

Lexi Pinzon

Professor Callahan

Capstone

12 December 2020

The Prevalence of Colorism Through Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" demonstrates a sibling bond like no other through Maggie and Dee's relationship. Two siblings birthed by a Southern, single, black mother who are of different complexions. Dee with lighter, pastier skin while Maggie has dark, chocolate skin. The difference in complexion leads to the internal and external issues of colorism explained as prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a darker skin tone. Alice Walker was the first to coin the term in 1983 defining it as an "internalized preference for European physical features by African Americans such as light skin and straight hair, which divides the Black community" (Harris 2073-2074). Dee's complexion offers her a different life, in regards to education and success, compared to her sister demonstrating the consequences for those with a deeper pigmented skin tone. Colorism is not a unique trend solely conforming to the story of the two siblings, rather a persisting issue central to the lives of black women ranging from the era of slavery to modern day. Walker's "Everyday Use" shows how the concepts of identity and representation within black women continuously inhibit women in their success in life regarding education, careers and general well being and will continue to inhibit them. Women are still confronted with colorism; while their complexion offers them different opportunities in terms of

education and work opportunities, the steps taken to debase this issue only reaffirms the consciousness and outright disregard of colorism.¹

The relationship that Dee holds with both her sibling, Maggie, and mother demonstrates the prevailing trend of the color complex. The mother is the narrator of “Everyday Use” showing her perspective of how she views her two daughters. Mama being the narrator of this piece comes from Walker’s term “womanist” which deals with seeing the world from the eyes of a black woman. This is significant because one must analyze the work through Mama’s eyes; her interpretation is the only perspective given to the reader. Maggie and the mother are similar in the sense of their blackness with more black features than Dee. Their education is little, their skin is dark, and their hair is deemed to be not as nice as Dee’s. Mama describes Dee stating, “Dee is lighter than Maggie, with nicer hair and a fuller figure” (Walker 315). The mother continuously pits the two girls against each other, always making it known that Dee is the nicer looking daughter of the two, given her more European features with her skin and hair. She continues to detail Maggie’s description explaining, “She stumbles along good-naturedly but can’t see well. She knows she is not bright. Like good looks and money, quickness passed her by” (Walker 316). Mama’s illustration of Maggie is harsh. She never speaks about her in a loving way like mothers usually talk about their children. Her explanations of her are always unpleasant and shameful

¹I was young when I realized I didn’t look like anyone else. Maybe before the age that I could even walk or talk but regardless of my inability to do these things, I knew that I was different. In the sense that my hair was curlier, but not just curly. It was curly coily resembling 3C hair texture while the other black girls around me had a tight 4C hair texture which were referred to as naps. This was seen as undesirable. When I was born I had extremely fair skin but so do both of my parents. It wasn’t that I was special, exceptional, or extraordinary, I just simply had what people deemed a nice curl pattern with light skin and people treated me differently because of that. I saw my friends and family who were looked at differently because their hair wasn’t how others wanted it to be and their skin resembled dark chocolate while mine was caramel. People called me pretty while they told me other little black girls were ugly solely based on the fact that these girls at school had a darker complexion and a tight 4C hair texture. I saw these same people get mean looks from this little age and when I grew up, I realized that treating people of the same race based on their appearance was my first encounter with colorism.

like she is ashamed of her one daughter based on her appearance showing the detrimental effects of colorism in family relationships.

This perception stems from Mama's own fight with colorism. Her ideals are masked by her own life and the disadvantages she has faced due to her darker complexion. Her ideology based on her past forces her to look at her daughter this way showing that her shame for herself has transferred to Maggie. The story would be very different if Mama had light skin or was white, she would relate more to Dee instead of Maggie. If this were the case, she would still see Maggie in a distasteful light because the views that white people had regarding the complexion of skin impacts Mama greatly. One source states,

Historically, it has been very common for people of color to have their stories told by Caucasians. Walker attempts to break this tradition by having a black rural middle-class woman tell the story of her relationships with her two daughters. An important part of the story occurs when the mother in "Everyday Use" states, "You've no doubt seen those TV shows where the child who has "made it" is confronted, as a surprise, by her own mother and father, tottering in weakly from backstage... Sometimes I dream a dream in which Dee and I are suddenly brought together on a TV program of this sort..."[21]²

The author of the article makes note of how Mama is the narrator of the story highlighting the need for a black woman narrator. This is her story, and it is only reliable through her eyes that way the audience can understand why Mama feels the way that she does. She wants to feel the tight knit relationship with Dee, but she cannot because she sees herself as less than. Mama is blinded by the colorism that has masked her consciousness leaving her with a distant connection to her own daughter. Throughout the short story, Mama talks about Dee like she is better than her which comes from the influence of colorism.

