

THE COLOR LINE: DISCUSSIONS OF COLORISM IN 19th- AND 20th- CENTURY
BLACK LITERATURE

by

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DEDICATION

To anyone unsure of where to start. You will figure it out.
Irie.

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Thank you endlessly to Dr. Goldstone for always supporting my educational endeavors, no matter how last minute I am. Thank you to the friends and family who've stood beside me and rooted me on in this journey; my cousins for being my best friends; my best friends for also being best friends; my brother for keeping me on my toes; my sister for always giving me a good laugh; my aunts and uncles for letting me stay rent free. I love you deep. And, of course, thank you to me. I'm proud of how far you've come and your determination to finish despite the need for sleep.

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ABSTRACT

In his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois writes, “The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line.” This quote speaks toward the societal divide that segregated Black and White Americans and the ways in which Black people were excluded and discriminated against. It is important to acknowledge not only the Black and White color line, but also the color line that exists within the Black community as a result of pressures stemming from White American society. Black writers in the 19th and 20th century addressed this social divide by writing about colorism and how it has impacted their identity and self-actualization. It is by acknowledging that this color line exists that we also begin to see the ways in which Black writers challenged *and* embraced blackness through journeys-to-self in stories where Black characters struggle through learning what it means to be Black in America and how to live within those constraints. By including these stories in the collegiate curriculum, students can gain an understanding of the Black experience that is often not shared even within the community.

INTRODUCTION

Literature during the 19th and 20th century served as a tool for Black Americans to have their voices and stories heard. Given the social state of America and the restrictions that Black Americans endured while pushing for the right to participate and be acknowledged in this society equally, it was, and continues to be, crucial that literature be one of the tools by which Black people could share their humanity. Thus, literature became one of the most salient ways in which Black writers afforded themselves the ability to both speak towards the state of American society and tells stories of the Black experience. Whether those stories were fictional or not, the substance behind the characters and events remained real and could not be ignored.

In the past, many White writers treated “blackness” as a problem as opposed to skin color being a part of the Black identity. For W. E. B. Du Bois, blackness is something that can be observed and understood through what he called “the color line,” which for him referred to that divide which separates Black and White Americans. This broader termed color line is indicative of the ways in which Black people were forced into the standards set by White people. However, there is another iteration that exists within the Black community itself which come directly as a result of the Black-White color line.

The color line that plagues the Black community continues to have long-lasting effects that harms the psyche of Black Americans. It is through this internal separation that we observe colorism and its effects on self-identity and how individuals perceive blackness. Given the racial tensions at the time, Black writers of the 19th and 20th century often told stories that challenged blackness while embracing it in the same breath to

convey the pressures placed on Black people to embrace their skin color in a country that expects for them to disregard it and adopt American standards of beauty and self-actualization. This project examines the ways in which Black authors of the 19th and 20th century discussed colorism and its influences on the Black community, individuals' journeys to self-actualization, and how true blackness was perceived in relation to self-identity.

THE COLOR LINE

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“The Blue Veins did not allow that any such requirement existed for admission to their circle, but, on the contrary, declared that character and culture were the only things considered; and that if most of their members were light-colored, it was because such persons, as a rule, had had better opportunities to qualify themselves for membership.”

-Charles Chesnutt, “The Wife of His Youth”

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In discussing issues of colorism, a major point Black writers had to address included the differences and similarities in experiences of individuals who were “fully” Black and those who were of mixed race (in this class, Black and White). In many ways, those who were of mixed race tended to be held in higher regards since they were, in theory, closer to “white.” Moreover, while they were often presented as the positive or ideal image of the Black community, their movement was limited since they still could not cross over into White society, as blackness remained a part of their identity.

There are many anecdotal stories that suggest that people on both sides of the color line perceived those who are biracial as “better than” their fully Black peers. This perception of the “mulatto” has contributed greatly to the colorism that exists within the Black community and can be observed through actions of Black Americans. In Charles Chesnutt’s short story “The Wife of His Youth,” the main protagonist, Mr. Ryder, struggles with accepting the woman he married when they were enslaved: a dark-skinned Black woman. Although Mr. Ryder had also been previously enslaved, he is of lighter skin and has since attained a respectable image as a member of the Blue Vein Society, an

organization meant to improve the standards of Black people “whose social condition presented almost unlimited room for improvement” (Chesnutt, 4). The presence of the Blue Vein Society serves as reminder that for many Black people, the goal of each generation is not to fight racism but to instead marry spouses who are lighter skinned until the blackness from the family is gone.

