

The Film "Luce" Fully Explained and What It Teaches About Stereotyping

[Harrison Dent](#)

On the surface, the 2019 thriller film *Luce* lacks a clear ending. The viewer is left wondering who did the *bad* actions throughout the film: Who left fireworks in Luce's locker? Who lit fireworks in Harriet's classroom? Who wrote expletives on Harriet's window? And finally, which character lied to whom and why?

In order to discover why the film leaves these questions unanswered, we must unravel some of the film's important layers. On the surface and sub-textually, *Luce* predominantly deals with how stereotyping leads to unsubstantiated, speculative assumptions.



Official Movie Poster for Luce (Fair Use Copyright)

Everyone Makes Implicit Assumptions

Within the film's main plot, all of the film's characters are motivated by unsubstantiated assumptions based on sex, race, and status stereotypes.

Many of these stereotypes are based on a character's actions. For example, because Luce (played by Kelvin Harrison Jr.) is an all-star track athlete, successful debater, and skilled public speaker, he appears special and distinct from his classmates, especially from other African-American students.

But in many ways, Luce acts more akin to his classmates than to a model student. He smokes weed, has sex, attends

parties, lies, breaks rules, and manipulates. Most teenagers behave similarly at one time or another, yet because of how the film presents Luce with his past from a war-torn African country and with his paper written in the voice of Frantz Fanon, a controversial African philosopher who advocated for political action through violence, Luce appears dangerous to the viewer and to many of the film's characters.

This is why the film's subtext is key. The film steers the viewer to actively participate in the stereotyping of Luce while also blinding the viewer from the fact that the viewer must stereotype in order to pick sides with the film's characters.

Hence, *Luce* is about how implicit bias and stereotyping unintentionally leads to conclusions and assumptions that are unfounded and lack resolution. The film's fictional characters, just like non-fictional people, are neither simply *good* nor *bad*. Binaries do not exist in the film. By closely examining the film, one can see how every character is realistically flawed. Moreover, the viewer may even see how Luce has a righteous motive for his behavior.

The Characters Stereotype Each Other

Harriet (played by Octavia Butler) succumbs to implicit bias. She stereotypes Luce as a token black student in order to help African Americans overcome stereotypes. She intends to help her race by encouraging Luce while

simultaneously punishing DeShaun. Both students smoke weed, but Harriet elects to search DeShaun's locker for unstated reasons, perhaps because: his diction, his valuation of athletics over education, or his darker skin tone.

Whereas, because of Luce's academic accomplishments, Harriet initially stereotypes Luce as a *good* black kid and student. Yet simply based on Luce's paper, Harriet seemingly believes she has "reasonable suspicion" to search Luce's locker.

Though the film leaves it unsaid, Harriet has an "implicit bias" against Luce due to his past from a war-torn country. She did not simply search his locker because of his paper. She seemingly garnered a multitude of factors in her mind about Luce to form her conclusion about him as dangerous, with her main considerations likely being his nationality and background.

On the other hand, Luce stereotypes DeShaun by believing that an athletic scholarship is DeShaun's only realistic route to college. Due to Harriet's race, Luce also stereotypes Harriet as being racially motivated.

Stephanie is an Analogue to Luce/You Definitely Stereotyped Her

Other characters make similar mistakes based on stereotypes with which the viewer must grapple. The film leads the viewer and the film's characters to believe

Stephanie is innocent and trustworthy. She appears as a token, innocent, — and even feeble — Asian student.

Yet, Stephanie, not Luce, likely carried out many of the film's violent actions against Harriet. The ending forces the viewer to confront this possibility. Stephanie may have lit the fireworks. She may have written the expletives on Harriet's window. Additionally, she likely lied to Harriet and Luce's mother, Amy (played by Naomi Watts).

Instead of merely being manipulated by Luce to carry out these actions or being complicit in the malevolent actions, Stephanie could have easily been the mastermind and primary instigator behind the film's malicious actions.

Stephanie likely shares values with Luce regarding race, stereotyping, and tokenization. Stephanie is a female and a minority. Asian-Americans are tokenized in America [more than any other minority group](#). Additionally, American culture is rightfully changing to an [embrace of believing women over men regarding sexual assault allegations](#).

Thus, there is seemingly no initial reason to doubt Stephanie's sexual assault story that she disclosed to Amy in the coffee shop.

And finally, [women commit fewer violent crimes than men](#). Yet, it seems Amy is much more likely to have lit the fireworks in Harriet's classroom than Luce. Luce was with his family the entire night, whereas Stephanie seemingly wanders off in the school building during the night of the

fire. Stephanie was also at Harriet's house the night she found the expletives on her windows.

