

Iboro Okpok
Prof. Kendra Johnson
THEA 3170 - African American Theater
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Q2: Explain the Title of *They Sit in Darkness*. What messages did the playwright try to convey?
(25-point question)

The play, *They Sit in Darkness*, was written the year 1919 during the time of the heavily enforced Comstock Laws. The Comstock act had banned any distribution of information or contents pertaining to contraceptives and birth control through the U.S. mail system. During this time many people, especially the black community in the United States, were unaware of contraceptives, birth control and abortions. The title *They Sit in Darkness* is a common phrase when referring to someone not knowing anything about an important topic that is being discussed. In this particular instance, the topic is the access to contraceptives and birth control. The mother in the play, Malinda Jasper, is unaware of the access to contraceptives and lacks accurate sex education. At one point in the play, Malinda tells Nurse Elizabeth Shaw how she is unsure of where all of her children are coming from and doesn't know how to stop. As a result of the Comstock Act, Nurse Shaw is unable to discuss with her the options she has, but tries her best to hint towards it. Mary Burrill was attempting to bring awareness to the birth control issue amongst impoverished black families, but also the lack of sex education and knowledge that women of that time possessed as a result of the Comstock Act.

Q2: Define colorism and give examples of characters from the assigned readings who expressed colorist views and the ones who were affected by them. Use specific examples from the plays.
(75-point question)

Colorism is defined as the prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group. In many of the plays we have discussed, there have been colorist remarks that affected different characters in each of the plays. Throughout the play, *On Striver's Row*, there are many colorist remarks or names that are being thrown by the characters or the descriptions of the characters and the different scenes. In the Opening scene Sophia makes a comment on page 230 about how it surprises her, "why some colored people— even the "well-bred ones" — have such unbred feet". During those times a black person who was considered "Well-bred" was someone who comes from a descent of black and white people. While describing Dolly the description even states that Dolly is "well-bred, youthfully fortyish matron of the Afro-American elite that descended from pre-Civil War Black and white Romeos and Juliets in downstate New York". Another play that displayed an

abundance of colorism would be *Big White Fog*. In the play, Ella's mother, Ms. Martha Brooks is extremely colorist and makes colorist insults towards Ella's husband, Vic, and their child, Phillip. Vic and Phillip are of a darker complexion and because of this Ms. Brooks insults them based on the color of their skin. On page 309, Ms. Brooks refers to Phillip as a "Black skamp" and frequently establishes her dislike of their skin tone. On page 310, during a fight with Ms. Brooks, Vic and Ms. Brooks insult each other so harshly to the point where Ms. Brooks leaves. Because of this, Ella then spews colorist insults to Vic calling him an, "evil, Black fool!" These words not only hurt Vic, but instill shock on their child, Lester. The colorist remarks then cause a rift between Ella and Vic, leaving Vic heartbroken that Ella would ever say such a thing to him.