² Unknown source

Mama is not the only one who feels this shame as Maggie feels it too based on accounts in the short story. Mama details, “Maggie will be nervous until after her sister goes: she will stand hopelessly in corners, homely and ashamed of the burn scars down her arms and legs, eyeing her sister with a mixture of envy and awe. She thinks her sister has held life always in the palm of one hand, that “no” is a word the world never learned to say to her” (Walker 315). Mama includes the scars running down Maggie’s body which shows Maggie’s connection to her slave history. Enslaved people had scars from being whipped and beaten; Maggie has these same scars showing the relation between the two. Unlike her sister, Dee does not have the same connection. She never felt connected to her childhood home in the way that her sister did, resulting in no scars. Maggie loved the childhood home which is why she went back into the burning house to save possessions regardless of the fact that it was burning down. Dee being scarless while her sister has scars emphasizes the disconnection that Dee feels with her ancestors explaining another aspect of colorism. Darker skinned enslaved individuals most likely had more scars because they were in the fields while lighter skinned enslaved individuals were in the house where they weren’t subjected to the treatment in the fields. Maggie is not only scarred physically but mentally due to the treatment that was given to her based on her appearance.

Maggie looks at her sister with envy because she wants to be like her. She wants that same appearance of light skin and nice hair because that is what society deems as pleasant and attractive. Walker chooses to use the word “awe,” explained as a feeling of respect with either fear or wonder. Maggie and her sister are not equals; she sees herself as subordinate. This expression shows the relationship of the two sisters because one will always be inferior to the other solely based on their appearance, primarily their complexion. This analysis corresponds with one statement from a separate passage, “Consistent with the old, a new racial world order

consists of light-skinned “superior” races and dark-skinned “inferior” races” (Hall 2135)³. This ideology is the color complex. Maggie falls victim to this concept based on how she and others view her compared to her “more attractive” sister.

Maggie consciously sees that Dee has greater opportunities than she does which is explained in the second part of the quotation. Dee doesn’t get told no because of her skin complexion which is lighter than Maggie’s offering her separate circumstances. Maggie, opposite of Dee, does get told the word no. One who is of darker skin does not have the same privilege as another of lighter skin which fits into the description of “always holding life in the palm of one’s hand.” One source notes, “This strategy of appearing “respectable” through one’s skin tone yields greater privilege, access, opportunities, and mobility” (Landor 339). Dee embraces this characterization because she is able to do things that her sister could not. Maggie was not the one who is able to go to school, Dee does go to school when the church and their mother raise the money (Walker 316). It is interesting to note that the mother and community are willing to raise money for one child but not the other which is explained by the dichotomy of their complexion. Another article states, “Very light skin corresponds with a greater likelihood of going to college

³Is this what colorism is? Being treated differently because I look more white? Am I really seen as superior to my friends and family because of the way I look? I grew up in a primarily dominant white town and eventually I went to school with people who didn’t look like me and people who constantly had something to say. The privilege given to the white children was not the same as mine, but I felt that I had more privilege than the other black kids in my classes. Regardless of how light my skin was, I was still black. There came a time in my own life when people questioned my blackness because my dad is Colombian and my mom is Haitian. What they didn’t know is just because I am biracial does not mean that I am not black. Unlike Maggie, I didn’t think that I was superior because of my lighter complexion but I did understand that I was given more privilege. I think I did not feel this way because my parents always instilled the belief in me that regardless of my complexion I should have pride in my appearance. Maggie did not have that motherly figure. Instead of showering her with pride, Mama continuously berated her daughter through her actions and descriptions of her. Mama truly felt that there was no pride in being a dark skinned woman with 4C hair texture which translated into Maggie’s own feelings of herself. If Mama had presented herself and her daughter with self respect, Maggie would have realized that she is beautiful regardless of the characteristics given to her by other people.

and finding a full-time job” (Webb 22). Lighter skin grants more opportunities which is shown through the differing lives of both sisters. Given these opportunities, Dee is seen as more intelligent because she does go to school and is able to get an education whereas her sister does not have the same luxury. Allowing light skinned girls to get more education than dark skinned girls only reaffirms the stereotype and privilege. Dee becomes more educated which is why those around her see her as more intelligent. What if Maggie had the same opportunity? She then would essentially break that assumption. Along with this point, the recent source only written last year also demonstrates the prevalence of colorism today explaining how the words of Walker still exist in the current society.

Mama, just like Maggie, also sees the division in opportunities that her daughter was given and she was not. Mama says she did not have an education which resulted from the closing of the school in the second grade (Walker 316). Mama with no education and her daughter with an education separates the both of them disallowing for a relationship to bond. This alienation comes from their complexion because with lighter skin one lives under better circumstances and greater possibilities.⁴ Mama speaks about Dee like she is intimidated by her despite the fact that she is actually her mother which is shown in the passage, “She used to read to us without pity;

