**LEVEL 3 WRITTEN ESSAY RESPONSE**

**TO WHAT EXTENT IS SETTING A SIGNIFICANT FEATURE OF NOVELS? TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE?**

Setting is a significant feature of novels. To a large extent this is true for *‘The Help’* written by Kathryn Stockett. In this novel the setting of 1960’s Jackson, Mississippi reveals important themes such as discrimination, social prejudice and gender expectation. The setting also gives crucial insight into character motivations and beliefs, particularly for the characters of Hilly Holbrook and Sketter Phelan.

Stockett’s ‘The Help’ is based around segregation and the civil rights era in America. The main narrative revolves around Skeeter Phelan, a young white woman who decides to write a novel about what it is like to be a black maid in Mississippi. Skeeter enlists the help of a number of maids for example Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson. The community of Jackson is very close-minded and many of its citizens are extremely racist. The town is divided along racial lines with strict rules to separate white and coloured people. The ignorance of many white people in the community has been passed down from generation to generation to create this climate of intolerance and inequality.

This setting is extremely significant as it helps to reveal to readers the theme of discrimination. It offers a window of insight into what it was like to live in this environment during the civil rights era in Mississippi. Many examples of discrimination exist in this novel. The town’s deacon stated in a sermon to his congregation that “Mississippi and the world is two different places”. This reflects that even though the rest of the world was changing its views on segregation, the people of Mississippi were firmly entrenched in their racist views. Change was very hard to instigate and coloured people suffered numerous instances of discrimination. One example can be seen in the way in which the town was divided. The narrator states that “Jackson is just one white neighbourhood after the next…the coloured part of town we one big anthill”. The white community has space and freedom while the coloured community is very restricted. As their numbers increase it becomes more congested and overcrowded. Coloured people in this community had very little protection and justice. Often if a crime was committed against them it was overlooked. In the text Minny wonders “who’s gone protect our people, aint no coloured policemen”. This reflects the lack of faith many people had in the justice system. Clearly this setting is significant as it conveys the discrimination which existed in many areas of the United States during the civil rights era. Hopefully it will also cause readers to reflect on their own prejudices and examples of discrimination in their own communities.

Setting is also significant as it helps readers understand the idea of social prejudice. The Jackson community was characterised by a strict social structure and certain rules of behaviour. Wealth, family background and reputation heavily determined your social status and acceptance by others in the community. Although the divisions had no legal foundation, it was difficult for people to move between classes or make their way into elite social circles. Any act of rebellion could mean social exclusion and absolute isolation in the community. This could have far reaching consequences especially in terms of employment or marriage prospects. We clearly see this through the character of Celia Foote and her relationship with Hilly Holbrook and the Junior League, of which Hilly is the president. Hilly looks down on Celia as she comes from a poor area of Mississippi called Sugarditch. She refers to Celia as “whitetrash” and repeatedly ignores Celia’s offers to help with organising a fundraising benefit. Celia is a moral and somewhat naïve person who only wants acceptance from the Jackson women. These attitudes are reinforced when at the benefit one of the Junior League members comments on Celia’s revealing clothing. She states “bosoms are for bedrooms and breastfeeding. Not for occasions with dignity. I want her to cover. Them. Up”. Hilly also thinks to herself that Celia does not have the “gentility” to join the Junior League which consists of respectable women in the community. These examples illustrate how Celia was judged based on appearance and her background rather than her personality. The setting is significant as it helps readers understand the extreme prejudice many women faced during this 1960’s era. It also allows readers to examine and consider the way they treat others and their own preconceived attitudes. Perhaps Celia was excluded not simply because of her class but because other women felt intimidated by her.

Another reason that setting is significant in this novel is that it helps readers understand the idea of gender expectation. During the 1960’s there were rigid roles for both women and men. Women in particular were valued for domestic ability and their ability to produce children. Their main roles in society were as wives and mothers. They were not expected to work and indeed this was frowned upon. Education was also not considered a valuable asset in women. The setting helps show these ideas through the character of Skeeter Phelan. Skeeter returns from four years at college with a degree, or as her mother sees it, a “pretty piece of paper”. Skeeter attempts to apply for a job as a journalist at the local paper, the Jackson Journal. As she sits down for her interview the editor asks Skeeter “I assume you know how to clean?”. As she is a woman the editor does not consider that she might be applying for anything other than a cleaning position, despite a number of jobs being advertised. Later in the novel Skeeter also notices that the Jackson Journal has two positions vacant. One for a woman and one for a man. The positions are for the same job but the female position is for significantly less pay. This setting of 1960’s Jackson clearly portrays the gender inequality which existed during this era. It offers insight into the double standards and derogatory attitudes women had to fight against and helps readers realise just how far women have come in modern society.

Lastly, setting is significant as it helps readers understand the character and motivations of Hilly Holbrook and Skeeter Phelan. Hilly is a wealthy socialite and president of the Jackson Junior League. Her husband is involved heavily in politics and she is a highly respected and feared member of the community. Hilly’s character is important in revealing the theme of discrimination. She is a prime example of the ignorant, racist views many people held at this point in time. An example which shows this is when Hilly introduces to Jackson the “Home Help Sanitation Initiative”. This initiative promoted having a separate bathroom in your home for “the help”. Hilly tells her friends that coloured people “carry all kinds of diseases” and that they are “different”. Skeeter is vastly different to Hilly. She is much more open minded and begins to feel very out of place after returning to Jackson from college. She states that she feels she has been “dropped off in a place I don’t belong”. Skeeter also starts to notice the differences between herself and her once close friends. She realises that “Hilly raises her voice about three octaves when talking to black people. Elizabeth smiles like she's talking to a child, although certainly not her own. I'm starting to notice things.” The 1960’s was a turbulent period in which many changes occurred in the United States. Through understanding this setting readers further understand the characters of the novel and their motivations and beliefs. Even though Hilly is extremely racist and a narrow-minded readers can understand that this is due to the environment that she was brought up in. Her beliefs and ignorance was passed down from generation to generation. Skeeter’s character is also made clearer through an understanding of the setting. During this period many women did start to rebel against gender expectations and question the beliefs held by their parents and communitys. Skeeter is symbolic of a new, independent type of woman who emerged from this era. As such the setting is extremely significant in helping readers understand these two key characters in the novel, the reasoning behind the attitudes they had and the decisions they made.

As shown, setting is a significant feature of novels to a large extent. In this novel the setting helped reveal themes such as discrimination, social prejudice and gender expectations. It also helped readers understand the character motivations of both Hilly and Skeeter, as readers had a better understanding of the era in which they were raised. By diving into perspectives not frequently explored in popular literature, Stockett widens our view on the American historical past and encourages readers to look around their own communities with new eyes. The setting of 1960’s Jackson, Mississippi helps us as readers understand not only our past but also the actions of the characters in the text, the prejudices they might have and their motivations. I firmly believe that through setting novels can open people’s eyes to the events of the past and impact their views or opinions. Through greater understanding of the past and with more novels like this one we can hopefully end some the discrimination and prejudice still present in the world today.