Dee is lighter than Maggie, with nicer hair and a fuller figure,” says the narrator in Alice Walker’s short story “Everyday Use” (49). A significant aspect of this classic text is the conflict between the two sisters, Dee and Maggie. Some readers might infer that a large source of this conflict stems from the difference in Dee’s and Maggie’s appearance, as did one of my African American male students, who concluded that “Dee is lighter than Maggie, so that means Dee can smash her.” While it may seem like a huge leap to go from Walker’s sparse description of Maggie’s appearance to such an overt judgment about the meaning of her complexion, we must remember that students do not read skin color neutrally or objectively. Particularly for students of color, the nuances in skin tone among members of their race are loaded with cultural baggage due to the ubiquitous phenomenon of colorism. The same may be true for us as teachers. As a dark-skinned African American woman with a lighter-skinned sister, I readily perceived the archetypal relationship between Walker’s characters. However, even readers who do not have such mirroring experiences are likely to recognize what is popularly labeled the “light skin versus dark skin” dynamic.

While teaching high school in Louisiana between 2010 and 2012, I occasionally witnessed instances of explicit colorism among my students in their conversations about themselves and others. Beyond the above student response to Walker’s short story, I heard several of my other ninth and tenth graders make unsolicited value judgments about skin color in casual conversations outside of instructional time:

“I wish I was light-skinned like my momma.”
“I’m less proud of myself because I got darker over the summer.”
“I don’t like this picture; I look too black on here.”
“I don’t like dark-skinned people when I first meet them, maybe once I get to know them.”

Some of these statements were even told directly to me, and every time I heard something like this, my heart broke. Students took for granted and assumed a consensus that light skin shades are preferable, if not outright superior, to darker skin shades. Much like an everyday household item, colorism was something that my students took for granted as just a typical element of daily life, something they could simply accept at face value, something innocuously mundane. This article provides teachers with a basic understanding of colorism and how it commonly affects students, how to incorporate lessons or discussions about colorism into a typical high school English curriculum, and strategies for continuing conversations about colorism beyond the singular classroom.
Walker, in fact, writes extensively about this hurtful dynamic in her 1982 essay “If the Present Looks like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?” Walker coins and defines the term colorism as “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color” (290). Researchers have since described this phenomenon using other terms such as skin color bias or color complex (Russell-Cole et al.). In the decades following Walker’s testimony on colorism, scholars have conducted research on colorism in fields such as education, economics, law, and social work and in cultures spanning the globe in places such as Canada, Brazil, and India (Hunter 238). Colorism is indeed a global issue.

Colorism is also associated with prejudice based on other physical traits, such as hair texture, eye color, and shape or size of the nose and lips (Blair et al.). All of these features have historically been racialized in the United States, meaning we typically associate these features with certain racial categories, and also certain ethnic groups. Colorism is based on the degree to which one’s outward appearance matches or does not match the expected or archetypal (and stereotypical) appearance of one’s designated race. The general pattern is that society extends greater privileges to people of color who appear less like their racial archetype and more like a European racial archetype. In my discussions about colorism with White people from around the world, many of them also report social pressure among Whites to meet certain standards of racial appearance, such as blonde hair and blue eyes. Though in recent decades a Western standard of beauty among Whites has been tanned skin, for centuries the ideal beauty feature for White women was pale skin (Blay 21).

Throughout her epistolary essay, Walker elaborates on the historical conflict of colorism among Black women in the United States and asserts that colorism is as harmful as the more well-known issues of racism and sexism. Walker’s beliefs about colorism as expressed in that essay are connected to her short story in how, for example, the sisters’ complexions correspond with their relative confidence, social status, and financial success. The overwhelming majority of research has confirmed and elaborated on the issues Walker raises in her short story and essay, including income and wealth inequality—as much as a 14 percent gap between earners with lighter skin compared to those of the same race with darker skin; implicit (unconscious) employer discrimination—such that job applicants with light skin fared better even when they had less education; disparities in marriage rates; and differential health outcomes (Goldsmith et al.; Hamilton et al.; Harrison and Thomas; Kreisman and Rangel; Udry et al.). Here are some findings we should be particularly aware of in an educational setting:

