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Beauty, Complexion, and Self-Esteem

by Jason Hernandez

(English 1903)

The Assignment: Using any idea from Alice Walker's short story, "Everyday Use," write a 10-page, MLA-documented research essay integrating seven to ten sources.

**B**eauty, complexion, and self-esteem are all commodities. Most everyone can say that, at one time or another, they once encountered the effects of one of these three nouns that can be almost defined as a form of wealth. Everywhere we turn, a billboard or a magazine shows the "ideal person." These images subconsciously suggest inferiority to our very beings. Some of us go to great lengths to obtain that desired appearance, and others are simply happy with who they are.

Most everyone cannot deny that they once looked at themselves in the mirror and wished they were taller, shorter, skinnier, thicker, lighter, or darker. The desire to change our image comes from the comparison to others. When we compare ourselves to others, we set impossible standards to live up to that can detrimentally affect our health. Conditions like bulimia, depression, and skin cancer from UV rays are common diseases that result from the pursuit of the "ideal image." Sometimes the images of beauty are so wrongfully seeded into our minds that we become disillusioned, focusing only on the physical appearance. If nothing else, history has taught us that "beauty" is favored with special treatment and this may shed light as to why we compare ourselves to others. Instead of superficially favoring physical beauty, such as a person's skin color, race, or physical appearance in general, we need to consider and incorporate into our everyday lives the beauty of compassion, peace of mind, love for one another as equals and live up the motto "Color Blind."

In the "Color Blind" nation of America, it is evident that the quote is merely that... a quote. It is human nature to formulate an opinion about someone when we first meet him or her. Thus, the basis of the quote, not looking at someone's appearance with judgment, is quite the opposite. In fact, 100-level speech classes at most universities teach students that the first visual characteristic someone notices about another is their body type: height, weight, complexion, and even that person's sense of style.

In comparison, the author of *A Natural History of the Senses*, Diane Ackerman, explains that the first visual animals notice about a predator or victim is shape and color. The reason animals pay so close attention to these details are for security. In the animal and insect kingdoms, red is universal for danger and yellow means caution; this is much like the concept behind our traffic streetlights. If a male robin is shown a handful of red feathers, it instantly attacks the hand holding the feathers (Ackerman 263). However, there are those organisms that see only in black and white, including genetically flawed humans. It is this genetic flaw of not seeing colors that our "Color-Blind" quote is based on. Unfortunately, some people can only see it as a flaw and not a highly moral code that every one of us should try to achieve. This level of humanity is absolutely necessary if we are to grow as a nation not in segregation or discrimination.

The society of America in the twenty-first century is so fixated on the idea of perfection that there is little or no justification to the belief system of the perfect face or body type other than the impression of observational learning. This type of learning occurs when someone responds to an influence by observing others who can be called models. If people are motivated by a once-modeled situation, or look, they believe this response is desirable. This is the basis for fashion models in Victoria Secret and so on. Companies hire attractive people to wear brand name clothes in the hope

that someone will desire that look. Even magazines have half-naked women (who are usually white or ethnic with a lighter complexion) model their products; again, the hope is that someone will be lured by beauty. There is the association that the beautiful girl shows a higher status that anyone can achieve by way of a given product or image. However, that product is not any better because Vanessa Williams wore it or Brad Pitt produced it. It is in our perception that we find importance in the non-important.

For instance, in the 1900s, the ideal image that was desired for women was that of a stick figure (no curves) and pale skin. Looking back even further, fashionable women of England in the 1600-1700s were quite thick with their faces powdered like that of freshly fallen snow. An even more recent example is the 1970s when the natural look or hippy look was in. In comparison to twenty-first century's society, these fashions of the past would be considered outcasts, strange and unusually out of style. Fifty years from now, the fashions and looks of today will fall under this kind of ridicule. Our age of plastic implants and procedures to tighten our stomachs, remove wrinkles by muscle relaxing drugs and, amazingly, change the complexion of one's skin through creams and dyes will be considered an age of low self-esteem and self-worth.

The effects of these issues are evident in people's actions, words, and even writings. For example, Alice Walker, the author of a short story "Everyday Use," made important references to racial complexion within her writings. The main character, Mama, who has a very dark complexion with very un-lady-like traits to her appearance, has two daughters, Maggie and Dee. Maggie fits the image of her mother, while Dee is of much lighter complexion with a more nicely developed body. It is Dee who really makes the story unfold. She is the one who seems to be more privileged and shows her confidence more so. Very explicitly, she considers herself equal in status with anyone and everyone. Mama and Maggie, on the other hand, are very timid and insecure with who and what they are.

