

What Happens in the Play?

Settings: Bradford Corners, a small town in central Tennessee in 1919

Chicago, Illinois that same year

Color Me Dark is a play about the Love family, a black family*. The **immediate family** includes Freeman, the father; Olive, the mother; and their daughters, Erma Jean and Nellie Lee. Freeman Love, an **undertaker**, runs the family business, Love and Sons Funeral Home.

The Love family looks forward to Uncle Pace's return after having been a soldier in France during **World War I**. Their anticipation turns to grief when Pace is **fatally** beaten near home.

Pace's death causes Erma Jean to stop speaking. Mr. Love takes Erma Jean to Chicago to receive treatment at an excellent hospital for blacks.

In Chicago, Mr. Love contrasts the opportunities for blacks with the growing problems of life in the South. He moves the family north to Chicago, and, there, the family struggles to adjust.



CAROL PRATT

▲ Nellie Lee (left) and Erma Jean enjoy reading a letter from Uncle Pace who has been in France fighting during World War I. From left: Tymberlee Chanel and Edwina Findley, members of Actors' Equity Association.

Even in Chicago, problems exist between blacks and whites. At the beach, a young black swimmer is attacked by whites. A **riot** breaks out. Terrified, the girls run home. When her parents do not return, Nellie Lee wants to look for them. Erma Jean **resumes** speaking to warn Nellie Lee that it is too dangerous to leave the apartment. Finally, Mr. and Mrs. Love return home, and the family looks forward to better times for themselves and for all blacks.

immediate family—people closest in relationship to one another: father, mother, and children

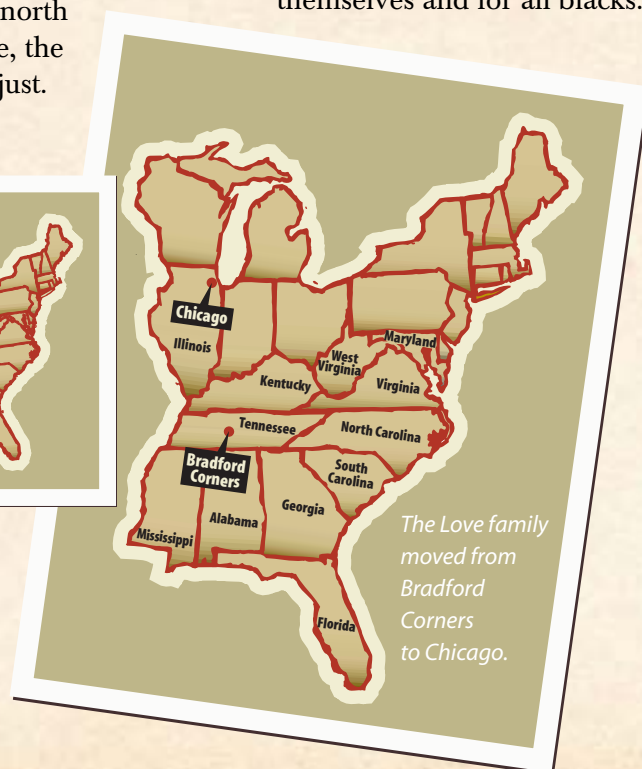
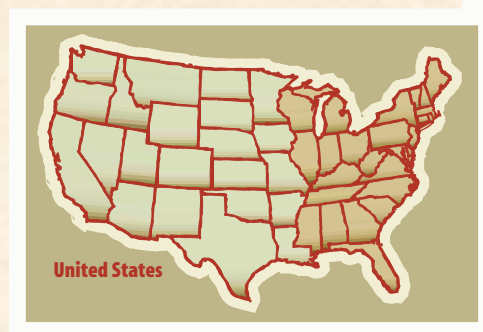
undertaker—someone whose job it is to arrange funerals and prepare dead bodies for burial

World War I—war fought mainly in Europe between the Allies (United States, Great Britain, and France) and Germany; 1914–1918

fatally—causing death

riot—a violent public disturbance caused by a crowd

resumes—to start doing something again after a break



* In the play, the Love family refers to themselves as “colored.” In 1919, “colored” was the term used by both blacks and whites.

