



## **Skeeter's ambition in Kathryn Stockett *The Help***

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**Abstract.** This study discusses Skeeter's ambition in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*. The purpose of this study is to describe Skeeter's ambition, its causes, and its effects. In analyzing Skeeter's ambition, the writer used the psychological approach and the theory of ambition by Judge and Kammeyer & Mueller. This study employed qualitative research. The findings reveal that Skeeter aspires to become a great writer. Skeeter's ambition is driven by two factors: internal and external. The internal causes of Skeeter's ambition are her deep love and passion for writing, her desire to uncover the truth, and her drive to fight for justice. The external causes of Skeeter's ambition are her wish to change her mother's traditional thought about women, her closeness to her nanny who is an African-American maid, and the social factors in her environment that frequently discriminate against black people. The effects of Skeeter's ambition are also twofold: positive and negative. The positive effects of her ambition are that Skeeter eventually gets a job in New York, and white women become aware of the unfair treatment experienced by African-American maids. The negative effects of her ambition are that Skeeter starts to be shunned by her friends and even ostracized by other white people. She is abandoned by her boyfriend, and African-American maids are fired by white families

**Keywords:** Ambition, external, internal, psychological approach.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Ambition usually emerges as a primary motivator that helps people achieve their goals and aspirations. Ambition is not only a spurious desire for success; it can also be a sincere desire to create differences in social interactions within a particular region. Ambition often results from personal experience or environment that makes one want to achieve something one desires. David Hume describes ambition as a longing for power, not just in terms of achieving personal goals but particularly as "an authority over others." (Pettigrove, 2007: 2). Therefore, ambition can be defined as an internal drive that occurs due to a strong desire to achieve something that is considered significant or valuable. Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller (2012: 759) add that ambition is the ongoing and broad pursuit of success, achievement, and fulfillment. It frequently entails persistence, increased effort, and significant sacrifices to achieve one's goals.

Ambition can relate to career, education, financial success, or achievement in any area of life. People with high ambition often have big dreams and are willing to work hard to achieve them. Ambition can be a vital source of motivation to achieve success and fulfill one's dreams. Ambition is typically seen as the pursuit of status and wealth, rather than efforts to achieve overall well-being and socioemotional acceptance (Judge &

Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012: 759). People's life experiences and social context are crucial in shaping their ambitions. People with strong ambitions may experience specific events or experiences that trigger them. For example, unfair treatment in society is commonly called discrimination.

Skeeter Phelan, a central character in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*, is a young white woman who grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, in the 1960s. Although she comes from a wealthy and respected family, Skeeter often finds herself at odds with her peers, particularly regarding the treatment of black maids. Her black caregiver, Constantine, has a profound influence on her life, and Constantine's absence becomes a pivotal event that reshapes Skeeter's worldview. Skeeter becomes increasingly dissatisfied with the racial injustices faced by black maids working in white households. Her ambition to become a writer drives her to document these maids' experiences, giving a voice to those typically ignored by society. Despite the significant risks in a racially prejudiced society, Skeeter is determined to foster change. By compiling the stories of black maids into a book titled *Help*, she aims to raise awareness and inspire social reform.

The writer is drawn to studying Skeeter's ambition in *The Help* because the novel reflects real-life attitudes, illustrating that ambition is an integral part of human experience. The novel offers valuable lessons, particularly in the fight against social injustice and discrimination, and highlights the efforts to bring about positive change. This study aims to explore Skeeter's ambitions, their causes, and their impacts within the novel *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychology and literature are two interconnected fields that complement each other in understanding the human psyche. Psychology studies the causes of human behavior, whereas literature portrays this behavior through fictional narratives. Literature serves as an important source of inspiration for psychology, which attempts to explain human emotions, behaviors, and mental processes scientifically. Thus, literary psychology examines literary works from the perspective of human behavior or psyche, as observed through the characters in the story. Wellek and Warren (1977) define the psychology of literature can be defined in four ways: examining the writer's biography from a psychological perspective, analyzing the creative process, exploring psychological principles within literary works, and studying the effects of literature on readers. (Pratiwi & Pramesti, 2022 : 132).

The psychological approach in literature uses psychological theories to analyze literary works, enhancing our understanding of writers' minds and the characters, themes, and narratives they create. This dynamic interaction between psychology and literature reveals the profound impact of storytelling on our comprehension of the human psyche. By exploring themes, characters, and narratives through a psychological lens, we gain insights into the complexity of human emotions, behaviors, and experiences. This reciprocal relationship highlights that elements of psychology are inherent in literature as long as human themes remain central to the text.

