

ENGL 3060 Modern and Contemporary Literature
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Alice Walker, "*The Color Purple*"

Alice Walker grew up during the fifties in Georgia – within a community caught up in racist issues and dire poverty. Her parents experienced first hand the hardships of not only slavery but also the oppressive sharecropping system: a construct which repressed the tenants of a field by demanding large portions of their earnings. During her childhood, Walker had to make the best of what little her parents could offer her in terms of education and support. Being the only girl in a household of boys, she also had to suffer under male domination: far from the traditional pranks and quarrels one would thus expect, Walker suffered from outright violence brought about by her brothers. Most notably, she was shot in the face by one of her brethren and suffered blindness in one eye as a result. Walker's difficulties and hardships which she experienced both at home as well as while growing up played a large role in her participation and engagement not only in emancipation movements but also in the widespread civil rights advance of her time. In-between studies, she traveled to Uganda and other areas of Africa both to discover her heritage as African-American woman, as well as to uncover her roots and origin. She combines these experiences of race and gender conflicts within the many works of literature and allows the pride she feels for her race to develop from the characters and settings within. Among her many novels, Walker's "*The Color Purple*" exemplifies this gradual awakening to the privation experienced by African-American women by telling the story of Celie, an unfortunate girl who must suffer both the cruelty of white man as well as the merciless enslavement of wives within black societies. Alice Walker's literary

accomplishments within "*The Color Purple*" thus go hand-in-hand not only with modern topics of emancipation and civil rights but also allow the reader insight into the power of female relationships and the disruption of traditional gender roles within African-American societies. Finally, expanding on modern developments within literary and cultural works of her time, Walker goes into great depths to explain diversity and differences within characters, societies and cultures dealt with throughout the text.

The main conflict discussed within "*The Color Purple*" is the degradation of women as well as the resulting gender-induced enslavement of females during the early twentieth century. In Walker's novel, Celie grows up in a world which thus has nothing but violence, rape and life as a slave in store for her: Beginning as a child she suffers sexual abuse by her step-father, Alphonso, and in her teens involuntarily becomes the captive wife of a brutal husband to whom she refers to only as "Mr. _____". The novel, consisting of letters written by Celie throughout her life thus already give an indication as to the force and lack of love associated with her marriage simply by showing that Celie doesn't even know her husband's name. Throughout this period, Celie thus learns to fit into a society which expects women not only to blindly answer to their husband's needs but also to retreat from any personal ambitions and dreams they may have. What results is an image of a woman who has nothing but the well-being of her husband on her mind – not through self-choosing, but as a consequence of consistent brainwashing and forced indoctrination of her husband's values. All this changes suddenly through Celie's acquaintance with Shug Avery – an blues singer and secret lover of Mr. _____. Not only do the two women become good friends, but Shug introduces Celie to the life of a free and independent woman. Thanks to her new friend, Celie thus gradually realizes what she has had to sacrifice for her husband. Little by little, she therefore takes steps towards separating the binds between her husband and herself until in the end she finally succeeds and, as a newly emancipated woman, begins life independently.

Among the primary indicators and markers of personal development and emancipation within Walker's novel is Celie's style of writing. Since the novel consists of personal and intimate letters which Celie writes to both God as well as to her sister

Nettie, the reader is in a fortunate position to experience how her growing independence effects the style and depth of her writing and thinking. Throughout the first half of Walker's novel, and as such throughout the first "half" of the protagonist's life, Celie's letters to God display only simple thoughts and straightforward grammatical structuring. She does not attempt to interpret the events which occur around her and thus does not critically judge her situation. This simplicity is further illuminated through the vernacular use of language elements and spelling mistakes within her texts. Thus, quotes such as "Mr. _____ be gone all night Saturday, all night Sunday and most all day Monday" (27), or "She is coming with her orkestra. She going to sing in the Lucky Star out on Coalman road. Mr. _____ going to hear her. He dress all up in front the glass, look at himself, then undress and dress all over again" (25) underline Celie's rather simple thoughts and naïve conception of life. Only after befriending Shug, does Celie's style of writing change. Gradually, she expresses feelings and wishes within her letters and increasingly writes to her sister, Nettie, instead of God, which gives the reader a new perspective by which to view Celie. She not only learns to analyze her own feelings, but begins to make observations of the people around her. These developments thus play a large part in helping her recognize the desolate situation in which she is trapped. Elements such as the following illuminate not only Celie's newly gained independence but also show the development of her writing style: "You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need. [...] You took my sister Nettie away from me, I say. And she was the only person love me in the world. [...] You was all rotten children, I say. You made my life a hell on earth. And your daddy here ain't dead horse's shit." (207). Thus, although Celie still predominantly writes in the vernacular, her sentences are more complete than in the beginning and can be understood more easily.

