
The Destructive Power of Colorism: A Poison Within the Race In Zora Neale Hurston's "Color Struck"

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Abstract:

This article analyses and explores the impact of colorism and its surprising influence on us today through the play "*Color Struck*" by Zora Neale Hurston as a case study. Zora Neale Hurston was an American writer often focusing her literature around the struggles of black women and the racial struggles of the darker shade people. This article mainly focuses on elaborating how Emma, a protagonist in the drama, is obsessed with lighter skin tones (being "color struck") which poisons her relationship with John and herself, ultimately leading to heartbreak. The paper points out the power colorism holds through the lens of historical roots in colonialism and its lasting impact on mental health, relationships, and even parenting choices. It concludes with a call to action for everyone to come together and fight against colorism by raising awareness within communities, challenging existing beauty standards, and tearing down biases within institutions.

Keywords: color struck, colorism, colonialism, racism, mental health, Harlem Renaissance**Introduction**

Are we all Color Struck? This question has a deep insight of knowing yourself under the skin. Imagine love being complicated not just by who you love, but by the color of your skin. Zora Neale Hurston's play "Color Struck," written during the Harlem Renaissance, explores this issue beautifully. Hurston paints a vivid picture of how colorism can poison a relationship. We see how Emma, the protagonist, feels insecure about her dark skin, creating suspicion and jealousy that ultimately drive a wedge within her life. Colorism, like a hidden family secret, can be passed down within communities. Even today, it remains a shadow, impacting not just romantic relationships, but mental health, societal norms, and even family dynamics.

Color Struck

Zora Neale Hurston's "Color Struck" wasn't a huge commercial success upon its creation. Originally published in 1926 within the magazine "*Fire!!*" it actually won second place in a literary contest. Despite not being staged during the Harlem Renaissance itself, the play aligns

with the movement's themes of celebrating Black identity and confronting internal struggles. "Color Struck" falls under the category of a one-act play, meaning it's a concise story meant to be performed in a single sitting.

Color Struck tells the story of Emma and John, a young Black couple. They're on a train heading to a celebration, but trouble starts brewing right away. Emma sees John talking to another woman with lighter skin, and jealousy flares up. Emma is "color struck," meaning she believes lighter skin is better and feels insecure about her dark skin tone. This insecurity poisons their relationship. Emma constantly suspects John is attracted to lighter-skinned women, Effie, and John gets frustrated by her accusations. Even after constant reassurances from John, Emma never erases her doubts. Because of these misunderstandings, they end up breaking up.

Twenty years pass, and John comes back to Emma, still in love. But Emma's colorism is so strong, that she can't truly accept his love or move past her self-hatred. Emma's colorism has hardened into self-hatred. It's even impacted her parenting – we learn she has a daughter with very light skin named Lou Lillian, but the details of the child's life are left unclear.

Ultimately, Emma's inability to overcome her prejudice prevents her from reuniting with John, leaving both of them heartbroken. The fair-skinned daughter dies at the end of the play due to the lack of urgency by Emma's side to bring the doctor on time to cure her sick daughter. The play ends on a sad note, showing how colorism can damage lives.

Roots of Colorism in the Play

Sure, things are better, but colorism is still a problem. Society has made significant progress in combating colorism, but it's far from wiping out. Zora Neale Hurston's play "Color Struck" was written during the Harlem Renaissance (1920s-1930s), a period of artistic explosion celebrating Black identity. While racism was the overarching societal issue, colorism within Black communities also existed. The play sheds light on this internal judgment, highlighting its presence even during a time of cultural awakening.

Colorism is rooted in racist ideologies that emerged during colonialism. Lighter skin was often associated with European colonizers and seen as superior, while darker skin was linked to enslaved or marginalized groups. This perception continues to influence beauty standards and social biases. For example, Emma stuck in a colonial way of thinking, does not even realize she's comparing herself to the other women during the Cakewalk competition.

“EMMA (calmly bitter): He went and left me. If we is spatting we done had our last one. (She stands and clenches her fists.) Ah, mah God! He's in there with her - Oh, them half whites, they gets everything, they gets everything everybody else wants! The men, the jobs everything! The whole world is got a sign on it. Wanted: Light colored. Us blacks

was made for cobble stones. (*She muffles a cry and sinks limp upon the seat.*)” [Scene – II]

Here, Emma’s anger reveals the traumatic effects colonialism handed down through generations. According to an UN report, impact of colonialism breathes through racial discrimination, xenophobia and much more. This supports the idea that even when Emma directly have not experienced any racism against herself, she was well aware of her world, her roots and surrounding.

Back in history, people with lighter skin were often associated with closer proximity to white slave owners gaining some privileges which were beyond reach for those darker skin tone. This history triggers Emma to feel like lighter skin is valued more, even for things like love and jobs. Her reference of how light colored are always preferred and wanted while blacks were meant to be dedicated to slavery, to work and build with cobble stones, show how it has become a norm.

Harmfulness of Colorism in the Play

While the scars of colonialism run deep, the conversation now turns to the mental health consequences and the harmfulness of colorism, exploring its toll on individuals and relationships.