Ambition is a fundamental drive that propels individuals toward success, achievement, and honor. A person's ambitions are the primary driving force that motivates them to set goals and fulfill their desires (Maliangkay & Rahayu, 2023: 484). It provides strong motivation and determination, influencing people to strive for excellence in their pursuits. While ambition can be a positive force, driving individuals to accomplish extraordinary feats, it also has the potential to lead to negative outcomes if not properly managed. The

balance between harnessing ambition for positive growth and falling into extremism is crucial. Ambition can drive individuals to compare themselves with others, which may reduce life satisfaction despite higher achievements. Life background, family, and social conditions significantly influence a person's ambition, and those with strong ambition often achieve more but must guard against the potential negative impacts of unchecked ambition.

Ambition, as described by scholars like Pettigrove and Murray, involves not just desire but also commitment, self-discipline, and action over time. Murray emphasizes the need for achievement, recognition, and praise as key components of ambition. The drive to achieve involves overcoming obstacles and seeking social status, while the need for recognition focuses on attention and admiration. Murray's theory categorizes human behavior into motives, drives, and needs, with ambition being shaped by learned behaviors and individual aptitudes. Properly managed ambition involves passion, perseverance, and setting high standards, ultimately fueling continuous achievement and personal growth. However, extreme ambition can lead to negative consequences, and a lack of ambition can hinder potential, highlighting the importance of finding a balanced and healthy approach to ambition.

## METHOD

This study used an extrinsic approach in the analysis of literary works, which considers factors outside the text itself, such as the social context, culture, and historical period in which the work was created. According to Wellek and Werren, the extrinsic approach involves factors outside the work itself, such as sociology, psychology, history, and others (1949: 65-66). In this study, the author discusses Skeeter's ambition in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* using a psychological approach. This psychological approach examines behavior and thought and can be used to study human life, mental functioning, and individual and social behavior.

Vanderstoep & Johnston (2009: 7-8) qualitative research generates narrative or textual descriptions of the studied phenomena, enabling researchers to offer a thorough understanding of the population. Then, Bogdan & Bilken (1992: 5) added that Qualitative research is inherently descriptive, with data gathered in the form of words or images instead of numerical values. The data collected are in the form of quotes from the novel *The Help* that describe the character of Skeeter Phelan and her ambition. The primary source used is Kathryn Stockett's novel "The Help," which was published on June 5, 2010. Supporting sources encompass theories on ambition and references drawn from libraries and global media.

The research instrument involves the author immersing themselves in the subject matter, comprehending and integrating the referenced materials to bolster this study. Data collection steps include reading the novel, identifying data, and selecting relevant data. Data analysis involves collecting data, analyzing data, interpreting data according to theory, and drawing conclusions based on the analysis.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Skeeter's Ambition to be a Writer in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*

Eugenia Phelan, commonly known as Skeeter, is a central character in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*. Skeeter is a young woman from an influential white family in Jackson, Mississippi. Her mother, Charlotte Phelan, is a traditional woman who upholds social values. She expects Skeeter to marry and have children, as society would expect.

However, Skeeter has different ambitions, wanting to become a great writer. The relationship between the two is often strained because of this difference in outlook. Skeeter only had a good relationship with his father in his family because they shared the same ideas. Skeeter's father takes care of the family's cotton plantation. In addition, Skeeter also has an older brother named Carlton Phelan. In this study, the writer will discuss Skeeter's ambition and its causes and effects in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*. The results of this study found that Skeeter has an ambition to become a successful writer. Skeeter's ambition to become a writer is great, this is seen when she is offered to apply for a job by her mother to become a bank teller in order to socialize with many people and get a life partner. However, Skeeter denies this as she has no interest in the job. Therefore, Skeeter tries hard to find a job according to her interest, which is to become a writer. To fulfill her desire to become a writer Skeeter accepts a small, challenging job as the first step of her career pioneering. This is evident in the following quotation..

A not-so-feminine receptionist watches me. She is enormous and looks uncomfortable in the small wooden chair. "Welcome to the *Jackson Journal*. Can I help you?" I had made my appointment the day before yesterday, hardly an hour after I'd received Elaine Stein's letter. I asked for an interview for any position they might have. (Stockett, 2010: 72)

Skeeter's ambition is also evident when she uses the excuse of feeding the hungry at the Presbyterian Church to her mother, gaining permission to leave the house every other night for two weeks. She does this to prevent her mother from becoming suspicious about her intentions with a black person. Skeeter employs all means to meet Aibileen in order to conduct the interview for her book and promptly send the results to Miss Stein. This is evident in the following quotation.