As stated above, Alice Walker incorporates both her perception of emancipation and pride in her race within the book's main character: Celie. Thus, over the course of the plot, Celie is formed and molded to fit these ideals and to represent what Walker has both come to admire and sought to achieve: independence, self-expression and happiness. Though Celie recognizes much of what oppresses her, she must thank the many characters she meets along the way for giving her the energy to rid herself of the

handcuffs put on her by not only her husband but by society in general: Women within black families on one hand were seen as servants whose sole appointment it was to run the household and fulfill their husbands' wishes. As African-Americans, on the other hand, they also had to endure racial injustice and feel the remnants of slavery and oppression which dominated societies throughout the American south. Celie learned to fight both fronts with the help of friendships she made throughout her life. Among these, her intimate relationship with Shug Avery – the jazz singer - was the trigger which set off her developing independence. By listening to Celie's problems and stories, Shug enabled Celie to open up emotionally and release the pressure and pain which had muted and desensitized her throughout both childhood as well as adulthood. As she writes in one of her letters, "My life stop when I left home, I think. But then I think again. It stop with Mr. _____ maybe, but start up again with Shug" (85). Her friendship with Shug becomes a lifetime bind and accompanies Celie throughout her struggles with both Mr.

_____ as well with the remembrances of her childhood hardships. Shug becomes the angle by Celie's side who helps her pave the first steps towards independence: "I won't leave, she say, until I know Albert won't even think about beating you" (79).

Another influential character in the course of Celie's life is Sofia, the wife of one of Mr. _____ sons. Like Shug, Sofia is an emancipated and independent woman who does not let anyone put her down – not even her husband. She stands by what she wants to achieve and fights for her right to do so. As a result, on many occasions she is the first one to begin a fight simply to ensure that society treats her fairly. As Mr. _____ says at one point, Sofia is bound to live her life and be herself no matter what. By regarding Celie's relationship with Sofia, the reader is in a unique position to view the development of Celie's character. In the beginning, Celie cannot understand why Sofia decides to stand up against oppression and tyranny of society. She believes that neither fate can be changed nor that fighting for equality will have any effect on her status as a woman. Thus, when Sofia's husband asks her for advice on how to deal with Sofia's rebellious character, Celie can offer only one recommendation: "Beat her, I say" (38). Throughout the book, however, Celie not only begins to recognize the importance of Sofia's fighting but as a result also learns to stand up against the indoctrinated moral values of her oppressive past which have held her captive. Thus, Celie learns to reject these false

values and moreover begins to fight both for her rights as well as for respect amongst her family. This determination becomes evident when she confronts Mr. _____: "Any more letters come? I ast. He say, What? You heard me, I say. [...] If they did, he say, I wouldn't give 'em to you. You two of a kind, he say. A man try to be nice to you, you fly in his face. I curse you, I say. [...] I say, Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble" (213).

Thanks to both Sofia and Shug, Celie develops into an independent woman who not only learns to enjoy the fruits of her life but also begins to help others reach their goals and become aware of themselves as well. Thus, when Squeak joins the family, Celie helps her assert herself by suggesting that she "make [her husband, Harpo] call you by your real name" (89). Just as Celie's renaming by Shug enables Celie to reinterpret the world (Shug renames her a "virgin"), Squeak's declaration of her real name, Mary Agnes, represents an affirmation of life and emancipation, which not only helps her ascertain her pride but also marks the turnaround point in her life. From this point on, Squeak thus begins to discover herself and learns to identify her talents and personalities.

Along with the development which Celie and Squeak undergo, both Mr. _____ as well as Harpo, Squeak's husband and Mr. _____'s son, feel the effects of their wives' emancipation. Mr. _____ in the beginning represented male dominance to the fullest extent. He not only abused Celie physically but also injured her mentally by eliminating contact to her sister as well as rejecting her strive to develop and grow. Throughout the novel, however, Mr. _____ painfully learns that he cannot continue to enslave his wife and must loosen the reigns he had imposed on her. In the end, unlike Celie who lives a life of happiness and freedom, Mr. _____ finds himself alone in the world and must fend life as best he can. Though both Celie and her ex-husband become friends towards the end, it is clear that Mr. _____'s abuse has provided him with nothing but solitude and unhappiness. Harpo on the other hand, never had the persistence to pursue the type of tyranny he experienced in his father's house. This provides him with a sense of self-doubt since he cannot find commonality between his perception of a strong and dominant husband and persisting happiness within his marriage. Both Sofia as well as Squeak teach him that the methods used by his father will not succeed in cutting them off from society and emancipation: "You gon let her go? I ast Harpo. He look like only a fool could ast the

question. He puff back, She made up her mind to go, he say. How I'm gon stop her? Let her go on, he say, cutting his eyes at her sister wagons" (71).