Context Matters/Luce Might be Trustworthy

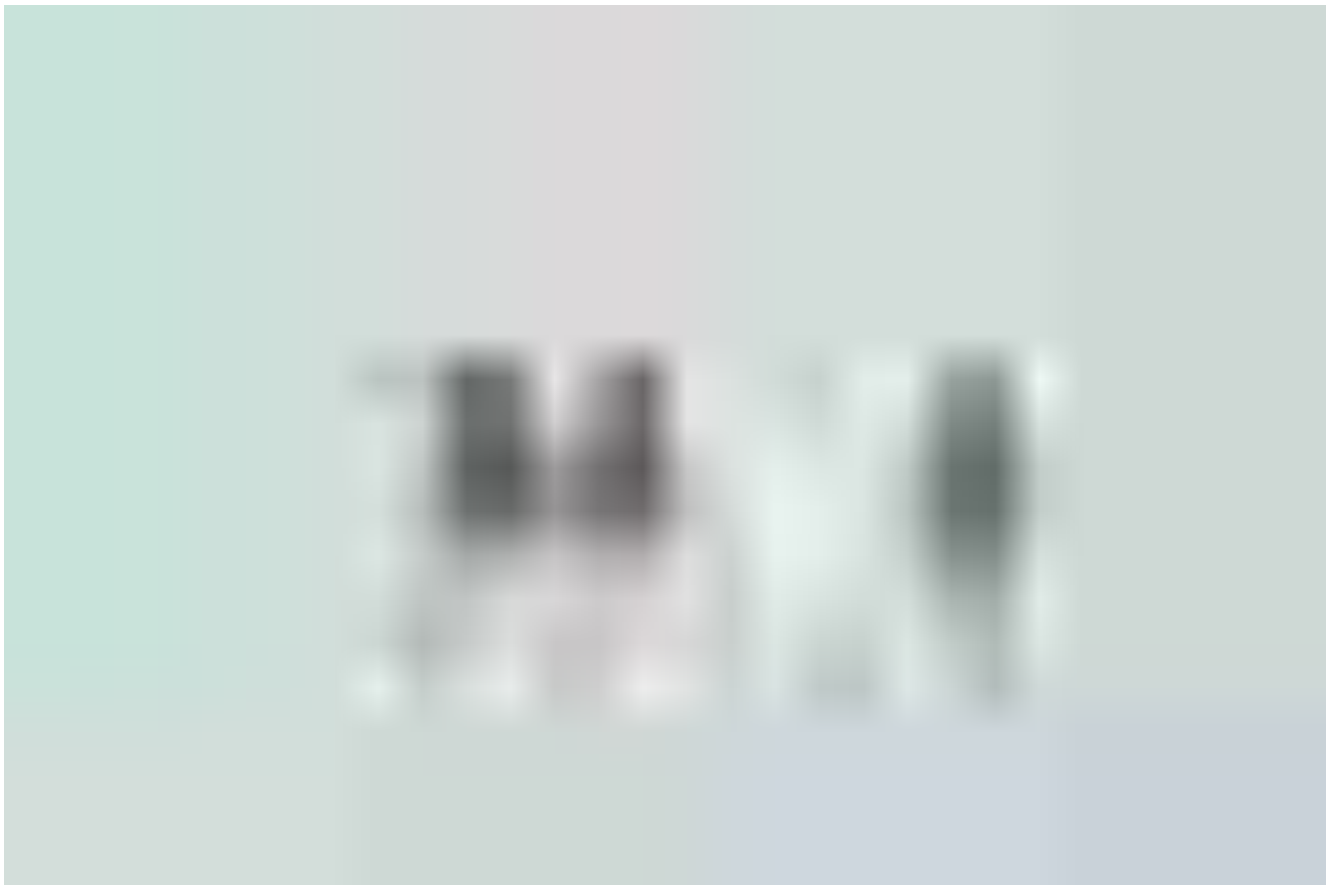


Photo by [Markus Spiske](#) on [Unsplash](#)

The meaning of *Luce* is that context forms the basis of all our judgements. Context means the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea. A muscular man in a dark mask walking into a bank may have been scary in 2019, but now this sight is commonplace. Yet, the film insinuates that the viewer can never fully understand and assess context, because we never truly know someone.

In the example of the movie, we do not know Luce's real name. We do not know the extent of his background and

whether Luce actively participated in wars in Eritrea. We never read his essay. We never hear his entire speech. All we have to judge Luce on is what the movie presents to viewers on the surface and within the context of the film.

