**The Timeless Literature of African-American Women**

**WEBSITE LINK:**

https://warnertwinsj.wixsite.com/oprah

Oprah Winfrey Kathryn Stockett Theodore Melfi

Welcome to the show. Tell me, Theodore, why you directed your 2016 biographical film,

*Hidden Figures?* And then, Kathyrn, what inspired you to write your 2009 historical novel?

Well, I was unaware of the journey of the mathematician Katherine Johnson, who faced racial and gender discrimination when she worked for NASA calculating space trajectories. My purpose was to use her narrative to inform a younger generation about this disgraceful chapter in American history and inspire similar women to find the courage to fulfill their dreams. I use *double entendre* in my title to highlight this, as the protagonists were all brilliant mathematicians who were not acknowledged due to the colour of their skin. I chose to direct this film rather than *Spider-Man: Home Coming* as I felt I had the skill to use filmic devices that would honour the struggles of these remarkable women and show a younger well-educated female audience that the world can be a better place for them.

Gosh, my motivation was very similar. *The Help,* stemmed from a deep curiosity as to how I was raised by Demetrie, my family's African-American maid in Mississippi. I had always wondered how she felt raising white children who could never be hers. My purpose was to challenge our views of racism by using the first person narrative perspective of three female friends, along with my stylistic preference for using descriptive language and motifs, as well as other literary devices. I also target contemporary female readers, while prompting them to see the depth of the complex relationship between 'the help' and the white children.

The female protagonists in both texts are spirited role models for this audience here today, aren't they? Your themes are very similar, yet the texts are quite different. Why is this?

In the establishing scene, I want to depict the protagonists' struggles against prejudice and foreshadow their difficult journey. Setting is important here, as I use a broken down car, carrying three brilliant minds to allow the viewer to see their ironic plight. Although her school principal has recognised that "'[he's] never seen a mind like [Katherine] has'", the scripting here includes dialogue that, along with the acting style, exposes the racism all three women face. The prop of the police baton is added to create an extra layer and help us understand why Mary declares"'... I'll hitchhike".' The characterisation of Dorothy is also important, as she lies defiantely under the car doing the work of a man as she refuses to admit defeat. As I characterise her, I feel that it is important to show her taking the initiative

in their struggle against racism, as we understand that someone who will “walk for sixteen miles” to get to work will also eventually become head supervisor of NASA’s ‘colored’ computers and saving them from redundancy in the new IBM world.

I chose to use first person to express similar ideas as I explore the perspectives of Aibileen, Minny and Skeeter. The suffering of the other ‘help’ is made apparent through the dialogue between these characters, as they explore the discrimination and injustice that existed in the 1960s. Readers learn that the white women would ‘ ...count every piece of silver after [the help] finished polishing ...’ and this makes the white voice of Skeeter more powerful as she declares ‘these things I know already, yet hearing them from colored mouths, it is as if I am hearing them for the first time.’ In ‘The Benefit’ chapter I use an ironic twist through the the motif of ‘chocolate custard pie’ to show how Minny fights back against the prejudice that is levelled at her. As baking is a significant part of ‘the help’s’ work, I chose a motif that represented her hard work but also sweetened the bitter things the maids endured, as it was also used as a weapon. The irony of this is strengthened by my use of the Southern patois, with the effluent within the pie transforming it to something ‘terrible awful’ and I use a third person perspective to include the reader as an objective observer. Together with ‘Hilly [who] stands very still …’ I hope my thinking female readers understand the sweetness of the undoing of white pride.

Do you use motifs as well, Theodore?

Yes, I use motifs to target a more mature audience with the chalk being the prominent motif. The chalk is a symbol of knowledge and privilege, and also represents Katherine’s journey from an impotent child to a powerful woman. The opening sequence shows Katherine’s ‘colored’ teacher passing her the ‘white’ chalk. This sequence is repeated when Katherine is working for NASA and is given chalk by the most powerful man in NASA scientist, who finally acknowledges her mathematical abilities and asks her to solve the discrepancy in the IBM computer’s calculations. The composition I use here is important, with the hands framing Katherine’s hand as lower when the motif is first shown, and as higher when she gains status at NASA. My intention is to target this older well-educated audience to contemplate who the teacher actually might be.

Theodore, I notice that you both have a common fascination with toilets! What’s that all about?