"Color Struck" paints a devastating portrait of how colorism can poison lives. Emma's constant suspicion and fear of John being attracted to Effie, a lighter-skinned woman, reveal the deep insecurities and anxiety colorism can breed. This internalized racism, where she might judge her own worth based on skin tone, can lead to depression and other mental health struggles. The play emphasizes the strained relationship that is caused by colorism. John’s kindness and normal human behavior are again and again questioned by Emma's harsh insecurities creating tension and breakdown. Colorism doesn't just affect individuals; it fractures families and romantic bonds, leaving a trail of heartbreak in its wake.

Scene IV of "Color Struck" paints a dark picture with powerful symbolism. The final scene is bathed in darkness, except for a brief flicker of light. John repeatedly lights a lamp, symbolizing his attempts to bring light and understanding to their relationship. However, Emma extinguishes it each time, a metaphor for her refusal to let go of her prejudice. This darkness represents the emotional blindness caused by colorism in Emma's life.

Moving towards the end, the play hints that Emma might have had a relationship with a lighter-skinned man in the past, possibly the father of her daughter. While Emma repeats “**Ah, never wuz married, John**” we don't know for sure if Emma ever had a proper partner, although it's interesting to note that she, who once worried about John leaving her for a lighter-skinned woman, might have chosen someone with lighter skin herself. This inconsistency highlights her hypocrisy.

It becomes even clearer when she questions John's intentions for approaching her daughter, even though his motives are good. The brief light symbolizes John trying to connect with the daughter, but Emma's suspicion extinguishes it, highlighting a missed chance for happiness. John's heartbreak come into view when he says **"So this the woman I've been wearing over my heart like rose for twenty years! She so despises her own s] that she can't believe anyone else could love it!"** He realizes she hates her own skin tone so much that she can't believe anyone, including him, could truly love her for who she is. It's a sad statement about how Emma's insecurities are pushing him away.

The most heartbreaking consequence is the daughter's death, symbolizing lost innocence and a broken future. When the doctor asked Emma why didn't see come over sooner, she replied with two simple words: **"Couldn't see."** These words hold immense weight, echoing throughout the play's themes. One, Emma has been blind to John's true feelings. Obsessed with skin color, she couldn't see his genuine love for her as a person. Second, this blindness extended to her own worth as the insecurities about her skin tone cloud her judgment, preventing her from valuing herself. Furthermore, she's blind to the bigger picture. The play suggests her prejudice might have impacted her parenting, neglecting the importance of love and care over skin tone.

The phrase **"Couldn't see"** can also be seen as a commentary on societal blindness. Colorism, as portrayed in the play, creates a world where people miss out on genuine connections. Emma's tragic fate serves as a stark reminder of the high cost of such blindness. It is really interesting to question whether Emma should be seen as a victim or someone responsible for her own choices. The play ends with Emma alone in the dark, suggesting her colorism will keep her isolated. This powerful scene serves as a warning. It shows how colorism can destroy relationships and lead to tragic consequences.

Self-acceptance and Collective Action

So, are we all color struck? It doesn't matter if it is as obsessing as Emma or not. Colorism can be tough to deal with. People often find different ways to cope even in today's world. Some people might use skin-lightening creams to try and fit into beauty standards that favor lighter skin. They change the way they talk or act depending on who they're with, hoping to avoid judgment. There's this whole movement growing about self-love, encouraging people to appreciate their skin tone no matter what it is.

Yet we see the media plays a big role in shaping our ideas of beauty. Constantly showing lighter-skinned people as the stars in shows, and using fairness creams to show the brightness of skin color, that it starts to feel like that's what "normal" or "attractive" looks like. This can make us, completely unintentionally, favor lighter skin even if we don't mean to. It's kind of like a habit – we see something a lot, so we start to think it's the right way to be. It is necessary to realize how tricky it is that all of this happens without our full conscious.

Not everyone experiences racism directly, and some might not be bothered by it. But racism exists everywhere, and the fear it creates, fuels colorism. It's like a bad habit - even people who are hurt by racist comments can sometimes judge others based on skin tone. This keeps

colorism alive and creates a cycle of negativity. Fighting colorism requires a united effort. We need to normalize the beautiful spectrum of skin tones within communities, uplift narratives that challenge colorist ideals, and dismantle these biases within institutions. It's a battle, but by acknowledging the effective sting of colorism, we can pave the way for a world where everyone is seen not by color but for who they truly are by heart.

Conclusion

In conclusion, "**Color Struck**" isn't just a play of individual struggle; it's a call to collective action. By depicting the destructive power of colorism within a Black community, Hurston urges us to prevent the consequences the individuals have to go through by getting rid of this system from within. This isn't just a problem in the play, it happens all over the world. Colorism hurts people's feelings and keeps them from reaching their full potential. Just like in the play, it can tear people apart. The play serves as a starting point to question and discuss the deeper exploration of the issue of Colorism and its impact on mental health, relationship bonds, and societal norms. By fostering open dialogue and promoting self-acceptance, we can begin to stop the roots of colorism from spreading worldwide.

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