Mama explains that she could not imagine looking a white man in his eyes; however, Mama often had a dream that showed her as the way her daughter, Dee, would want her to be: much skinnier, more talkative with "uncooked barley pancake" skin complexion and the ability to converse with a white man on a national television talk show (Walker 107). It is in Mama's dream that the correlation between race, beauty, and complexion can be seen directly and indirectly, negatively affecting the self-esteem. Mama, in her waking life, hefty with a very dark complexion, could not see herself being equal to the white race; whereas, the image she projected in her dream was not only more equal to the white race but resembled or even was accredited to the white race. Mama may not have consciously seen herself like her dream; however, subconsciously she may have wanted to be of that image if nothing else than to be considered equal. After all it was her dream. The image projected in Mama's dream showed herself as her definition of beautiful, a woman who had lighter skin and a well-defined figure. Walker made the special point to emphasize the association of Mama's skin tone and image with the association of high status.

Many years ago, White America announced the "one-drop" rule. This is related to the roots or background of someone's family. When blacks and whites had children they were considered a Mulatto, half black and half white. The Mulattos then had the choice of their significant other... usually. During the slave years of African Americans, "wanting to be light" was a concept and goal. The children of mixed races, or Mulattos, were more privileged because of their "blood-lines" in comparison to the full-blooded African Americans. The Mulattos were given the easier jobs, such as cooks and butlers. They sometimes were as privileged by the occupational and luxury level as the whites were. For example, the clothes they wore mimicked the average white person. Because of the privileges associated with the lighter skin, the Mulattos made sure to keep the bloodlines light (Herring 763). As the bloodlines mixed into a lighter complexion, the black skin was genetically buried. Although no matter how light the shade of skin became, the fact that at one point there was a black descendent in their family tree, they were considered black, hence the "one-drop" rule (Herring

3). Imagine someone not being able to marry the one they love because their children would suffer. At this point, the whole process might be considered animal breeding.

Generally, today, people are not making the choice to mate based on complexion or race, rather on who they love. An African American friend of mine, Bob Miller, once explained his childhood growing up on Chicago's Southside. He further explained that dark skin black males did not like light skinned girls because "they thought they were too good for everyone" (Miller). On the contrary, years later he married a light skinned lady, and they now have two daughters who share their mother's complexion. Ironically, he informed me on his feelings of surprise toward his own thoughts that once discriminated against his lighter counterpart. He also stated that it must have been extremely hard, if not impossible, to live in the early years of America. If the beliefs of early America were present today with the same influencing strength as they once had, Bob Miller may not have married his wife.

The assumption of "favoring color" can be looked at from a biological-psychological perspective. Charles Darwin, bio naturalist, theorized; "only the strong survive." In this situation, the "strong" trait was that of light skin. In early America, having lighter skin meant having an advantage to opportunity. Psychologically, this kind of situation can cause depression or other mental illness to those who are dark. "Scholars have widely demonstrated that light skin tone for African Americans and Mexican Americans is correlated with higher incomes, higher levels of education attainment, more integrated housing options, more occupational choices, higher levels of self-esteem, and fewer mental health problems (Herring 30). The mistreatment and oppression of people because of the way they were born causes low self-esteem and self-worth not limited to Africans and Hispanics. However, these low mentalities can be seen today. Depression, anxieties and low self-esteem can be associated with not "fitting in" and, again, comparing ourselves to others with false pretenses in regard to the "perfect" height, weight, and complexion.

Richard Rodriguez, author of a memoir titled *Hunger for Memory*, may help readers understand the importance of complexion. Rodriguez grew up in a middle-class household. His family and relatives expressed their beliefs about what skin color was respected. He recalls his aunts rubbing lemon juice on his cousins' faces, hoping to lighten their complexion (Rodriguez 116). He didn't want to go outside if the sun was out because it would darken his already dark skin (Rodriguez 120). Rodriguez was always very self-conscious about who, what, where, when, and how something was done. He functioned as if he had a malignancy in regard to his skin color. His influencing factors, family, all pointed to inferiority toward dark skin. Being considered of dark complexion, Rodriguez started to act and feel inferior. If a person is told something over and over again, then it becomes religiously impressed into their mind and they will act in accordance to it.

