

Major Themes in Alice Walker's The Color Purple

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(God, Female Solidarity, the Power of Strong Female Relationships, Racism and sexism, Transcendence and relationships and Violence and Suffering).

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

Abstract:

A Theme is a word, like death, alienation or love, which through its association with other theme and symbols, reveals to us the basis for the ideas within a literary work. Sometimes a theme is suggested, implied or stated. Alice Walker employs a vast network of themes to give her work the impression of real life. She is especially skilful at weaving together conflicting themes through the language of her characters. This article focuses on these themes which dominate throughout the novel.

The Color Purple won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983, making Walker the first black woman to win the prize. Clearly, this novel is Walker's spiritual journey as well as Celie's, which unites the two women as comrades on the journey. In fact, the whole novel focuses on the journeys of its women. It is a feminist work about an abused and uneducated African American woman's struggle for empowerment.

Major Themes in the Novel: God.

As the narrative perspective shifts and develops, so too does Celie's view of God. When Celie writes her first letter to God, we have a very limited idea of what she means by God. At first, God is an abstract, authoritative and dependable figure to whom Celie can share herself. White skin and a white beard, he will be there for Celie as long as she believes in him. When Celie tells Shug that she will stop writing to God because he does not listen, Shug teaches her something highly significant. Shug does not tell her to imagine a black God instead, nor does Shug simply tell Celie to keep believing anyway because God will return in the way she remembers him. Rather, Shug tells Celie to feel loved by God by being herself. Shug explains that one does not find God in a church but through oneself. This perspective challenges the general view of God in their society, as though God is someone who can be visited or expected to come when called-or as though God is some white old man with white grey beard. Shugs shows her own way for God by loving the

things she has been given. She appreciates the world from her own sexual ecstasies to the color purple she finds in nature.

For Celie, God moves from being a person to being something (not someone) inside Celie, a goodness that inspires. Celie learns that she writes from her own view of the world and that every view must be challenged and not taken for granted. Whatever people may think about God, whether the Bible says it or not, Celie learns to find her own meaning in God. Throughout her written letters, we see her writing, perhaps rewriting, her world and the divinity it expresses. Still, it is not until the end of the novel that she most fully sees what she has been doing all along: creating her own story. One has a certain power and responsibility in creating a world or judging a world that has been created by oneself or someone else.

Female solidarity

At the start of the novel, the young, black female is presented as about the most vulnerable person in society. Celie epitomizes this female: she is abused and denied a voice by her (supposed) father and then by her husband. Along with the racial prejudice young, black women endure; they also tend

to struggle against their black, male counterparts. Sofia always fought her brothers, and we see how she has to fight Harpo to assert her equality. Likewise, the Olinka tribe do not believe in educating their women, and although there are no reports of abuse against women by men in Nettie's letters, female subservience is unchallenged, and the debasing initiation ceremony continues without contest--except from Nettie and her family. Under such conditions, if they want to change the status quo, these women must stick together against male oppression. In fact, the one time that Celie is too disturbed to sleep is when she betrays Sofia by telling Harpo to beat her; the disloyalty to her fellow female is more than she can bear. Usually, however, there is a strong union of support between one woman and another, and this bonding comes from a need to unbalance the male view of themselves that they have total authority over women in their society.

The woman who manages to challenge this male dominance the most is Shug, who asserts her independence by living according to her own laws. It is unsurprising, given the circumstances, that Celie and Shug become involved romantically. Shug is a powerful goddess who refuses to be brought down by men, ever vigilant to maintain the upper hand. Celie is a victim of male abuse who has closed herself off from the possibility of trusting men. When she comforts Harpo, who is crying on the porch, she feels nothing more than she would for a dog. Together, these females free each other: Shug teaches Mary Agnes to sing, Albert's sister takes Celie shopping when no one else does, Sofia's sisters look after her children while she is in jail, Nettie writes to Celie and looks after her children for thirty years, Eleanor Jane cooks nourishing food for Henrietta and Celie nurses Shug back to health and inspires her songwriting. More than all this, Shug and Celie loves each other with a very strong love born from isolation, desire for something better, and acceptance of one another. By the end of the novel, these women are no longer powerless; they have joined forces and are forging their own lives.

The Power of Strong Female Relationships

Throughout *The Color Purple*, Walker portrays female friendships as a means for women to summon the courage to tell stories. In turn, these stories allow women to resist oppression and

dominance. Relationships among women form a refuge, providing reciprocal love in a world filled with male violence.

Female ties take many forms: some are motherly or sisterly, some are in the form of mentor and pupil, some are sexual, and some are simply friendships. Sofia claims that her ability to fight comes from her strong relationships with her sisters. Nettie's relationship with Celie anchors her through years of living in the unfamiliar culture of Africa. Strong relationships among Olinka women are the only thing that makes polygamy bearable for them. Most important, Celie's ties to Shug bring about Celie's gradual redemption and her attainment of a sense of self.

