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The Gift of Loneliness: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Alice Walker's stunning 1982 novel **The Color Purple** (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982) won a Pulitzer Prize in 1983 making the Georgia-born author and poet the first black woman ever to receive the award for fiction. The book is beautifully written, rich in humanity and humor, sorrow and irony, and laced with brilliantly conceived characters. Walker explores themes, many of which germinate in her earlier short stories and poetry, that illuminate the human condition: loss of innocence, search for faith, the nature of human suffering, and the triumph of the human spirit. Additionally, she examines some taboos in the relationships between men and women as well as between parents and children. The book treats the reader to a journey where the characters discover beauty, truth, love, and the answer to the meaning of life.

To focus on the themes of incest and lesbianism would be a misreading of this deceptively simple symbolic novel which has both subplots and tales within tales. The story is set in rural Georgia, beginning two generations ago and covering thirty years in the lives of the characters. It is told from the viewpoint of poor, ragged, semi-literate Celie, who speaks in black folk dialect. The plot advances on the briefest lines of dialogue in an epistolary style which has Celie, out of loneliness and despair, write letters first to God, then to her sister Nettie in Africa. From the first line of the book,

You better not never tell nobody but
God. It'd kill your Mammy.

the reader instantly identifies with fourteen-year-old Celie, who is caught in the horror of incest and abuse. She bears one child who later turns up missing. When her mother asks where it is, Celie replies:

I say God took it.
He took it while I was sleeping.
Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this
one too, if he can (12).

Not until much later in the book does Celie find that her children's father is really her stepfather and that her own father had been lynched—information that has been cruelly withheld from her.

Alice Walker attacks head-on the taboos that most black writers shy away from, with the notable exceptions of James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison. Like the author Zora Neale Hurston, whom she admires, Walker says she writes about taboos because she is not embarrassed by anything black people do.

Celie's younger sister Nettie seeks asylum from the advances of their stepfather by going to Africa with Sam and Corrine, a young missionary couple who have adopted Celie's two children. Celie is then married off to Albert, a widower, who fancies Nettie rather than Celie but needs a servant to care for two of his children (their mother has been shot by her lover). Beaten and abused, Celie is miserable until the day when Albert brings home a former common-law wife named "Shug" (short for "sugar") Avery, with whom Albert had borne three children before his previous marriage. Shug has been living an independent life as a blues singer, leaving their illegitimate children to be raised by her parents. But now Shug is ill, and when Albert asks Celie to nurse her to health, there results a *menage a' trois* with a twist: Celie falls for Shug, forming a lesbian relationship, while both are living with Albert. Walker's treatment of this taboo is characterized by tenderness and humor. While bathing Shug, Celie says:

First time I got the full sight of Shug
Avery long black body with it black
plum nipples, look like her mouth, I
thought I had turned into a man (53).

Walker's female characters come brilliantly alive under the skillful hand of their creator. Shug Avery symbolizes the beautiful black singers of the 30s and 40s: the Bessie Smiths, Clara Wards, and Billie Holidays. Celie's loving descriptions of Shug give the reader a closer perspective. When Shug first arrives, Celie says:

And she dress to kill. She got a red
wool dress and a chestful of black

beads. A shiny black hat with what look like chickinhawk feathers curve down the side one cheek, and she carrying a snakeskin bag, match her shoes. (50).

Shug's eyes fascinate Celie probably because they betray a suffering Celie can relate to: "I look into her eyes. Her eyes say Yeah it **bees** that way sometimes" (18). Towards the end of the book Celie describes an aged Shug:

When you look into Shug's eyes, you know she been where she been and seen what she see; did what she did, and now she know...

And if you don't git out the way, she'll tell you about it (236).

Walker is preoccupied in her writing with the suffering of black women throughout history. She says in an interview with critic John O'Brien, "I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and triumphs of black women" (**Interviews with Black Writers** New York: Liveright, 1973). In Walker's novel, Nettie's letters to Celie are rich in stories of the things she has learned living with the Olinka tribe in Africa. This epistolary method provides Walker with a means of revealing the past in order to provide an understanding of the source of the oppression of the black woman. Nettie writes how the pampered Olinka men sat around while the tribeswomen did all the work. Young girls had to have their faces scarred and their genitalia mutilated in bloody initiation rites. Olinka men didn't listen to their women or even look at them while they were speaking. For a woman to look at a man's face was considered brazen. Olinka men literally had the power of life or death over the women, Nettie relates.

After Nettie and Samuel, whom she has married after his wife's death, become disillusioned with their work, they discover that oppression is not reserved for black women alone. In a final irony, the Olinkas are eventually run off their tribe's land by English landowners and the Dutch government who intend to build a rubber plantation in anticipation of World War II.

The relationships between males and

females are important in **The Color Purple** and in some other works by Alice Walker: **In Love and In Trouble** (1967), **You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down** (1971), and **In Search of Our Mother's Gardens** (1983)—all from Harcourt, San Diego. Conflicts occur over the traditional male qualities of power, dominance, and control and the female traits of submission, obedience, and servitude. Albert teaches his son Harpo to beat his wife Sophia to make her mind. "Wives is like children," he says, "You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a sound beating" (42). Being a strong-willed woman, Sophia fight back, telling Celie, "I'm getting tired of Harpo. All he think about since us married is how to make me mind. He don't want a wife, he want a dog" (67).

Young Celie knows only beatings and sexual coldness before Shug arrives to teach her how to love. Relations with Albert are only empty machinations. She tells Shug:

Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep.

Shug say, why Miss Celie, you make it sound like he is going to the toilet on you.