In “The Wife of His Youth,” Chesnutt explains that the Blue Vein Society got its name from the organization notoriously accepting members who have light skin—in other words, their skin was so light that one could see their “blue veins.” The discrimination against brown and darker skinned Black individuals captures the implied social hierarchy that favors whiter skin. The Blue Veins reinforce this idea set by American society that blackness is a condition to be avoided while whiteness is deemed respectable, further reinforcing the color line among their own community. Of course, it is known that the Blue Veins have some black in them, but the tendency to remove themselves from the Black identity is clear. That pressure having an impact on Mr. Ryder is evident as he first pretends to not know who his wife is and later goes on to ask the Blue Veins whether or not he should accept her. Though it is not explicitly stated, Chesnutt presented to audiences this issue of accepting blackness which detracts the Black community.

By the end of the story, Mr. Ryder ends up accepting his wife openly in front of the Blue Veins, but Chesnutt seems to be suggesting that his decision is based on the opinion of his love interest, a fair-skinned Black woman who says that he should do the “right” thing and embrace the wife from his youth. Generally, it should be understood that despite accepting his wife and thus their shared background, Mr. Ryder does not

truly accept hers or his own blackness. Rather, he continues to appease standards of White America via his love interest's opinion. Thus, it is not Mr. Ryder embracing his dark-skinned wife; rather, he is embracing their shared past and what he sees as his moral obligation to someone he thought he had escaped when he came to Ohio.

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"I believe it to be a fact that the colored people of this country know and understand the white people better than the white people know and understand them."

-James Weldon Johnson, "Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man"

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Blackness being treated as a problem is partially responsible for the internal divide among Black communities. Black writers expressed to audiences that beyond the obvious issue of degrading Black identities, there is a deeper trouble that Black Americans have with building self-identity. The expectation, which may also be looked at as a necessity, to abide by white American standards sets up Black people to compromise their own. In *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, James Weldon Johnson tells the fictional story of an unnamed narrator who struggles to accept his blackness in his youth and early adulthood, which eventually leads him to passing as white in his adulthood.

This unnamed man has been primarily raised by his mother, a light-skinned Black woman, and he only occasionally sees his white father up until he stopped visiting in his teen years. The "Ex-Colored Man" assumes that he is white because he has lighter skin than his mother, and it isn't until he is told by his teacher in school that he learns he is Black. This event introduces the effects of the Black-White color line to the narrator as he must accept an identity he did not associate with himself and understands as being perceived as less than the white identity. It is through this moment that Johnson further

suggests two things to the reader. One, that the Ex-Colored Man familiarized himself with being white because of the looming expectations and standards of white America. And two, the irony embedded in the system which cannot ignore blackness while insisting that those who are not white prove their worth by abiding by white standards. The blatant disregard and degradation of blackness encourages the acceptance of whiteness, a point that is significant towards highlighting the detriment of self-identity in Black communities. The vertigo that the Ex-Colored Man experiences with learning his Black identity expresses the importance of building identity in Black youth; had he been associated with his blackness before, it might have influenced his adult decision to pass as white differently. Throughout the rest of the novel, however, the Ex-Colored Man is increasingly exposed to the experiences of Black Americans and leads to him submitting fully to a White identity. While a large concern was addressing and bringing to light the troubles of dismissing blackness, another purpose Black writers saw over the 19th and 20th centuries was pushing for the unity of Black communities; this was often achieved through imagining what acceptance of blackness could look like.

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“Doctor, were I your wife, are there not people who would caress me as a white woman who would shrink from me in scorn if they knew I had one drop of Negro blood in my veins?”

-Frances E.W. Harper, Iola Leroy

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Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* begins as a story of the turmoil experienced by biracial individuals in regard to self-identity and ends by depicting the possibility of self-

acceptance and its outcomes. The novel follows Iola Leroy's journey to learning and accepting of her black identity. Iola is another fair-skinned Black character who is white passing and has blue eyes; up until her father's death, Iola and her brother were raised as white and only come to learn they are part black when their uncle Lorraine sells them into slavery out of revenge towards their father. Harper shows what happens when Black people deny their blackness and instead embrace whiteness; like the unnamed narrator in Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Iola is forced to face White society with an identity with which she was previously unassociated.

As forementioned, Black writers sought to bring awareness towards the damage done on Black individuals' self-identity through not only highlighting the influences hurting them, but also by depicting what black acceptance might look like for the Black community. Different from Johnson's novel, Harper closes out *Iola Leroy* with Iola and her family fully identifying with their Black skin, marrying Black people, and moving to North Carolina to help give back and nourish the Black community. Given that this story takes place during the Civil War/Reconstruction era, this ending may be perceived as unrealistic considering the limited opportunities afforded to Black people. Regardless, Harper seems to write for a Black audience to communicate that Black people need to pour themselves into the Black communities rather than trying to be embraced by a White community that only accepts them when they think they are White. It's important, however, that this black acceptance occurs through a character who is white passing and not one who is brown or darker skinned.

