

### **Skeeter Phelan and the Foundation for Double Consciousness**

An African-American man walks down an urban street in a large city, passing a row of parked vehicles to his left. He notices that a white man sits in a sedan reading the paper, presumably waiting for his partner who might be running an errand across the street. The white man shifts his gaze to the street and notices the black man walking past. As the black man continues on his journey, eyes on the street ahead, he hears the familiar click of the car locks dropping into place. He does not look back, but he is now conscious of himself through the eyes of the white man, who is trying not to stare at him as he adjusts the newspaper closer to his face.

The concept of double consciousness, as theorized by W.E.B. Du Bois in the early twentieth century, was first created to describe the divided identity that Afro-Americans felt living in The United States in the post-slavery era when the racial schism was ever-present. Double consciousness refers to the divide in the identity of a black person who is forced to view herself with her own eyes, and also through the eyes of those around her, predominantly the whites. Du Bois wrote:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (2-3)

Double consciousness essentially works to describe an ailment of the time period. Racial prejudices were alarmingly common, and almost always directed toward African-American persons. The term describes the side effect of the prejudice disease; the black persons only

possess this dual consciousness because they are forced to do so by the incessant, hegemonic pressure from the white population. Therefore, the concept refers to a negative symptom of the ailment that was forced upon the African-Americans. Nevertheless, double consciousness (though born from a negative racial disease) grants a greater perspective of the self through an examination from one's own perspective, and from an external one. The resulting perspective is a complete one that solidifies its own identity through an unfortunate circumstance of ignorance.

Double consciousness, then, serves as a useful conceptual theory that can be applied in analytical readings of text and film, as it allows one to understand the depth of a given character that is placed in a racially charged situation. In order to illuminate a certain character, double consciousness must be reversed and applied in a positive light, which subverts Du Bois's original meaning. Tate Taylor's film adaptation of *The Help* is one such example, most notably with the character of Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan. Skeeter is generally read to be the most open-minded white character in *The Help*, and displays a moderate degree of double consciousness. Though she is still subject to the institutionalized racism of the 1960s, she respects African-Americans as equal human beings. Most importantly, Skeeter's journey to document the stories of the black maids results in her possession of a true double consciousness. Within the world of the film, the audience is shown that Skeeter's open-mindedness came largely from her upbringing with her maid and companion, Constantine. Constantine raised Skeeter and in many ways acted as a more present, loving mother figure than Charlotte did. Constantine's perpetual presence in Skeeter's life left her with little opportunity to develop the racist undertones that plague the other whites in Jackson, Mississippi. Skeeter's double consciousness manifests in her journey to view herself through her eyes and through the eyes of those around her. Skeeter's character remains unique from her peers and fellow whites because her open-mindedness is not an objectively conscious choice; rather, her lack of racist ideologies ought to be directly accredited to the loving upbringing that Constantine provided, resulting in a foundation that would allow Skeeter's double consciousness to eventually be built upon.

In a deeper examination of Skeeter's relationship with Constantine, one might look at the scene in which Skeeter flashbacks to an episode when Constantine comforted her after she remained at home the evening of a school dance, and notice that it grants immense insight into the dynamic of their relationship. In the Flashback, a young Skeeter sits on a bench underneath a tree on her family's land, upset that she did not have a date for the dance and that the boys had called her ugly. Constantine makes her way to the bench and tells Skeeter that "ugly is something that grows up inside you. It's mean. It hurts like them boys" (*The Help*). Skeeter feels like a disappointment in her ugliness, as her mother was the third runner up in the Miss South Carolina Pageant, but Constantine diffuses this sadness immediately, taking on the role of the nurturing, loving mother figure where Charlotte could not. Constantine eventually states that "every day, every day you're not dead in the ground and you wake up in the morning, you're going to have to make some decisions. You gotta ask yourself this question: am I going to believe all those bad things them fools say about me today?" (*The Help*). These words teach Skeeter a crucial lesson about self-confidence and independence, but they also carry a deeper subtext in that they mirror the emotions that Constantine must have in regards to her status as a black woman during the time of Jim Crow, a time when insults of objective ugliness were the least a person of color needed to be concerned with; yet, the notion of objective ugliness becomes a metaphor for the prejudiced ugliness that grew within so many whites of the time. Constantine spoke these words with emotion, desperately hoping to instill within Skeeter the knowledge that ugliness is not objective; instead, it is something that festers inside, and takes the form of evil actions. Constantine's nurturing lessons help give Skeeter an open-minded concept of African-Americans and allow her to be prepared for her eventual journey to a full double consciousness.

Unfortunately, Skeeter's peers do not maintain the same manner of racial open-mindedness that she does. Hilly Holbrook and Elizabeth Leefolt are two of Skeeter's friends who exhibit despicably racist characteristics. In the story, Elizabeth treats Aibileen poorly because she is black, neglects her baby daughter, and follows Hilly's actions and orders regardless of their nature. Hilly acts as the direct antithesis to Skeeter; Hilly's racism is so

strong that she believes it necessary that every home should have a separate bathroom for the African-American help, due to the fact that they, apparently, carry different diseases than whites (Stockett 10). Skeeter disagrees with every action set forth by Hilly, and makes excuses when she feels apprehensive about including information on Hilly's "Home Health Initiative" in their club newsletter (Stockett 184). In a scene after Hilly usurps her as the editor of the newsletter, Skeeter goes for a long drive and thinks to herself: "I wish I could just leave here [...] God, I am the town's Boo Radley, just like in *To Kill a Mockingbird*" (Stockett 414). This passage illustrates Skeeter's own self-awareness; even amongst her white peers she is truly the outsider. Skeeter is not truly a friend to Hilly or Elizabeth, nor are they friends to her. Indeed, Skeeter maintains the identity of the outsider in Jackson. Furthermore, she is educated (Hilly opted to drop out of university to get married), uninterested in marriage, focused on working, and most importantly she is not oppressively racist, all of which remove her from her friends and the other whites in town. Truly, Skeeter represents the outsider among the white citizens of Jackson, which gives her a certain amount of double consciousness before one even considers the ramifications of Constantine's racial influence. Skeeter remains the outsider among the white citizens of Jackson, which enhances her ability to absorb Constantine's lessons about race and ugliness, ultimately establishing the foundation required for her to adopt double consciousness.

Despite double consciousness's original status as a term used to describe a side effect of those oppressed by a racist society, its effectiveness in analysis serves to broaden the lens with which a viewer might examine Skeeter Phelan in order to explore the depths of her character. Double consciousness, traditionally, would not have been applied to a white character, yet in doing so the audience may begin to fully comprehend Skeeter's position as a bridge-like character between the black and white persons of the novel. Out of necessity, subverting Du Bois's concept expands its abilities into the realm of theoretical application, in which a reader may begin to see Skeeter's racial awareness with more clarity; as a character of the 1960s, she possesses a racially conscious mentality that is essentially unheard of for the time. Skeeter's early experiences with Constantine gave her the necessary foundation to adopt a double consciousness as she grew older, became educated, and learned the

experiences of the black maids. Her position as the outsider among the white people of Jackson only assisted in her inevitable rejection of the societal structure of the 1960s, and her adoption of double consciousness.

## Works Cited

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folks*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1961. Print.

Stockett, Kathryn. *The Help*. New York, NY: Berkley, 2009. Print.

*The Help*. Dir. Tate Taylor. Perf. Viola Davis, Octavia Spencer, Emma Stone, and Cicely Tyson. Dreamworks Pictures, 2011. Film.