In her novel, Alice Walker also addresses the developing views of religion and piety as an important component of self definition. In the beginning of the book, Celie explains to Shug that her perception of God is that of a distant figure who seems not to care for her pain and suffering. Her only wish is to live life as best she can, regardless of agony and grief, in order to reach heaven – the single place where she believes she can be free to experience independence and happiness. However, Shug's concept of religion is much more personalized and empowering. Unlike Celie, she does not ascribe gender or race to God. Instead, she believes that deity is omnipresent within the world around her; that "God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. [...] God ain't a he or a she, but a It. [...] I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be" (202). She believes that each person manifests God within themselves in a unique fashion over which only they have control. Thus, one can believe in God without having to "go to church, sing in the choir, feed the preacher and all like that" (200). Celie's acceptance of this view and understanding of the control she has over her religious piety thus symbolizes her first important step towards independence and freedom.

Walker uses further symbols such as Sewing and Quilts to elaborate on these topics of self-definition and autonomy. Thus, sewing in "*The Color Purple*" indicates the turn-around point within Celie's life. It enhances her life's meaning and gives her a position within society. Moreover, her new business "Folkspants, Unlimited" provides her with the means to go out and discover the world for herself without relying on others to interpret it on her behalf. Sewing quilts similarly displays not only the possibilities which Celie has at her fingertips, but also symbolizes the power woman can achieve by working together towards a common goal. Thus, Sofia and Celie befriend each other while working on a quilt together. This truce after the initial struggle between the two lasts a lifetime and creates the foundation for a common understanding between both women.

Throughout "*The Color Purple*" Celie describes her life in the form of letters to either God or her sister Nettie. Among others, this creates for an interesting effect since

the reader is not only introduced to Celie's most intimate thoughts but at the same time witnesses the changes which the protagonist goes through during each stage of her life. Thus, the content of each letter provides for new opportunities to not only discover new elements of emancipation but further to experience how Celie has developed and changed. In addition, Celie's letters offer a recluse from the outside world which initially does not afford Celie an outlet to voice her problems. As a result, these letters rupture the silence imposed on her and symbolize her underlying wish to become free and unrestrained.

With the help of each character's struggle to define life and happiness within "*The Color Purple*", Alice Walker tells the story of successful transformation: Whether it is Celie who finds a purpose in life and liberates herself by breaking the vicious cycle of servitude or Mr. _____ who learns to respect his wife, each individual's character develops throughout Walker's narration and offers an image of accomplishment and reconciliation. Still, while most conflicts are resolved, the novel ends with the recognition that not all differences can be overcome. Thus, not only the clash between the Olinka villagers and the factory owners remains open, but there is also no indication of a reconciliation between Eleanor Jane and Sofia whose ties become undone during a voiced disagreement. In the end, however, Walker succeeds in conveying to the reader that vast opportunities and possibilities await us. Thus, we must not let ourselves be discouraged by setbacks but have to fight with all our force to inch ourselves towards these goals.

I. Introduction

x 1. Author – background and life

- x a. Grew up in Georgia – oppressive south
- x b. Parents experienced the oppressive sharecropping system and the racism
- x c. Difficult childhood – shot in face by brothers
- x d. Active in African-American civil rights
- x e. Travels to Uganda all part of finding her heritage and discovering her roots
- x f. Pride for African race
- x g. Color Purple written in 1982 as a controversial novel which on one hand reveals the stereotypes about black communities but on the other hand also gives testament to the difficulties among women in these communities.

x 2. Connection between author's history and literary accomplishments

- x a. This leads to modern topics of emancipation,
- x b. power of strong female relationships,
- x c. disruption of traditional gender roles,
- x d. diversity and differences – analysis fourth paragraph

II. Contextual and Technical Analysis

1. Context

- x a. Major conflict
- x b. development of Celie's writing
- x c. development of Celie's character
 - people who influence her
 - Us sleep like sisters, me and Shug.
 - climax: first tirade against Mr. _____
 - "I say marry him and get one good year" (6)
 - "Shug act more manly than most men... he say. You know Shug will fight, he say. Just like Sofia. She bound to live her life and be herself no matter what."
- x d. development of women's characters
 - Squeak:
 - "Harpo say, I love you, Squeak. He kneel down and put his arms round her waist. She stand up. My name Mary Agnes, she say."
- x e. development of man's character
- x f. development of religious views
 - "Well, us talk and talk about God, but I'm still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?)"
 - Analysis last letters third paragraph

2. Technical

- x a. Symbols
 - God is symbol for taking life into her own hands

- Sewing and quilts

Sewing within the novel is associated with her emancipation
Sewing quilts symbolizes the power women can gain from helping
each other and combining their efforts to reach a common goal

x b. Point of view (switching makes it modern)

III. End

Story of successful transformation

not all conflicts are resolved, but we accompany Celie as she fights for a
new life and is able to transform herself into a successful, propertied
entrepreneur.

Her attainment of self-respect has truly broken a cycle, not only liberating Celie, but
others as well.