▼ Mr. Love has to convince a reluctant Mrs. Love that moving to Chicago will result in a better life for the family. From left: David Toney and Lynn Chavis, members of Actors' Equity Association.



▲ Erma Jean (right) reacts angrily to Rosie's suggestion that Erma Jean needs to change her appearance to look more like a white person. From left: Erika Rose & Edwina Findley, members of Actors' Equity Association.

Color Me Dark!



Nellie Lee, Erma Jean, and their friend, Rosie, have different points of view about beauty. Nellie Lee's skin color and hair texture would let her pass for a white person, but she is proud her family is black and says, "Color me dark!" Erma Jean enjoys being described as "pretty" in Uncle Pace's letter. However, she doesn't believe she deserves the compliment because her dark skin and hair texture do not match white standards of beauty. For Rosie, the ideal is looking like a white person, so she learns about hair straightening and skin lightening products.

What would you say to each girl about beauty? Write your thoughts in a journal entry or poem for each girl. Share your work.

To Stay Put? To Move On?



The Love family has reasons to stay in Tennessee and reasons to move to Chicago. During the performance, listen for reasons supporting each choice. Afterward, discuss whether or not you agree with the Love family's decision and why.

Names Are Important

In *Color Me Dark*, the characters' names are important. For example, both daughters have two first names, something common among **rural** Southerners. In Chicago, Nellie Lee asks her friend to call her "Nell" which shows that Nellie Lee is abandoning her country ways.

During the performance, think about the following questions:

- ❁ Why is the family named the Love family?
- ❁ Why is the father named Freeman?
- ❁ Why is the mother named Olive? (Hint: Think about the meaning of the olive branch in mythology or in the Bible.)

Afterward, discuss your answers.

rural—having to do with the countryside

Fiction and Fact

Based on Real Events

Color Me Dark is historical fiction, combining real settings and events with characters and a plot that are not real.

Read the facts behind the play.



CHICAGO DAILY NEWS, CHICAGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

▲ This soldier and his family pose with the US flag to show their pride at his having fought for America in World War I.

Black Soldiers Come Home

Erma Jean: *Uncle Pace has been off fighting the war... They'll kill you Nellie Lee. Just like they did Uncle Pace.*

FACT: More than 350,000 blacks were soldiers in World War I. They hoped their military service proved they deserved equality in America. Black soldiers discovered that whites in Europe did not share the racial **prejudice** common in America. After the war, black soldiers would not accept the discrimination they had endured before the war. Many whites, who felt threatened by the black soldiers' efforts to achieve equality, attacked blacks wearing military uniforms.

prejudice—an unreasonable opinion about someone based on the person's race, religion, etc.

Ku Klux Klan: Hatred in White Sheets

Nellie Lee: *...last week the Klan got hold of that boy in Eastman. Not to mention them three lynchings...*

FACT: The Ku Klux Klan, a group that believes in white superiority, was founded in 1865. Klan members opposed the changes after the Civil War (1861–1865) that gave blacks more equality. Klan members disguised themselves in hooded white sheets and used violence and terror to prevent blacks from voting or enjoying other rights. By the 1880s, the Klan had achieved its objective; blacks had few rights in the South. In 1915, the Klan became active again when blacks increasingly demanded their rights.



CORBIS

▲ Blacks who stood up for their rights risked a beating or worse from the Ku Klux Klan.

REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD JOIN THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE.

Because you are opposed to discrimination in places open to the public; lack of education for your children; restricted fields of employment; peonage; Jim Crow cars; segregation where you live and where you work; taxes without votes; lynching.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is organized to secure your full rights as citizens; to obtain equal justice in the courts; to prevent repressive legislation; to gain for you equality of opportunity everywhere; to bring your wrongs before the American public; to right these wrongs.

Organizing for Rights and Dignity

Sheriff Bell (to Freeman Love):
...you being a member of the NAACP.