"Every other night for the next two weeks, I tell Mother I'm off to feed the hungry at the Canton Presbyterian Church, where we, fortunately, know not a soul. Of course she'd rather I go down to the First Presbyterian, but Mother's not one to argue with Christian works and she nods approvingly". (Stockett, 2010: 152)

Skeeter's desire to uphold justice and raise social awareness falls under altruistic or moral ambition. Altruistic actions are those carried out for the benefit of others without expecting any reward, while moral ambition focuses on the desire to create positive changes in society based on ethical principles and justice. Ambition directed towards altruistic or moral goals, like Skeeter's effort to raise social awareness, shows that ambition is not always self-serving. Ambition can reflect ethical values and a commitment to social justice. According to Freire, the central tenet of social justice education is the significance of cultivating an understanding of oppressive social conditions, which he terms critical consciousness (Torres-Harding & Meyers, 2013: 214). Skeeter strives to reveal the injustices often experienced by African-American maids in their employers' homes.

## **2. The Causes of Skeeter's Ambition in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help***

In this section, the author will examine the causes of Eugenia Phelan's (Skeeter) ambition. Ambition arises from various factors, including the influence of social environment, which significantly shapes an individual's life. This influence motivates a person to pursue their desires, as exemplified by the protagonist in this study. Broadly speaking, ambition stems from two main sources: internal and external. Internally, it emerges from an innate motivation within each person to strive for greater achievements beyond what

they have already accomplished. A person naturally has a desire to progress and achieve better performance every day. Judge & Kammeyer (2012: 760) another internal reason for ambition is rooted in individuals possessing specific traits like extraversion or conscientiousness. These traits play a significant role in driving individuals to pursue ambitious goals and aspirations.

In addition to internal causes, there are also external causes that influence one's ambition. These external factors include the family, education, and overall social environment. Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller (2012: 761) highlighting family or social circumstances as a catalyst for ambition. A supportive family environment, for example, can provide encouragement and motivation for individuals to pursue their ambitions. A good education also plays an essential role in shaping a person's mindset and ability to achieve their goals. Social environments, such as friends and the surrounding community, can influence one's ambition through interaction and shared experiences. In Skeeter's context, external factors such as her experience of the injustices faced by African-American domestic helpers and the encouragement of those around her influence her ambition to enact social change.

#### **a. Internal Causes of Skeeter Ambition**

In this study, Skeeter's internal ambition stems from her aspiration for a life characterized by freedom and independence. Living in a very traditional environment in Jackson, Mississippi, where a woman's role is often limited to being a wife and housewife, makes Skeeter have a very strong desire to live outside of those restrictions. She wants to have a different life than what is expected of her by society and even her own mother. Skeeter has her first taste of freedom when she starts college at Ole Miss. She spends her days writing letters and writing about things she likes throughout the day. This habit leads Skeeter to her ambition of becoming a great writer.

Firstly, when Skeeter is studying at Ole Miss, she feels the freedom she has always wanted. Skeeter's happiness is reflected in the way she enjoys her days in the dormitory by writing a lot. She writes so many letters ranging from letters of complaint, letters to her mother and nanny, and even a letter to a man that she only piles up because she never sends it. This slowly builds Skeeter's interest to someday become a great writer. This is evident in the following quotation..

No one could argue that I hadn't worked hard at Ole Miss. While my friends were out drinking rum and Cokes at Phi Delta Theta parties and pinning on mum corsages, I sat in the study parlor and wrote for hours—mostly term papers but also short stories, bad poetry, episodes of Dr. Kildare, Pall Mall jingles, letters of complaint, ransom notes, love letters to boys I'd seen in class but hadn't had the nerve to speak to, all of which I never mailed. Sure, I dreamed oh having football dates, but my real dream was that one day I would write something that people would actually read. (Stockett, 2010: 58-59)

From above quotation, Skeeter's freedom for the first time while studying at Ole Miss makes Skeeter enjoy her daily life more by freely expressing herself through writing. Skeeter begins to understand her hobby in writing and begins to participate in various organizational activities with the same position, namely editor. She hones her skills regardless of her peers who mostly prefer to enjoy life by having fun. Because of her hobby, Skeeter begins to dream that someday she will have to write a book that will be read by everyone.

## **b. External Causes of Skeeter's Ambition**

In addition to internal causes, Skeeter's ambition also occurs due to several external causes. There are three external causes in Skeeter's ambition, namely her mother, Skeeter's former housemaid, and the white's treatment to black people.

### ***b.1 Skeeter's Mother***

Skeeter's mother has a very traditional mindset where she expects her only daughter to find a partner and get married like any other woman. Her mother insists that Skeeter enroll as a teller in a bank. This of course contradicts her desire to become a great writer. Her mother hopes that by becoming a bank teller she will socialize with many people and maybe meet someone who could be her life partner later. This makes Skeeter feel uncomfortable because her mother keeps pushing her to get married. This can be seen in the below quotation.