Yet, that is the film's message: judging someone on the surface level and based on limited information will always fail to provide a complete image. Moreover, we often don't believe what Luce says because we don't trust him, yet the film repeatedly forces viewers and characters to reexamine our collective distrust in Luce.

In the last scene, the viewer is left to ponder why Luce looks enraged while running. Is it because we are afraid of him? Perhaps, Luce is simply himself while running? Or, does Luce actually feel anger? We cannot not know how Luce feels, because we are left without an explanation. In the film's final shot, Luce is not able to offer an excuse through words. We can only know how Luce makes us feel, and thus we remain confused and scared.

Yet, the process of thinking about this misunderstanding is how and why the movie works so well. On a surface level, the characters struggle with understanding each other throughout the film. They see each other as one way, but the characters are often vastly different than as perceived by others.

Luce may or may not be a model immigrant student. Amy and Peter (played by Tim Roth) may or may not be *good*

parents for taking Luce's side and helping further his academic future — even when their seemingly virtuous motivations led to unvirtuous lies to help Luce succeed. Though they have provided shelter and food for Luce, Amy and Peter may not be *good* parents in adopting someone and trying to acclimate him to their culture with such force. Harriet may or may not be a devoted sister. In all these interactions, words take preeminence.

Language is Context

In a seemingly unimportant but incredibly consequential scene, Harriett lectures on the function of language codes for cultural communities. In examining how language factors into the film, the viewer may begin to see how Harriet is a flawed character, and Luce is more nuanced than simply *bad* or *good*.

Luce adopts various cultural language codes in order to mesh with whites, African Americans, parents, and women. He is skilled at debating and public speaking. Ironically, throughout the film, Luce does not use violence to further his ends: he uses words and images. To make excuses, he shows a video of Harriet's sister and a video of his friends smoking. He tells elaborate stories and conjures successful, apologetic excuses for his actions.

On the other hand, Harriet struggles to find the right words and correct tone when speaking to other parents such as Luce's parents, to the principal, and to students like

DeShaun and Luce — and to Stephanie, if the viewer is to believe Luce's story.

Blackness is not a Monolith

In a way, the principal is right: perhaps, Luce's paper is above Harriet's mind. Luce is an African immigrant and Harriet is African American. Despite what Harriet seems to believe, blackness is not a monolith.

Harriet also seems to believe that education is more important of a right than privacy. Luce is upset, because he believes Harriet violated privacy by relying on stereotypes. As Luce insinuates during debate preparations, Harriet invaded DeShaun and Luce's privacy for two reasons: for the sake of teaching them a lesson and to ensure Luce's opportunities for an elite educational experience after high school were not lost.

However, both Luce and Harriet are simulatenously right in their motivations. [Privacy is a judicially guaranteed civil right based on the Constitution](#) whereas, access to [education is technically not a recognized legal civil right in the United States](#); access to an equal opportunity to receive education is. Nevertheless, the Supreme Court has also recognized that, to ensure the safety of others, [students have limited privacy rights on school property](#). Just because both characters are black does not mean they share the same values or ideas on how to advance their race.

Hence, the debate preparation scene further reinforces the theme of the film. Context matters. One cannot simply apply the holding of one case to another situation without knowing all the facts. Yet, almost always, one does not have all the facts. We judge others based on limited information and assume others hold values and will act in accordance with our expectations.

The Film's Inconsistent Internal Ethics Reveal the Irony of Bias

Thus, the film's concept of *badness* and *wrongness* depends on context. The film toys with the relativity of what is *bad* by placing it on a spectrum that the film quietly steers the viewer into embracing.

For example, the fireworks are not a gun, but they are bad because they are illegal and dangerous. Drugs are illegal, but invasions of privacy are supposedly worse. Smoking weed is bad according to Harriet, but sharing a video of others smoking weed as an alibi is acceptable — and less worse than using expletives — even though the video invades the privacy of others. Characters use the word “bitch” often, but the word is only bad when it refers to a female. Mental illness is tolerable, but becomes bad only when its symptoms surface and the symptoms can be perceived by others.

The film continually reveals an ambiguous ethical structure that once examined breaks down due to the fact that the

internal ethics only make sense if one can buy into and accept the personal judgements and biases of the film's characters.

All of Luce's actions have a duality that rely on the viewer to form his own judgement. Luce may have killed a fish intentionally, or he may — as an innocent kid without many life experiences — have sincerely desired to see whether the fish could fly. He says he likes America, but he may secretly hate America. On the other hand, Harriet blames America for stereotyping.