The Cyclical Nature of Racism and Sexism

Almost none of the abusers in Walker's novel are stereotypical, one-dimensional monsters whom we can dismiss as purely evil. Those who perpetuate violence are themselves victims, often of sexism, racism, or paternalism. Harpo, for example, beats Sofia only after his father implies that Sofia's resistance makes Harpo less of a man. Mr. _ is violent and mistreats his family much like his own tyrant like father treated him. Celie advises Harpo to beat Sofia because she is jealous of Sofia's strength and assertiveness. The characters are largely aware of the cyclical nature of harmful behavior. For instance, Sofia tells Eleanor Jane that societal influence makes it almost inevitable that her baby boy will grow up to be a racist. Only by forcefully talking back to the men who abuse them and showing them a new way of doing things do the women of the novel break these cycles of sexism and violence, causing the men who abused them to stop and re-examine their ways.

Transcendence and relationships

By the end of the novel Celie has experienced love, started her own business, and learned to accept herself. She is a very different woman from the fourteen-year-old at the beginning. She becomes closer to Mr Albert through their shared love of Shug and then by their listening to and relating to one another. The lessons both Mr Albert and Celie learn teach them about themselves, which in turn gives them the confidence to talk to one another without any preconceived ideas of the roles they each fit into. Friendship becomes a vehicle for

people to change and grow out of their original selves.

Many of the relationships are disturbed over the course of the novel but are later restored: Sofia returns to her family and to Harpo, Shug returns from her travels with Germaine, and Nettie arrives home with Celie's children. In these cases, people grow and change separately before coming back together. Although they each travel their own journey and learn their own lessons, when the relationships are restored they are bonded by family and friendships that transcend the pain of the past and the earlier roles that had caused tension.

Violence and suffering:

Violence and suffering in *The Color Purple* are typically depicted as part of a greater cycle of tragedy taking place both on the family level and on a broader social scale. Celie is raped by her stepfather and beaten for many years by her husband, only to have Shug Avery intervene on her behalf. Sofia is nearly beaten to death by white police officers after pushing a white family; she nearly dies in prison. Nettie is almost raped by her stepfather and by Mr. ____, and must run away in order to protect herself. Harpo tries, unsuccessfully, to beat and control Sofia, his first wife, and he beats Squeak until she leaves him for Grady (though Squeak returns to Celie's home at the end of the novel). These cycles of violence are repeated across the South: Celie's biological father and uncles were lynched by whites jealous of their business success, and there is always the threat that, if black people agitate too much for their rights, they will be struck down by the white people who control the local and state government.

In Africa, too, this violence occurs within the local culture and in the relation between whites and blacks. Men in the Olinka village have absolute control over their wives, and a scarring ritual takes place for all women going through permanently, leaving their faces permanently marked. The white British rubber dealers who take over the Olinka land end up killing a great many in the village, without concern for the humanity or customs of the Olinka, who have lived there for many years. But despite all this violence and suffering, there is a core of hope in the novel: the hope that Celie and Nettie might be reunited. It is this hope that, eventually, stops the

cycle of violence, at least within Celie's family, and enables the reunion of many of the family members in Georgia at the novel's end.

Self Discovery:

The novel is, ultimately, a journey of self-discovery for Celie, and for other characters. Celie begins the novel as a passive, quiet young girl, perplexed by her own pregnancy, by her rape at the hands of Pa, and her ill-treatment by Mr. ____. Slowly, after meeting Shug and seeing her sister run away, Celie develops practical skills: she is a hard worker in the fields, she learns how to manage a house and raise children, and she meets other inspiring women, including Sofia, who has always had to fight the men in her life. Further, she discovers her own sexuality and capacity to love through her developing romance with Shug. Eventually, Celie discovers that her sister Nettie has been writing to her all along, and this, coupled with Shug's support, allows Celie to confront Mr. ____, to move to Memphis with Shug, to begin her own pants company, and, eventually, to make enough money to be independent. Celie's luck begins to change: she inherits her biological father's estate, allowing her greater financial freedom, and she manages to repair her relationship with Mr. ____ (he gives her a purple frog as a symbol of his recognition of his earlier bad behavior), and create a kind of family with Mr. ____, Shug, Harpo, Sofia, Squeak, Nettie, and her own children.

Nettie's arc is also one of self-discovery. Nettie received more years of schooling than did Celie, and Nettie has seen the world, working as a missionary in Africa, and eventually marrying a kind and intelligent man. But Nettie also realizes that she can balance her independence, and her desire to work, with a loving married life that also includes two stepchildren—Celie's children, Olivia and Adam. Indeed, it is the arrival of this extended family on Celie's land at the end of the novel that signals the last stage in both Celie's and Nettie's journey of self-discovery. The sisters have found themselves, and now, as the novel closes, they have found each other.

Conclusion:

Clearly, this novel is Walker's spiritual journey as well as Celie's, which unites the two women as comrades on the journey. In fact, the

whole novel focuses on the journeys of its women. *The Color Purple* is often used as an example of a “woman’s novel.” For Walker, womanist writing is that which focuses on African-American women in twentieth-century America. This tradition of novels tends to deal with the oppression of African-American women, not only by means of white domination but also by specific white and black males. In these novels, we often meet women who fight against all odds for their survival and for the survival of their families. In their disjointed and dislocated communities, these women are often mothers who seek to protect and bring together their families for the sake of future generations.

References:

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