[THEODORE LAUGHS] Well done, Oprah! I choose to use these props to focus on coloured and non-coloured bathrooms, using Pharrell Williams’ original score of, Runnin’ as it is a modern and upbeat jazz tune that captures the spirit of the day for older viewers but also appeals to today’s male and female modern audience. Along with the toilet scenes, these diegetic lyrics reinforce the hurdles Katherine encounters. I use several scenes showingKatherine running in heels - yes, props are very important [LAUGHS] - to carry classified information to the 'colored' restrooms on the other side of the campus. Although Katherine is given highly redacted material to check, she's forced to take it all the way to the coloured rest rooms, the satirical point of using this set being that segregation trumped security and also time pressures to meet deadlines! The lyrics '...runnin' from a man...' allow us to realise she is "running" from the Space Task Group of white men, which is an irony in itself.

However, later on, I use the film's narrative to have Sam Turner, the assistant, running to get Katherine from the West side of the campus to check their numbers before launch.

It's fascinating isn't it, Theodore, that such a basic human need as going to a nearby toilet can be denied due to skin colour. I explore segregation through the narrative structure as Hilly works to introduce segregated toilets for the African-American help, ridiculously declaring that '99% of all coloured diseases are carried in the urine' and that 'whites can become permanently disabled by nearly all of these diseases'. I believe humour is a powerful tool for engaging the younger reader as well, as it communicates truths about segregation in a non-confrontational way - so I have Skeeter cleverly organising all unwanted toilets to be dropped off on Hilly's front lawn.

*Yes, it's powerful seeing whites sticking up for African-Americans, is that something you tried to show too?*

Yes, I use setting of the segregated tea rooms and toilet signage to show the extent of the discrimination, but this changes in the pivotal sequence when Mr Harrison realises that white - coloured segregation is holding NASA back from achieving its goals so, at a key moment of realisation in the film, he peels the 'colored' sticker from the coffee pot.

Language use is also important here, as a combined use of hyperbole and simile conveys the inequalities of 'coloreds' as Katherine walks '...to Timbuktu, just to relieve [herself]...' and describes herself as '... work[ing] like a dog day and night, living on coffee from a pot none

... want [her] to touch'.

What are some of the other ways you achieve your purpose in depicting racial discrimination?

Well, we shot the 'West Wing Computing' in a dirty rundown basement using low-key yellow lighting, to depict the socio-economic plight of the 'coloreds'. In contrast, I apply white pristine light to the 'East Wing' set, the home of the white computing group. There is natural light shining through the windows to depict their freedom and to tell my viewers that to be white is to enjoy a position of privilege and freedom. We spent a long time on the set for this film, crafting the red-brick buildings to replicate those of the 1960', creating the large white-paneled wooden church-building to resonate with an older generation, and filming on location in Atlanta Georgia to engage American viewers but also add interest for

a global audience. I felt it important that we attract as wide an audience as possible, as the film’s message is so applicable to all of us. Theodore, I love the costuming - can you tell us more about it?

# Theodore, I love the costuming - can you tell us more about it?

# Well, the pearl necklace is another motif, as it reveals the unattainable, with Kathryn remarking ‘Lord knows, you don’t pay the coloreds enough to own pearls’. The costuming relays this message of blind discrimination again with the use of the white business shirts revealing the monoculture of the white men following each other blindly. I dress the African-American women in their flamboyant colours to signify their determination not to conform, and also to show their optimistic joy despite the oppression and cruelty that confronts them.

# Kathryn, your costuming is significant too - tell us about the maid’s uniform ...

# Yes. I write from a ‘white’ person's perspective to allow readers to see the inequalities in the society I describe. So, Skeeter can’t ‘help but notice, [that Aibileen] stands a little taller in … a green dress with black piping’ when she has ‘never seen Aibileen in anything but her whites.’ I want readers to recognise that the maid is a person, even though she is hired ‘help’. I also use costuming to create irony, as they need to wear it around white people even though it gets dirty ‘I put on my white uniform…’ for is it not ironic that they wear white uniform to work when it just gets dirty! Yet their costuming also makes them ‘white’ and I characterise Abilene to observe, ‘long as I got my white uniform on, I’m allowed to shop in this Jitney’. I therefore also target an affluent audience, hoping for more self-awareness.