“Why don't you go down to the bank and apply for a teller job?”

“I don't want to be a bank teller, Mama.”

“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,

“I told you. I didn't meet anybody I wanted to marry,” I say. (Stockett, 2010: 55)

### ***b.2 Skeeter's Former Housemaid***

Skeeter's ambition to voice the grievances of black maids is inspired by her childhood nanny, Constantine. Skeeter's desire to help black people live equal lives begins with her concern that black maids are required to have their own toilets outside their employers' homes because they are considered carriers of disease. This makes Skeeter think of her nanny Constantine, who has not worked for the family for a long time. This can be seen in the quotation below.

“I was... well, I was raised by a colored women. I've seen how simple it can be and — and how complex it can be between the families and the help.” I cleared my throat. I sounded stiff, like I was talking to a teacher. “Well,” I took a deep breath, “I'd like to write this showing the point of view of the help. The colored women down here.” I tried to picture Constantine's face, Aibileen's. “They raise a white child and then twenty years later the child becomes the employer. It's that irony, that we love them and they love us, yet...” I swallowed, my voice trembling. “We don't even allow them to use the toilet in the house.” (Stockett, 2010: 105-106)

### ***b.3 The White's Treatment to Black People***

Another external cause of Skeeter's ambition is also seen when Skeeter re-reads the story given by the black servants. Skeeter is shocked about the treatment that blacks receive when living side by side with whites. Even in the governor's house, they still receive discriminatory treatment, such as the separation of refrigerators between whites and blacks, but there are some things that make Skeeter look moved when she reads the part where a baby in Aibileen's care calls her mama. This makes Skeeter even more convinced to write about the event in the book they are making. This is evident in the following quotation.

“I know I wrote it, but you really want to put that in about the—” And I say, “Yes, I do.” But I am surprised myself by what’s in these stories, of separate colored refrigerators at the governor’s mansion, of white women throwing two-year-old fits over wrinkled napkins, white babies calling Aibileen “Mama.” (Stockett, 2010: 155)

From the earlier quotes, Skeeter's ambition is fueled by encouragement from her surroundings, including her mother, caregivers, and environment. Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller (2012: 761) also note that social or family circumstances serve as motivators. Skeeter aims to demonstrate to her mother that women can pursue careers and personal ambitions, achieving success without conforming to traditional norms centered around husbands and children. Additionally, social injustices in her community evoke memories of her African-American nanny, Constantine, a maid who faced similar oppression. Skeeter sympathizes with the plight of black people in society, drawing motivation from her memories of Constantine. The support and expectations of those closest to her provide Skeeter with the encouragement to strive towards her goals despite the challenges she encounters. This illustrates that Skeeter's ambition is driven not only by personal desire but also by the influence and expectations of her social circle.

### **3. The Effects of Skeeter’s Ambition in Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help***

To achieve an ambition or desire, there are inevitably side effects during the process, which can be broadly categorized into positive and negative effects. A major positive effect of ambition is attaining success that meets one's expectations. Strong ambition motivates individuals to set larger goals and work diligently to accomplish them, even if it means overcoming significant obstacles. Achieving such success can serve as a benchmark or inspiration for others, opening new opportunities.

However, ambition also carries substantial negative effects. Intense focus on achieving one's goals can lead to neglecting personal and social relationships. Highly ambitious individuals may resort to any means necessary to reach their objectives. This strong focus on personal achievement often results in spending less time with loved ones, such as family, friends, and partners. Consequently, this can strain relationships, cause emotional distance, and disrupt the balance between professional and personal life. In summary, while ambition can drive individuals towards remarkable success, it can also have detrimental impacts on their personal relationships and overall life balance.

#### **a. The Positive Effects of Skeeter’s Ambition**

In this part, the writer will present the findings regarding the positive impacts of Skeeter's ambition. There are several beneficial effects of positive impact is seen when Skeeter gets support from her Black friends to pursue what she dreams of. Minny convinces Skeeter to accept the job offered by Harper's magazine and says that she will look after Aibileen and Aibileen will look after her, but Skeeter only has enemies here. Their closeness seems very sympathetic to each other. Minny's words make Skeeter rethink accepting the job. This can be seen in the quotation below.