Luce may be lying to others or he may be telling the truth. He may be actively advocating for an end to stereotyping and trying to help DeShaun overcome Harriet's implicit bias. He may have sincerely felt bad for Harriet and brought her flowers to apologize. He may have raped Stephanie and may have been raping Stephanie her again at a hideout. Or perhaps, the intercourse was consensual. The viewer must form his own conclusions on limited information.

Nevertheless, the point of *Luce* is not for the viewer to arrive at an accurate conclusion; rather, it is for the viewer to confront the nature of why he or she forms judgements about others and why the viewer makes conclusions based on those judgements. Since one's judgements about others are usually based on personal bias and stereotypes, one's conclusions based on these judgements can never be fully formed.

Luce Might be a *Good* Person

Luce may be a *good* person. Yet, the viewer more readily perceives Harriet's actions as *good*. Within the film's diegesis/internal logic, Harriet's actions are quickly dismissed as *bad*. Many of the film's characters such as the principal, Harriet's sister, Luce, and many of Luce's classmates perceive Harriet as untrustworthy and caustic.

Harriet even abandons her sister who suffers from psychological difficulties, whereas Luce's parents helped him through his struggles. Harriet blames America for the struggles of blacks when she asks Luce to leave her home towards the film's ending, whereas Luce praises America in his final speech. Yet, the film still leads the viewer toward supporting Harriet over Luce.

Hence, we return to the meaning of *Luce* and how the film works through actively posing subtextual questions and leaving segments of the surface plot unanswered. Harriet and Luce both act empathetic within the film, and we never see Luce act directly selfish and violent. We mostly attribute these malicious behaviors to Luce, because we believe Harriet. Just as the principal and Amy uncomfortably question Harriet's perceptions, the film ultimately asks the viewer to do the same: why do we trust Harriet over Luce?

The Purpose is to Ask Questions About How You Think About Others

Why do you believe what you do about other people? Why do you perceive someone as good and trustworthy but another person as bad or worth fearing? Is it because of your own biases, personal ethical judgements, and/or reliance on racial or sexist stereotypes? If you do not know the person well — perhaps you do not know or cannot even pronounce his or her name — then how can you really know who they are and judge that person? It appears that everyone is biased. The solution is likely whether or not you are going to internally examine about your thought processes and try to change them.

There are no Easy Answers on Race



Photo by [Danny Lines](#) on [Unsplash](#)

In addition to the obvious influence of Fanon's views on his actions and behaviors, the character Luce seemingly embraces an approach to race akin to W.E.B. Du Bois. Luce advocates for racial progress through political action and agitation. Like Du Bois, Luce seems to believe that education and civil rights must be ensured for all black people equally. This belief system explains Luce's immense

anger toward Harriet as Luce believes Harriet bought into the white establishment by unjustifiably depriving Deshaun of a college education.

Harriet, on the other hand, seems to embrace a Booker T. Washington approach. Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise was an agreement for Southern blacks to submit to white political rule and to tolerate segregation and discrimination as long as these blacks could receive basic education and due process in law. Additionally, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and the economist, Thomas Sowell, believe African Americans fail to succeed in large numbers, because they are helped by others. These thinkers believe that African Americans should achieve success through their own achievements.

Harriet's views on race seem to align with the views of these later thinkers, yet she also contradicts her subscription to these beliefs by stating she was trying to protect Luce initially when she refused to punish him for his behavior. Harriet appears empathetic and relatable. Yet, she readily submits to others and their wants, especially whites.

Within the film, Harriet seeks to advance her race by seeking approval from whites. Rather than acting on her own initiative and reporting the fireworks to the administration, Harriet seeks Luce's white mom's opinion on Luce's paper and fireworks. She also seeks out Luce's white dad, Peter's, opinion.

Moreover, instead of contacting law enforcement over the violence and inequities perpetuated against her by Luce and his friends, Harriet seeks the counsel of the white principal. And instead of personally carrying her sister out of the school during her sister's public mental breakdown, she allows white cops to carry her sister out and compromises only that the cops "at least cover her [sister] up." Even though her forced leave is seemingly unjust, Harriet also quickly and solemnly accepts her fate when the principal suspends her from the school.

Hence, Harriet seems preoccupied with avoiding shame at the expense of standing up for herself and her race. On the other hand, Luce is proactive in standing up for perceived inequities and for his friends. Thus, though seemingly a horror movie with a clear villain in its titular character, *Luce* is ultimately a movie without a hero or villain. It is a movie about ideas, and the main impetus of the film is to force the viewer to reexamine his or her own ideas about others — regardless of how uncomfortable and unsettling this personal reevaluation may be.