- Light-skinned individuals often report painful awareness of privilege that results in “survivor’s guilt,” or alienation/antagonism from their own community (Cunningham). Teachers should understand this dynamic because it can often be one cause of interpersonal conflict among students.
- People perceive Blacks and Latinos with more Caucasian features as more intelligent (Lynn). This means that teachers of any race or ethnicity are likely to have some bias in their perceptions of student intelligence based on skin tone. As teachers we should honestly assess our own biases about darker skin tones and lighter skin tones, for example, or curlier hair versus straighter hair. Harvard’s suite of implicit bias tests includes a test on color bias (implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html). This is a useful tool for helping teachers become more self-aware regarding colorism.
- Dark and very dark-skinned Black students continue to experience educational disadvantages well after the Civil Rights era (Loury).
- Very light skin corresponds with a greater likelihood of going to college and finding a full-time job (Ryabov).
- Girls with very dark skin tones are three times more likely to be suspended from school than girls with very light skin tones.
who engage in the same behaviors (Hannon et al.). This is another example of implicit bias. Whereas above, people tend to view dark-skinned people as less intelligent, this finding about school suspensions is based on the stereotype that dark-skinned girls are more delinquent.

This research—which reveals the existence of color-based stereotypes, implicit biases, economic disparities, educational inequalities, and other forms of social discrimination—illustrates why it is necessary to discuss colorism with all students, not just students we believe are most directly affected. I recommend teaching all students about colorism just as we would teach all students about racism. Regardless of a student’s race, ethnicity, nationality, or other cultural background, having critical education about colorism helps them become more empowered, responsible global citizens who can help redress color-based social inequalities. In the remainder of this article, I return to the text “Everyday Use” to illustrate one possible approach to addressing colorism in our classrooms.

ADDRESSING COLORISM IN THE ELA CLASSROOM

A culturally responsive way to introduce the topic in class is through the literary texts we choose to teach. Walker’s short story “Everyday Use” is one good choice for exploring the topic of colorism within the framework of literary analysis. Focusing on the dynamic between the two sisters allows teachers to connect colorism to other themes in the text: sibling rivalries, self-esteem, bullying, social status, and class discrimination, to name a few. However, I caution against diluting conversation about colorism by lumping all forms of discrimination or bullying into one discussion. Rather, I urge teachers to hold space for students to learn about and discuss colorism as a specific issue. I urge this primarily because colorism, compared to more widely recognized -isms, often gets glossed over or dismissed outright in public discourse.

Though recent attention to colorism by celebrities such as Gabrielle Union and Amara La Negra is helping to change this, I still believe that our students will rarely, if ever, have other opportunities outside of our classrooms to have informative or productive conversations about colorism.

Beginning with the brief and deceptively simple statement, “Dee is lighter than Maggie, with nicer hair and a fuller figure,” teachers might ask: What does the narrator mean by “lighter” and “nicer”? A common obstacle to understanding colorism is the use of the word color as a euphemism for the word race. As stated earlier, certain physical traits are stereotypically associated with certain races, complexion and hair texture being first and foremost of those traits. So, starting here in a discussion of colorism can help students see that as biological siblings Dee and Maggie are the same race, yet they have different physical features. Their skin colors and hair types are unique, though both are African American. This is key to distinguishing between racism and colorism: people of the same racial category can have different skin tones and hair textures, and people of different racial categories can have similar skin tones and hair textures.

The next step, after recognizing the difference in the sisters’ skin tone and hair texture, is asking students: How might the sisters’ different appearances have affected their lives? Students can begin to explore this question by making inferences from details in the story as they read closely. Key passages and descriptions...
to highlight in response to this question include the following:

- **An introduction:** “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 47).

- **Body language:** “Dee, though. She would always look anyone in the eye. Hesitation was not part of her nature” (49) and “W-a-su-zo-Tean-o!’ [Dee] says, coming on in that gliding way the dress makes her move” (52) versus “Have you ever seen a lame animal, perhaps a dog run over by some careless person rich enough to own a car, sidle up to someone who is ignorant enough to be kind to him? That is the way my Maggie walks. She has been like this, chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle, ever since the fire that burned the other house to the ground” (49) and “She stoops down quickly and lines up picture after picture of me sitting there in front of the house with Maggie cowering behind me” (53).

- **Education:** “I used to think she hated Maggie, too. But that was before we raised the money, the church and me, to send her to Augusta to school. She used to read to us without pity, forcing words, lies, other folks’ habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice . . . to shove us away at just the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand” (50) versus “Sometimes Maggie reads to me. 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” (50).