I hear muffled words and handling of the receiver and suddenly it’s Minny on the phone. “You listen to me, Miss Skeeter. I’m on take care a Aibileen and she gone take care a me. But you got nothing left here but enemies in the Junior League and a mama that’s gone drive you to drink. You done burned ever bridge there is. And you ain’t never gone get another boyfriend in this

town and everybody know it. So don't walk your white butt to New York, run it." (Stockett, 2010: 424)

Some of the quotation above show that Skeeter's ambition has a significant positive effect on the relationships between the characters in the story. The support given by Skeeter's Black friends, such as Minny and Aibileen, as well as the loyalty shown by Lou Anne to Louvenia, illustrate that Skeeter's ambition not only drives her to pursue her dreams but also strengthens the bonds of solidarity and friendship among them. These actions demonstrate how Skeeter's ambition creates positive changes in her social environment by fostering mutual respect and support, ultimately overcoming racial and social differences. According to Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller (2012: 770), ambition generally has a positive correlation with success, including educational attainment, career accomplishments, and personal income. Skeeter's ambition aligns with this statement, as her ambition not only motivates her to achieve her professional and personal goals but also positively impacts those around her, reinforcing relationships and solidarity among them.

### **b. The Negative Effects of Skeeter's Ambition**

In this part, the writer will present the findings on the detrimental impact of Skeeter's ambition. There are several negative consequences of Skeeter's ambition, which are as follows. The negative effects of Skeeter's ambition is also seen when Skeeter begins to worry about her situation of having no one but her mother and father. Skeeter wishes she could leave Jackson, Mississippi far behind because here she no longer has friends, the job she loves, and even a lover. Skeeter feels lonely and hopes to start a new life in New York with the job she has always dreamed of. Skeeter starts sending job applications to New York again but hears nothing back from them. Skeeter worries that she will never leave Jackson and will be stuck here forever without friends, a job, and even the love of her life. This is certainly a nightmare that no one wants to experience. This can be seen in the quotation below.

But God, I have to get out of Mississippi. Besides Mother and Daddy, I have nothing left here, no friends, no job I really care about, no Stuart. But it's not just out of here. When I addressed my resume to the *New York Post*, *The New York Times*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The New York Magazine*. I felt that surge again, the same I'd felt in collage, of how much I want to be there. Not Dallas, not Memphis—*New York City*, where writers are supposed to live. But I've heard nothing back from any of them. What if I never leave? What if I'm stuck. Here. forever? (Stockett, 2010: 415)

Skeeter's ambition to become a writer by exposing racial injustice in her community goes against existing social norms. Her close friends feel threatened by her proposed changes, resulting in Skeeter's social isolation. The maids she works with face real threats to their safety and well-being, including job loss and physical violence. Skeeter also experiences emotional and moral distress as she sees the negative impact of her actions on the people she cares about. She has to face an ethical dilemma between pursuing truth and justice and dealing with the fact that her efforts to bring about change could harm others. As Pettigrove (2007: 4) says, "Ambition is difficult to ignore, and if their desires are not met, an ambitious person will feel disappointed". Skeeter feels guilty about what happens. However, despite these challenges, Skeeter remains steadfast in her goal. She shows that moral and altruistic ambition often requires the courage to go against the grain and face



difficult consequences. Despite significant negative repercussions, Skeeter's efforts pave the way for social change and give a voice to the unheard.

### CONCLUSION/KESIMPULAN

Based on the discussion in the previous chapter, Skeeter has ambitions to become a great writer. During college, she improves her writing skills by participating in several organizations as an editor. After graduating from college, Skeeter returns to her hometown of Jackson, Mississippi, aspiring to become a famous writer.

Skeeter's ambition is driven by internal and external causes. Internally, her love for writing and literature fuels her determination. She wants to break away from the traditional societal expectations in Jackson that confine white women to the roles of wives and mothers. Externally, her mother's traditional views and constant undermining of Skeeter's dreams push her to prove her worth. Additionally, Skeeter's deep emotional connection with Constantine, her former housemaid, instills in her the values of truth and justice, driving her to voice the injustices faced by black people. Skeeter's ambition to become a writer exposes her to the reality of discriminatory treatment towards African-Americans. This realization motivates her to oppose the injustice in her community. She anonymously writes a book detailing the experiences of African-American maids, seeking to give them a voice and fight for social change. Their struggles become a powerful motivator for Skeeter to become a meaningful and impactful writer.

Skeeter's ambition has both positive and negative impacts. Positively, she becomes closer to African-American maids Aibileen and Minny, who support her during her lowest points. The book project raises awareness among white mistresses about their unfair treatment of maids, and Skeeter lands her dream job in New York. Negatively, she faces alienation from her friends, is fired from her job, and is ostracized by the white community. Several maids are fired, and her relationship with her boyfriend Stuart ends just as it was about to become more serious.

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