With the Leroy's being able to pass as white but choosing to outwardly embrace their black roots, this unspoken act of treating blackness as a choice reappears. The point

to understand is that for Iola and her family, there is no chance for them to claim Black and White as their identity collectively. This experience is not the case for those who have darker complexions, so the trouble with forming self-identity differ in many ways.

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“She wasn’t the only person who regretted her darkness either. It was an acquired family characteristic, this moaning and grieving over the color of her skin.”

-Wallace Thurman, The Blacker the Berry

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For most Black people, skin color is the first thing other people notice, and for many characters written as such, the tone of their skin is described in a way that emphasizes the amount of weight that carries. Considering the limited spaces dark skinned Black people had that were welcoming, the difficulties that arose from being discriminated against comes in part from having to be your own safe space. Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry* walks readers through the isolation that is experienced when one has no community or spaces to accept them and the damage to self-identity that can come as a result.

In the novel, Emma-Lou, a dark-skinned black girl, consistently finds herself trying to relate to those who are light skinned in hopes of attaining self-love and acceptance by being accepted by them. This chase for acceptance never comes to fruition for her, and by the end, Emma-Lou realizes that she must accept herself before anyone else can. It is through this realization that Emma’s movement across various spaces shows the importance of community for Black individuals as well as the ability to self-actualize or self-define one’s identity.

Emma's negative perceptions of blackness stem primarily from the ridicule she received from the blue-veined women in her family. Although her Uncle Joe who was also dark-skinned supported her, he is not a black woman and therefore could not fully understand her experiences as a dark-skinned Black woman. Emma-Lou's tendency to associate with those who are lighter skinned only pushed her farther away from self-actualizing this sense of community/acceptance she was looking for and instead aided in her own oppression. This issue of self-loathing that is perpetuated by the Black community restricts individual's from connecting with the Black community at all such that one may seek acceptance under an identity entirely separate from blackness altogether.

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"You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their own conviction."

~

Toni Morrison writes about girlhood, self-identity, and conflicts as they appear within the Black race. In her novel *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison touches on each of these themes as the reader follows the experiences of Pecola, a young dark-skinned girl who wishes to have blue eyes. Her wish for blue eyes is indicative of her wanting a Eurocentric trait that she hopes will relieve some of the weight of her blackness. In the midst of her wishing, Pecola's reality is extremely damaging to her character due to the experiences of her parents and hurt inflicted by those that act superior to her. Morrison highlights the self-destruction that comes as a result of colorism within the Black

community.

Throughout the novel, Morrison shows us that whiteness correlates to values like sterility and beauty to which Pecola and her mother agree with. The two maintain this belief that they are unworthy and view themselves as ugly because of their skin; for Pecola, this comes due to her mother subjecting her to these thoughts, and Pecola's mother experienced the same in her youth as well. The generational passing of racial self-loathing speaks towards the nature of the color line in that there is deep rooted hate that cannot be forgotten in an instance. Further, the preservation of hierarchy based on skin color contributes to the ongoing inability for darker skinned characters to view their skin as anything outside of a burden to their success/acceptance and tendency to take actions that may benefit them even if it means hurting their own.

Cholly's abuse towards Pecola and her mother comes from him being humiliated by two white men in his youth when he is caught having sex with a black woman. Him turning his violence and hatred unto Black women instead of white men for his experience showcases the subconscious idea that by putting down or rejecting people of his own race, he may be granted some amount of power that he could not attain by accepting them. The continuous battering of Black characters in *The Bluest Eye* creates an environment impossible for them to understand or accept their Black identities, thus leading to Cholly and her mother's self-hate, and Pecola's eventual psychotic break.

The color line which divides the Black community upholds the nature of American systemic racism in terms of social hierarchy and perceptions of Black identities. This division directly influences the ways in which Black people are or are not able to make connections within the Black community to attain an identity that feels right

to their character and hinders individual and collective attempts to find solace in this country.

CONCLUSION

At the front of this project, I mention the importance of literature as a tool for Black writers to speak on the state of American society and the Black experience. The same thing applies today as the education system continues to restrict discussions of race in classrooms for the sake of avoiding (white) discomfort. Amid the disagreements regarding what Republicans are calling “critical race theory” curriculum being included in primary education, I find it necessary to push for the inclusion of Black literature on the collegiate level. Having gone through elementary, middle school, and high school, I can count how many Black teachers I’ve had on one hand; the same can be said for how many times I was taught Black history in school. Black students don’t have access to education on their own history through a textbook in the way that white students do. Essentially, it is made their own responsibility to educate themselves on their own time. To a certain extent this is necessary for everyone, but there is a clear privilege that is denied to BIPOC students. Telling black stories remains a primary tool for learning and maintaining history within the Black community while encouraging those outside of that to understand Black experiences in a meaningful way.

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