- **The climax:** “‘She can have them, Mama,’ [Maggie] said, like somebody used to never winning anything or having anything reserved for her. ‘I can ’member Grandma Dee without the quilts.’ I looked at her hard. She had filled her bottom lip with checkerberry snuff, and it gave her face a kind of dopey, hangdog look. It was Grandma Dee and Big Dee who taught her how to quilt herself. She stood there with her scarred hands hidden in the folds of her skirt. She looked at her sister with something like fear, but she wasn’t mad at her. This was Maggie’s portion. This was the way she knew God to work.

“When I looked at her like that, something hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet. Just like when I’m in church and the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout. I did something I never had done before: hugged Maggie to me, then dragged her on into the room, snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero’s hands, and dumped them into Maggie’s lap. Maggie just sat there on my bed with her mouth open” (58).

After completing close readings of these passages and thinking about colorism as a factor in the sisters’ relative confidence, education, and overall life outcomes, I recommend teachers continue with a third phase, which is to introduce critical context. The primary resource I recommend for providing critical context to high school students is Walker’s essay “If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?,” which students can read as a companion text.

For middle school students, I recommend teachers provide them with a summary or excerpts from FIGURE 2.

**The essay “If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?” appears in Walker’s 1983 volume In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose.**
the essay. Combining Walker’s fiction with her non-fiction is a good way of exploring themes across genres. Questions that help facilitate the cross-genre analysis between Walker’s two texts might include the following:

- **How is Walker’s focus on sisterhood in the essay reflected in her short story, “Everyday Use”?** Walker claims in her essay that colorism is particularly harmful to the relationships among women, causing division and antagonism. This is reflected in the story by her choice to focus on the sibling rivalry between two actual sisters.

- **How do the essay and short story each illustrate the relationship between colorism and class among African Americans?** In the story, the lighter-skinned sister Dee has moved into a middle-class lifestyle and exhibits prejudice against the poor and working-class lifestyle of her mother and sister, who happen to be darker skinned. In the essay, Walker calls out the Black middle class as being especially problematic in overtly discriminating against dark-skinned women.

- **How does “Everyday Use” differ from Walker’s criticism of early nineteenth-century novels by African American authors?** Walker’s essay includes her analysis of earlier novels by African American authors that only feature “white-looking” female characters, and only including darker-skinned female characters on rare occasions and only in disparaging ways. Her own short story breaks from that old tradition by telling the stories of Black women with darker skin tones who have more traditionally Black hair textures.

- **Based on the many examples in Walker’s essay, write an additional scene depicting an instance of colorism that Maggie might have faced growing up.** Walker’s essay includes real-life examples of dark-skinned people being excluded from middle-class social activities at school, from dating circles, and from certain career paths, especially during the historical time period of the story.

The fourth phase and essential component of coursework related to the theme of colorism is personal self-reflection. It is the element of self-reflection that matters most for students in their personal development as citizens. Again, self-reflection is productive for all students, even those who have no overt personal experiences with colorism. In most cases, students of any background have likely observed colorism in popular media such as music, movies, television, magazines, and other literature. It is also likely that students might have a conditioned, implicit bias against dark skin as a result of their exposure to such media, whether or not they typically encounter dark-skinned people in their day-to-day lives. Self-reflection can be incorporated throughout a lesson and/or incorporated as a formal activity or assignment. The following questions will help spark student reflection and can be posed as general class discussion questions, as prompts for journal entries, or as topics for more formal and extended essays or research papers.

- **How does “Everyday Use” and/or “If the Present Looks Like the Past” remind you of things you have seen, heard, or experienced in your own life or in other forms of media?**

- **In “Everyday Use,” the mother, who is the narrator, finally decides to take a stand for her daughter Maggie by giving her the self-reflection is productive for all students, even those who have no overt personal experiences with colorism. In most cases, students of any background have likely observed colorism in popular media such as music, movies, television, magazines, and other literature.
quilts instead of letting Dee take them. How might you and your peers act against colorism as upstanders?

- If racial categories did not exist, would problems like colorism still exist? Explain your reasoning.

- What advice would you give to someone who had a prejudice or bias against others because of their skin tone or hair texture? If your advice includes “appreciate all skin colors” or “don’t judge people for how they look,” explain ways that people can practice doing that. Use examples from the story or essay to explain your advice.

- What advice would you give to someone who is treated unfairly due to colorism? If your advice includes “love yourself” or “love the skin you’re in,” explain strategies for how people can learn to do so. Use examples from the story or essay to explain your advice.