FACT: In 1909, blacks and whites interested in justice and equality joined together to form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP investigated unfair laws and customs and went to court to change them. The NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis*, helped make blacks more aware of the growing demand for equality. As a result, individual blacks became more willing to stand up for their rights in spite of danger from hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan.

A Great Migration

Reverend Prince (welcoming families new to his church):
new arrivals...from Lexington, Kentucky...Jackson, Mississippi...and the Loves from Bradford Corners, Tennessee.

FACT: When President Abraham Lincoln ended slavery in 1863, 92% of all blacks lived in the rural South. After the Civil War, black Southerners enjoyed a brief period of justice and opportunity. However, over time, black-white relations returned to separation and

This 1915 newspaper article offers reasons for blacks to join the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

prejudice. In spite of these problems, 90% of all blacks still lived in the South in 1900. Beginning in 1915, the threat of lynching, farming problems, and racial injustice combined to cause Southern blacks to migrate north. This migration changed the black population of America from rural and Southern to **urban** and Northern. **urban**—having to do with cities



▲ Chicago is located along Lake Michigan. The lakefront beach was a popular place for both blacks and whites to escape the city heat in the summer.

Red Summer in Chicago

Nellie Lee: *Colored folks took to rocks, sticks, their fists. Anything to show they weren't gonna stand for it.*

FACT: The "Red Summer" of 1919 earned its nickname because of violent fighting between blacks and whites in many northern cities. In Chicago, the fighting began at the beach after a black boy was stoned by whites and drowned. Eyewitnesses explained what had happened; however, the police refused to arrest the whites responsible for the drowning. Angry blacks gathered on the beach of Lake Michigan and a riot broke out that lasted two weeks.



▲ Editorials in the Chicago Defender made Southern blacks aware of better opportunities in Northern cities.

Theater is Theatrical

The people who created *Color Me Dark* have staged it in a way that reminds the audience they are watching theater rather than real life. For example, you first meet Uncle Pace when Nellie Lee reads his letter from France. To heighten the dramatic effect of the letter reading, Pace appears on stage and speaks his written words.

Watch for these examples of theatrical staging:

Scenes can take place **simultaneously** in different areas of the stage. Three scenes occur at the same time: Erma Jean sits at the bedside of her injured uncle, Freeman Love and Sheriff Bell talk in a nearby room, and Nellie Lee and Olive collect supplies to deal with Pace's injuries.

Actors can become narrators. Nellie Lee speaks to the audience directly when she tells part of the story or explains what is happening.

Thoughts may be spoken aloud as conversations. Nellie Lee's thoughts about Chicago, her absent sister, and Uncle Meese's job are staged as an actual conversation with Uncle Meese.

Costumes supply information about characters. Uncle Meese appears in a **zoot suit** because Nellie Lee believes her uncle has an exciting, possibly illegal, job. Uncle Meese removes his zoot suit to reveal an ordinary businessman's suit underneath. This shows that Nellie Lee's ideas about her uncle have changed.

simultaneously—happening at the same time

zoot suit



CAROL PRATT

▲ The set designer, Tony Cisek, built this model (left) of the set. When the play begins, a group of boxes represents the sisters' bed in their Tennessee home. Each time something happens to disrupt the Love family's life, the boxes are pulled apart and re-arranged. For example, the boxes are used to represent a train (right) that takes the family north to Chicago. From left: Erika Rose, Lynn Chavis, Tymberlee Chanel, Cleo Reginald Pizana, Clinton Brandhagen, and David Toney, members of Actors' Equity Association.