⁴ Imagine your own mother not having a relationship with you because of your skin tone. This might seem like a foreign concept but it is pivotal to the essence of Walker’s short story. I am blessed that my own mother does not see me as superior and herself as inferior. She is the one who gave birth to me, allowed me to venture into this world and continuously grow into the woman she knows I will become. Granted both my mother and I are educated and we do have light skin, does that influence our relationship? If my mother was dark and I was light, would our relationship be reminiscent of Maggie and Dee’s relationship? Truthfully I believe it would not. She is the only sibling in her family with light skin, her siblings have dark complexions similar to both Maggie and Mama. We are both consciously aware that appearance does not dictate our feelings about each other or ourselves for that matter. If my mother did not have an education and I did, would that make her feel inferior? In a sense I do not know. We are both educated and sometimes I feel as if my own mother does feel that way because sometimes she does not speak clear English. Maybe that is a derivative of the fact that English was not her first language. Regardless, my mother is my best friend. Dee could not feel the same given the way her mother treated her and how she treated her mother.

forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice" (Walker 316). Dee has more knowledge than both her mother and sister because of the education she has that they do not. Mama is reminded that she does not have these opportunities which strained the relationship between herself and her daughter which resulted in the intimidation that she constantly feels. She knows she will never be able to be in the same position hence her explanation of being trapped. She has one role which will never change because of the opportunities she was not given based on her complexion.

The same opportunities with education translate to the opportunities women of color are given in the workplace. Every job needs to meet a certain racial quota which is an attempt at affirmative action. In order to fill these quotas there has been a rise in discrimination against those with darker complexions which ensues to the color complex in the workfield.⁵ One particular journal with analytical data demonstrates the rise of colorism and how it affects minorities. Cynthia Sims and Malar Hirudayara state that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 went under revision to include the concept of colorism because of the unfair treatment that has been given to darker skinned women and men in the workplace (39). This treatment discourages those with a darker complexion because they will never be given the same opportunities as their lighter skinned counterparts. The government had to change a law that has been issued since the Civil Rights Era in order to protect all people of color because of the prevailing trend of colorism and increase in the amount of cases the government saw. Both women continue with statistics

⁵ I challenge you. How would you feel consciously knowing that you will not get a job because your skin color is darker than your competitor? Is that fair? People of color go through this issue everyday of their lives, wondering why their credentials were not enough to get the job they wanted. The job that would provide for them and their family, their children, their wife. There have been studies showing that when two applicants with the same resume, one being of lighter skin and the other dark, that the lighter skinned applicant gets the job. This has always existed, as the results have been spread across every social media platform. Go to google and educate yourself on the problems of colorism. By examining this issue, I hope to bring awareness of the obstacles people today have to face.

stating, “In the United States, workplace colorism cases are consistently high. Colorism cases totaled 2,756 in 2014, down from 3,146 in 2013 but higher than the 2,662 cases in 2012” (Sims 39). By attempting to address racial inequalities, quotas in workplaces continue to establish the issues of colorism.⁶ Choosing lighter skin applicants over dark skin applicants, does not count as affirmative action if the repercussions on black individuals are constant. Colorism is not a newly found trend which has been shown through the work of Alice Walker but it has now found a home in the workplace.

Colorism is present in various ways in the current society. In order to combat this issue it is up to the citizens of this country to truly recognize what has been going on since the times of slavery. Colorism did not just sprout from the ground on an early Sunday morning. No, it is a product of oppression on black individuals. Colorism is one of the issues that do not grant attention as noted by one article, “I urge this primarily because colorism, compared to more widely recognized -isms, often gets glossed over or dismissed outright in public discourse” (Webb 23). Despite the ill education of this concept, it is still a problem that must be discussed. Teachers need to educate, people need to become aware, and the readers must realize the content provided in this essay.

⁶ It seems that every time the government attempts to combat the prevailing issues that have to do with race and discrimination, there is never a positive effect. Racial hierarchies are very much in effect today whether people choose to admit it or not. This is evident through the Black Lives Matter movement, but what people seem to forget is that BLM is not new. The problems existing in America have always been evident but people chose to believe that these issues have been solved. They believe it is a myth, something only discussed in history books and documentaries. Walker’s *Everyday Use* combats this ideology by explaining a story where women fall victim to the stereotypes and prejudice prevalent in the United States.

Works Cited

- Hall, Ronald E. "The Globalization of Light Skin Colorism: From Critical Race to Critical Skin Theory." *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 62, no. 14, Dec. 2018, pp. 2133–2145. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1177/0002764218810755.
- Harris, Keshia L. "Biracial American Colorism: Passing for White." *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 62, no. 14, Dec. 2018, pp. 2072–2086. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1177/0002764218810747.
- Landor, Antoinette, and Ashley Barr. "Politics of Respectability, Colorism, and the Terms of Social Exchange in Family Research." *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, June 2018, pp. 330–347. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1111/jftr.12264.
- Sims, Cynthia, and Malar Hirudayaraj. "The Impact of Colorism on the Career Aspirations and Career Opportunities of Women in India." *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, vol. 18, no. 1, Feb. 2016, p. 38. *EBSCOhost*.
- Walker, A., 2020. "Everyday Use". [online] Faculty.weber.edu.
- Webb, Sarah L. "Everyday Colorism: Reading in the Language Arts Classroom." *English Journal*, vol. 108, no. 4, Mar. 2019, pp. 21–28. *EBSCOhost*.