- What attitudes or beliefs have you had about different skin tones, your own or others? Why or how did you get those ideas? Have they changed, and if so, why and how?

THINKING BEYOND THE EXPLICIT CURRICULUM

As ELA teachers, one of the most proactive ways we can address colorism is to directly address it within our curriculum. However, there may be times when we observe colorism outside of the curricular or academic context. I briefly offer tips for responding in these situations.

RESPOND

A teacher’s failure to respond after an instance of colorism could be interpreted by students as approving or condoning colorism. While it might be tempting to say nothing out of fear of saying the wrong thing, our silence actually speaks volumes. Even the simple encouragement to “love the skin you’re in” is better than a nonresponse.

OFFER RESOURCES TO THE STUDENTS INVOLVED

This applies to the person who is a target of colorism as well as the person who is perpetuating colorism. A list of recommended resources is provided.

KNOW WHAT COLORISM LOOKS AND SOUNDS LIKE

Teachers can familiarize themselves with the kind of nomenclature minority students might use to tease or alienate their classmates. Even without knowing the specific words, educators can pick up on context clues that alert them to insults, teasing, bullying, or harassment. Regardless of students’ race or ethnicity, pay attention to when and how they discuss skin tone or hair texture. If you feel comfortable, ask students or other colleagues if they understand the meaning behind certain comments.

| TABLE 1. |
| These texts and resources are recommended for the study of everyday colorism. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Source/Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall Secrets</td>
<td>Candy Dawson Boyd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice Walker in the Classroom: “Living by the Word”</td>
<td>Carl Jago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Team Lightskinned”</td>
<td>CNN YouTube Channel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorism Poems</td>
<td>Colorism Healing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A Girl Like Me”</td>
<td>Kiri Davi on Vimeo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Skin I’m In</td>
<td>Sharon G. Flake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit Association Test</td>
<td>Stanford University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Shadeism: Part 1”</td>
<td>Nayani Thiyagarajah on Vimeo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Shadeism: Digging Deeper”</td>
<td>Nayani Thiyagarajah on Vimeo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“In This Shade (Colorism)”</td>
<td>Youth Speaks YouTube Channel</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
BRING THE TOPIC OF COLORISM INTO THE LARGER SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Partnering with other stakeholders to address colorism is a crucial next step because regardless of what we do within our individual classes, students will inevitably leave our classrooms and reenter a schoolwide atmosphere and community environment that condones and promotes colorism. Community engagement can include reciting poems at school assemblies, professional development for faculty and staff, or guest speakers. Teachers, administrators, support staff, professional development trainers, parents, students, researchers, and others can continue to educate ourselves and help spread awareness that colorism exists and how it manifests in our schools, classrooms, and communities. Just as colorism itself is an everyday part of society, so too must be our efforts to eradicate it.

CONSIDERING TEACHERS AS CHANGE AGENTS

The reason I’ve been focusing on colorism in the classroom through professional development, classroom visits, and instructional materials is because I believe teachers are one of the most powerful groups of change agents in the world. As educators, we hold a unique position to impact successive generations that will shape the future of our society and culture. I believe this is especially true of English teachers. I’m also aware of the overwhelming burden placed on teachers as we’re implicitly asked to play so many roles—content experts, surrogate parents, nurses, therapists, activists, technical innovators, and so much more. If the concept of colorism is new, it could feel like just one more responsibility added to the load. However, I hope this article helps demonstrate how we can address colorism with the everyday strategies we’re already adept at using.

WORKS CITED


Veenstra, Gerry. “Mismatched Racial Identities, Colourism, and Health in Toronto and Vancouver.” Social Science and Medicine, vol. 73, no. 8, 2011, pp. 1152–62.


Students gain a deeper understanding of a text when they make authentic connections. However, teachers need to know how to show students the ways a text connects to their lives, another text they have read, or the world around them. In this strategy guide, teachers will see how to model text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections for students so that they may begin to make personal connections to a text on their own. [http://bit.ly/2ctjoTZ](http://bit.ly/2ctjoTZ)

Teacher Appreciation Week

When each teacher received a tiny succulent, it was as if the district said, *Be like the jade. Clean the air, and refuse to take up space.* So useful to ignore, a cactus can flourish while this climate runs its course. I kept mine on the window sill above the sink for years, watching it shrivel up as I pined for another life. It paled as the soil went sandy, but the thing just kept getting taller.

—ALEXA GARVOILLE

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