How the Story is Told on Stage

From Page to Stage

When playwrights create a play based on a book, they make changes that help them tell the story on stage. Playwrights decide which events and characters to keep or change and whether to create new characters and events. Here is what playwright Jerome Hairston says about his play **adapted** from the novel by Patricia C. McKissack:

“I created a scene that wasn’t in the book—the opening scene in which Nellie Lee walks across the room to get the letter from Uncle Pace. In that one scene, I was able to show the sisters’ dependence on one another and to set up information about the family needing to be quiet during funerals because they live above the funeral parlor. That scene also stimulates the audience’s imagination. Nellie Lee’s movements and conversation with her sister help the audience imagine the bedroom, complete with creaking floor boards.”

adapted—to change or adjust to make appropriate for the stage



CAROL PRATT

▲ The Love family discovered that many of the problems in the south continued in the north. Here, Mr. Love is wearing the uniform of a hotel employee because he has had trouble getting a license for work as an undertaker in Chicago. The magazine he is reading to Erma Jean encouraged blacks to stand up for their rights. From left: David Toney and Edwina Findley, members of Actors’ Equity Association.

Adult Actors — Children’s Roles

Designer LeVonne Lindsay had a special challenge creating the costumes for *Color Me Dark*. In addition to doing research about what people wore in Tennessee and Chicago in 1919, she had to design costumes for adult actors performing the roles of children.

◀ These preliminary costume sketches reflect clothing styles in 1919. Notice that the illustration on the left includes Uncle Meese’s business suit and zootsuit. The illustration also includes a costume sketch for Uncle Pace’s World War I soldier’s uniform because the same actor plays both roles.



Think About...

True Sons of Freedom



Artist Charles Gustrine combined images from different time periods in his 1919 poster titled “True Sons of Freedom.”



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION.

The uniforms of the black soldiers and German soldiers and the airplanes are historically accurate for World War I. However, Abraham Lincoln was president of the United States more than 50 years earlier. Lincoln’s words are from his speech known as The Gettysburg Address (1863) in which Lincoln honored Union soldiers who had died in the Civil War (1861–1865). Think about the following questions:

- What does the complete Gettysburg Address say about freedom and equality for all people?
- How might the ideas in the Gettysburg Address apply to the struggles blacks were still facing from 1910 to 1920?

Discuss your answers.

Family Migration



Choose your mother’s or father’s side of your family and explore the reasons they immigrated to the United States and migrated to your current hometown. Interview the family member who first moved to your hometown, and, then, ask about earlier generations. Ask what pushed each family member to leave home (e.g., discrimination, famine, military conflicts) and what opportunities drew each family member to a new home (e.g., adventure, marriage, jobs). Share your information.

You, the Audience

The performers in *Color Me Dark* need help from you, the audience. You are an important part of the play. Being a member of an audience in a theater is different from watching a movie or television show. The performers are in the same room with you and are affected by what you do. To do their best, the performers need you to watch and listen closely. Other audience members also depend on your quiet attention during the performance so they can watch and listen, too.

Watch. Listen. Think. Imagine.
Enjoy *Color Me Dark*!

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Color Me Dark

Adapted by Jerome Hairston
Directed by Ricardo Kahn

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Cuesheets are funded in part through the support of the U.S. Department of Education, the President’s Advisory Committee on the Arts, the Kennedy Center Corporate Fund, and the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation.

Cuesheet

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Resources

You may want to...

go online:

Bronzeville Cultural Tour Homepage.
dig.lib.niu.edu/gildedage/cultural_tourism/laurasummers/index.html

read:

McKissack, Patricia C. *Color Me Dark*
The Diary of Nellie Lee Love, The Great Migration North. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 2000.

watch:

Dear America™ Color Me Dark. Videocassette. Scholastic, Inc., 2000.
Goin’ to Chicago. Videocassette. Produced and directed by George King. George King and Associates, 1994.

Dear America

Color Me Dark

A Story of the Great Migration North

By Jerome Hairston
Adapted from the book by
Patricia C. McKissack
Directed by Ricardo Khan

Cue sheet FOR STUDENTS

Welcome to *Cuesheet*, a performance guide published by the Education Department of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C. This *Cuesheet* is designed to help you enjoy the performance of *Color Me Dark*.



The compass pointing north marks topics for discussion or activities you may want to do with other students, friends, or family.

What's in *Cuesheet*?

What Happens in the Play? pages 2-3


Fiction and Fact, pages 4-5

Theater is Theatrical, page 6

How the Story is Told on Stage, page 7

Think About... and Resources, page 8

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