

how it feels to be colored me rhetorical analysis

How It Feels to Be Colored Me is a powerful essay by Zora Neale Hurston that encapsulates the complexities of race, identity, and self-acceptance in America during the early 20th century. Through her personal narrative, Hurston examines her experiences as a black woman against the backdrop of a racially divided society. This rhetorical analysis will explore the essay's themes, rhetorical devices, and overall impact, demonstrating how Hurston's work continues to resonate with contemporary readers.

Context and Background

Zora Neale Hurston's Life and Work

Zora Neale Hurston was an influential figure in the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement that celebrated African American culture, arts, and literature. Born in 1891 in Notasulga, Alabama, Hurston grew up in Eatonville, Florida, one of the first all-black towns in the United States. Her upbringing in a predominantly black community shaped her understanding of race and identity. Hurston's literary contributions, including her acclaimed novel "Their Eyes Were Watching God," explore themes of race, gender, and self-discovery.

The Historical Context

Hurston wrote "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" in the early 1920s, a time when racial tensions were pervasive in America. The Jim Crow laws enforced racial segregation, and the Great Migration saw a significant movement of African Americans from the South to northern cities. Hurston's essay reflects her unique perspective as a black woman navigating a world that often reduced her to her race.

Summary of the Essay

In "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," Hurston recounts her experiences of race and identity from her childhood in Eatonville to her life in urban America. She begins by describing her early years, where she was largely unconcerned with race, as her community was predominantly black. However, upon moving to Jacksonville, Florida, she becomes acutely aware of her racial identity. Hurston writes about the stark contrast between her experiences in Eatonville and the broader societal perceptions of race.

Throughout the essay, Hurston employs vivid imagery and personal anecdotes to illustrate her journey of self-acceptance and resilience. She embraces her identity, rejecting the notion that being colored is a limitation. Instead, she asserts that her race is an integral part of her individuality, enriching her experiences and perspectives.

Rhetorical Devices and Techniques

Imagery

One of the most striking aspects of Hurston's writing is her use of imagery. She paints a vivid picture of her experiences, allowing readers to visualize her journey. For example, when she writes about her childhood in Eatonville, she evokes a sense of belonging and community. In contrast, her descriptions of Jacksonville highlight feelings of alienation and otherness. This juxtaposition emphasizes the impact of environment on identity and perception.

Metaphor

Hurston employs metaphors to convey deeper meanings about race and identity. One notable metaphor is her comparison of herself to a "brown bag of miscellany." This metaphor illustrates the idea that, like a bag filled with various items, individuals are composed of diverse experiences and identities. Hurston's assertion that the contents of the bag are not defined by its color resonates with her belief that one's race should not dictate their worth or identity.

Humor and Irony

Humor is another rhetorical device that Hurston skillfully incorporates into her essay. She uses irony to highlight the absurdity of racial stereotypes and societal expectations. For instance, she describes how she felt like a "colored" person when she moved to a predominantly white area, emphasizing the arbitrary nature of racial categorization. By infusing humor into her narrative, Hurston invites readers to reflect on the absurdity of racism while also asserting her individuality.

First-Person Narrative

The use of first-person narrative is crucial in Hurston's work. By sharing her personal experiences, she creates an intimate connection with readers. Hurston's voice is confident and unapologetic, allowing her to assert her identity boldly. This personal perspective challenges readers to confront their own biases and assumptions about race.

Thematic Analysis

Identity and Self-Acceptance

At the core of Hurston's essay is the theme of identity and self-acceptance. She challenges the notion that race should define an individual's worth or capabilities. Instead, Hurston embraces her identity as a black woman, celebrating the richness and diversity that comes with it. Her assertion that she does not feel diminished by her race is a powerful statement of self-empowerment.

Racial Awareness and Perception

Hurston's essay also explores the concept of racial awareness and perception. Her experiences in Jacksonville illuminate the ways in which society views race and the impact of those views on individuals. By contrasting her upbringing in a predominantly black community with her experiences in a racially diverse environment, Hurston highlights the arbitrary nature of racial categorization. She critiques societal expectations that try to confine individuals to narrow definitions based on race.

The Beauty of Diversity

Another significant theme in Hurston's essay is the beauty of diversity. She celebrates the idea that each individual, regardless of race, contributes to the rich tapestry of human experience. Hurston's metaphor of the "brown bag" reinforces this idea, as she suggests that the contents of the bag—representing different identities and experiences—are what make life vibrant and meaningful.

Impact and Legacy

Influence on African American Literature

Hurston's essay has had a lasting impact on African American literature and the broader literary landscape. Her bold exploration of race and identity paved the way for future generations of writers to address similar themes. Her unapologetic stance against societal constraints resonates with contemporary discussions about race, identity, and self-acceptance.

Relevance Today

The themes presented in "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" remain relevant in

today's society. Issues of race and identity continue to be at the forefront of social discourse, and Hurston's essay serves as a reminder of the importance of self-acceptance and embracing one's individuality. Her work encourages readers to challenge their own perceptions and to recognize the beauty of diversity in a world that often seeks to categorize individuals.

Conclusion

In "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," Zora Neale Hurston masterfully weaves together personal narrative, vivid imagery, and rhetorical devices to explore themes of identity, race, and self-acceptance. Through her unique perspective, she challenges societal expectations and celebrates the richness of individual experiences. Hurston's essay not only reflects the complexities of race in early 20th-century America but also serves as a timeless reminder of the importance of embracing one's identity in the face of adversity. As readers continue to engage with her work, they are invited to reflect on their own experiences and perceptions, ultimately fostering a greater understanding of the multifaceted nature of identity.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'How It Feels to Be Colored Me'?

The main theme is the exploration of identity and race, highlighting the author's pride in her heritage and individuality despite societal racism.

How does Zora Neale Hurston use imagery in her essay?

Hurston employs vivid imagery to convey her experiences and emotions, using descriptive language to paint a picture of her life and surroundings, particularly in contrasting her life in Eatonville with experiences in other places.

What rhetorical devices are prominent in Hurston's writing?

Hurston utilizes metaphors, similes, and irony throughout her essay, effectively illustrating her points and adding depth to her reflections on race and identity.

How does Hurston's perspective on race differ from

the prevailing views of her time?

Hurston emphasizes a sense of pride in her race and individuality, countering the victimization narrative common in African American literature of her era, which often focused on suffering and oppression.

What role does humor play in 'How It Feels to Be Colored Me'?

Humor serves as a tool for Hurston to disarm her audience, allowing her to address serious topics of race and identity in a light-hearted manner that makes her reflections more accessible and engaging.

How does Hurston describe her childhood in Eatonville?

Hurston fondly describes her childhood in Eatonville as a vibrant, joyful experience, where she felt free and unencumbered by race until she encountered a broader world that imposed racial distinctions.

What significance does music have in Hurston's essay?

Music symbolizes cultural identity and community in Hurston's essay, representing the joy and spirit of African American culture that she embraces and celebrates throughout her narrative.

What is the impact of Hurston's use of personal anecdotes?

Hurston's personal anecdotes create a relatable and intimate connection with her readers, allowing them to understand her unique perspective on race and identity through her lived experiences.

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