Coming from a Hispanic background, I understand and sympathize with Rodriguez. My Hispanic roots are traced from Mexico to Spain. Unfortunately, I too understand the struggles with complexion. My father is one hundred percent Mexican and my mother a combination of western European nationalities, ranging from Italian to Irish. The ten percent or so of Irish blood within my genotype proved dominate, or shows in my physical characteristics. Relating, yet not relating, to my own heritage, I found myself standing on a very thin line growing up. Middle through high school was rather hard at times. All the different races clicked together. I, on the other hand, was never really considered this or that, at least not on a social level. Hispanics were on the left, Whites on the right and I was somewhere in-between. I felt like an outcast being among a group of concentrated races.

It was during these developmental years that complexion of my skin became important. If I was Hispanic, why do I look white? If I was white, why do I act or pretend to be Hispanic? I was asked these kinds of questions on several occasions growing up. I never really knew how to answer them. I heard remarks like these so much that it is clear I subconsciously took them to heart. I noticed myself paying attention to the skin color of others. In doing so, I noticed that the lighter skinned

males, especially the very light skinned ethnic male and the slightly tanned white males, were more favored one way or another. Whether it was by the attention of the teachers or the ability to attract the girls, their favor was shown. Being a young teen, social popularity was important. I remember coming home one day asking my father if he would take me to a tanning store. He thought I was crazy. I reasoned that a few shades darker would make me more attractive in some way. Maybe I would fit in more.

Looking even further back than middle school, I can recall my father and grandmother talking to me about my skin and hair color in the living room of my house. My grandmother (on my father's side) told me that my skin color is a blessing and almost a mask to people. How she explained it I'll never forget. The white people were very racist toward both my father and grandmother when they were younger. They told me my light skin would serve as an advantage in this world. Doors will be opened to me that otherwise would not be, they told me. I never really understood until I was a bit older. There were a few times in my life that I was around strangers that, not knowing my race, commented on Hispanics and Blacks in rather vulgar ways. I never really was offended by such comments, but my eyes were opened. The conversation with my grandmother started to make sense. One good example of this is the application process for admittance to a medical school. I have learned that almost all applicants are white, Indian, or Asian. I have also learned that there are quotas that must be met in order to accommodate the equal opportunity acts of America. Because of statistically low ethnic minority recruitment among medical schools, the under represented race is awarded extra points that cumulatively add to the students' MCAT and GPA scores, thus, making it slightly easier to get accepted. This is quite an advantage among the masses. Then again, the person getting the job might not be the best overall fit.

It is evident that the awareness of beauty is introduced at very young ages. For example, fairy tales are usually the introduction that beauty is good and ugly is bad. The main characters are always handsome or gorgeous, and the villain is always the ugly wicked witch or troll of some sort. As children grow up, they are subconsciously programmed to favor attractive people with the correlation that they are good. It is almost universal to consider someone beautiful or hideous. Therefore, the chances of succeeding in life are far greater if someone is considered beautiful. Even the chances of marriage are increased if the beauty quota is met. It has even been said that beauty is no longer a commodity, but it has evolved to a form of currency or money (Herring 31).

Just as one can argue physical beauty speaks for itself, one can also say inner beauty speaks for itself. Because someone is not considered beautiful does not mean they are not good, kind, gentle hearted and overall a great person. "Your godly lives will speak to them better than any words. They will be won over by watching your pure, godly behavior. Don't be concerned about the outward beauty that depends on fancy hairstyles, expensive jewelry, or beautiful clothes. You should be known for the beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God" (1 Peter 3:2-3).

We need to stop focusing on detail to the physical and concentrate on our personalities; after all, there is only so much we can change about our physical images in comparison to our inner images. There are big businesses that fund themselves off beauty products, not intended for medical/mental purposes such as Vitiligo, at the expense of low self-esteem individuals. While these products may enhance the physical appearance, we must find a way to enhance our inner appearances. It is not to say someone cannot think or feel highly of themselves, although when we think too highly or too low of ourselves the effects of self-esteem are seen. When growing up, I remember a young girl, who was not considered beautiful, in my eighth grade class. Most of the other kids would make fun of her, usually boys. I never paid much attention to her, until one day we became partners in a class project. We eventually became good friends. It was after our friendship was formed that I started to, in a schoolboy way, "like her." I was quite amazed that I found an unattractive girl to become attractive after spending the time to get to know her. This transformation was like that of a caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly.

The world is so hung up on what is and is not physical beauty that the other traits of beauty are overlooked and sometimes omitted. In my book, personality goes along with beauty. Sometimes we get so caught up on physical images that we try to fit in where we do not fit. Instead of trying to be, we should just be. Be happy with the way we are, be content with our appearance, be satisfied with what we were given, be honest in our appraisal of our self-worth, because this directly affects our very actions, and most importantly, be confident in ourselves. Only then will we find peace not only within, but we will find peace with others as well.

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