# The times must have been hard for these impoverished women?

# Yes, it was. I chose the symbol of peace as a resolution for my narrative as ‘the help’ have their voice through Skeeter’s book and the ‘whites’ have a chance to listen. I think my novel is still very current and needs a global audience because we desperately need peace in our world today. Look at the current crisis in Myanmar for example, where the Buddhists are persecuting the Rohingya Muslims. This is so much like what happens in my novel, if not worse.

# That certainly is a great message for America, if not the whole world. [AUDIENCE APPLAUSE] I adore both pieces of work. I love your exposition of history that speaks to our own American audiences and reveals the inequality that, hopefully, we can continue to overcome. Kathryn, the first person perspective of the protagonists allows female readers to understand the struggles and prejudice each faces. Incorporating the complex pie motif resonates with an educated female audience and your irony here attracts the generation. [PAUSE] Theodore, your setting and dialogue absolutely capture the discrimination against female African-Americans. With your costuming motif of the pearl necklace, we can see the limitations of the 'colored' characters clearly that interests both genders and all ages - and the diegetic jazz transcends time. This inspires me the most because I still need to push through those barriers of racism and sexism. And your visual literacy as a director showcases the vibrant personalities, and individual strengths of these real-life 'figures'. Well done to both of you, thank you for inspiring us all today.

Words: 1995

Performance Standards for Stage 2 English

Overall: A+ (30/30)

|  | Knowledge and Understanding | Analysis | Application |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| A | Comprehensive knowledge and understanding of ideas and perspectives in a range of texts.  Thorough knowledge and understanding of ways in which creators of texts use a range of language features, stylistic features, and conventions to make meaning.  Extensive knowledge and understanding of a wide range of ways in which texts are created for different purposes, audiences, and contexts. | Complex analysis of ideas, perspectives, and/or aspects of culture represented in texts.  Perceptive analysis of language features, stylistic features, and conventions used in texts, and thoughtful evaluation of how these influence audiences.  Critical analysis of similarities and differences when comparing texts. | Versatile and precise use of language and stylistic features to create a wide range of coherent texts that address the purpose, audience, and context.  Fluently integrated use of evidence from texts to develop and support a response.  Sophisticated use of accurate, clear, and fluent expression. |
| B | Knowledge and understanding of ideas and perspectives in a range of texts.  Knowledge and understanding of ways in which creators of texts use a range of language features, stylistic features, and conventions to make meaning.  Knowledge and understanding of a range of ways in which texts are created for different purposes, contexts, and audiences. | Detailed analysis of ideas, perspectives, and/or aspects of culture represented in texts.  Detailed analysis of language features, stylistic features, and conventions, and evaluation of how these influence audiences.  Clear analysis of similarities and differences when comparing texts. | Accurate use of language and stylistic features to create a range of coherent texts that address the purpose, context, and audience.  Appropriate use of evidence from texts to develop and support a response.  Consistent use of accurate, clear, and fluent expression. |
| C | Knowledge and understanding of some ideas and perspectives in texts.  Knowledge and understanding of ways in which creators of texts use some language features, stylistic features, and conventions to make meaning.  Knowledge and understanding of ways in which everyday texts are created for different purposes, contexts, and audiences. | Analysis of some ideas and perspectives represented in texts.  Description and some analysis of different language features, stylistic features, and conventions, and/or some evaluation of how these influence audiences.  Analysis of some similarities and differences when comparing texts. | Generally accurate use of language and stylistic features to create texts that address the purpose, context, and audience.  Selection of some evidence from texts to develop and support a response.  Appropriate use of accurate, clear, and fluent expression. |
| D | Knowledge and understanding of some ideas in a narrow range texts.  Some knowledge and understanding of ways in which creators of texts use language features and conventions to make meaning.  Knowledge and understanding of ways in which some everyday texts are created for different purposes and audiences. | Description of some ideas in texts.  Description of some language features, stylistic features, and/or conventions.  Description of some similarities and differences in texts. | Use of some language and stylistic features to create a narrow range of texts.  Partial use of basic evidence from texts to develop a response.  Inconsistent use of expression. |
| E | Identification of an idea in a text.  Identification of a limited range of ways in which creators of texts use language techniques.  Recognition of one or more ways in which a familiar text is created. | Reference to an idea in a text.  Recognition of language or stylistic features.  Recognition of a simple connection between texts. | Restricted use of language or stylistic features to create a text.  Limited use of evidence from a text in a response.  Limited use of clear expression. |