That what I feel like I say (79).

In one of her essays, Walker discusses how Jean Toomer described the slave women as enduring so much abuse that their minds were forced to desert their bodies. Celie describes the same feeling:

It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie you a tree. That's howcome I know that trees fear man (30).

Celie's relations with Shug are the opposite. Tenderly, Shug teaches Celie about her own body, using a mirror. "It a lot prettier than you thought ain't it," Shug says:

It mine, I say. Where the button? Right near the top, she say. The part that stick out a little.

I look right at her and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me.

Nothing much. But just enough to tell me that this the right button to mash. Maybe (80).

Samuel and Nettie seem to represent the ideal male-female relationship in the book. They become lovers and partners only after first becoming trusted friends and companions, working for common goals in the spirit of equality.

Concerned that women have been frustrated in their attempts at becoming creative artists through the ages, Alice Walker uses the craft of quilting to symbolize this struggle. Her own mother was a quiltmaker, and Walker was deeply affected by a quilt that she saw in the Smithsonian depicting the crucifixion. It had been created by an anonymous black woman more than a hundred years before.

Ironically, in the novel, Nettie writes that the Olinka tribesmen made quilts which were full of animals, birds and people. Celie and Sophie decide to sew a quilt using a pattern called "Sister's Choice." To make stars for the quilt, Celie uses scraps from Shug's cast-off yellow satin dress. Learning from Shug how to make pants, Celie eventually turns the skill into a small business in Memphis and becomes financially independent.

Walker believes strongly in the ability of people to change and grow, attributing this belief to her work in registering black voters in Mississippi during the Civil Rights Movement, when she saw a great deal of change. Most of the characters in **The Color Purple** change, even the minor ones. After Sophia leaves Harpo, he changes, learning to cook, clean house, and care for his children. Sophia finds him one morning cradling his father tenderly in his arms. With Celie gone to Memphis with Shug, even Albert learns to clean house, do the dishes, and work in the field—chores which he never did before when women were around. Celie changes from a ragged child into a sophisticated lady. Describing herself when she returns from Memphis, she says:

Look different. Got on some dark blue pants, and a white silk shirt that look righteous. Little red flat-heeled slippers,

and a flower in my hair (195).

Towards the end of the book, Albert asks Celie to remarry him in body as well as spirit because he had been too big a fool to let himself care for her while they were married. Although as Celie grows older, her dialect undergoes some change, it doesn't lose its essential soul. She tells Albert:

Here us is, I thought, two old fools left over from love, keeping each other company under the stars (238).

Like her literary predecessors Richard Wright and James Baldwin, Alice Walker explores the concept of God in **The Color Purple** and has her characters come to reject the traditional notion of a white God in favor of a spirit which resides in all of us and ultimately in everything. This spirit can be traced, according to Walker, to an African belief called **animism** that makes it possible to view all creation as living, as being inhabited by spirit. In existential terms, this is similar to **essence**. The major conflict becomes the struggle between **Everythingness**, an optimistic belief that the human spirit will not only endure but prevail, and **Nothingness**, a resignation to chaos and despair.

In a compelling part of the novel, Shug and Celie have a discussion about God. Young Celie describes the traditional God she has been praying to:

He big and old and tall and graybearded and white.
He wear white robes and go barefooted.
Blue eyes? She ast.
Sort of Bluish-gray. Cool. Big though.
White lashes I say.
She laugh (177).

But Shug has a different God to teach Celie:

God is inside you and inside everything else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it (177).

As the story progresses, Celie adopts this position. She shocks Sophia when she links God and reefer:

I smoke when I want to talk to God. I
smoke when I want to make love.
Lately I feel like me and God make love
just fine anyhow, whether I smoke
reefer or not.

God know what I mean (197).

Nettie relates in the book a long tale about
how the Olinka tribe came to worship the
roofleaf as their God. She then explains how
her faith has changed:

God is different to us now more in spirit
than ever before, and more internal.
Most people think he has to look like
someone—a roofleaf, or Christ—but
he don't. And not being tied to what
God looks like, frees us (227).

Tree symbolism in the book seems to be tied to
the belief in **animism**. When Shug first arrives,
Celie says, "She look so stylish it look like the
trees all around stand up for a better look" (50).
When Celie stands up to Albert for the first time
she says, "I give it straight to him just like it come
to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees"
(187). Shug says:

My first step from the old white man
was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then
other people. But one day when I was
sitting quiet and feeling like a mother-
less child, which I was, it come to me:
that feeling of being part of everything,
not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a
tree, my arm would bleed (178).

Flower symbolism in Walker's work stems
from her childhood memories of her mother's
talent for raising flowers, for creating beauty out
of poverty. When Celie returns to her stepfather
with Shug towards the end of the story, it is
spring and she has been spiritually reborn
among the flowering trees, jonquils, roses and
lilies. In fact, Shug's real name is Lillie although
mention of her is frequently juxtaposed
with roses:

Shug a beautiful something, let me tell
you. She frown a little, look out across
the yard, lean back in her chair, look
like a big rose (178).

Celie ponders thoughtfully on the idea that sug-

gested the novel's title:

I been so busy thinking about 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?)
Not the wildflowers. Nothing (179).

Shug says, "I think it pisses God off if you walk
by the color purple in a field somewhere and
don't notice it" (178).

Walker admired the work of Flannery
O'Connor, who lived a few miles from her
childhood home, for its economy of style, but
more importantly for O'Connor's understanding
that the question of race is really just the first
question on a long list. In **The Color Purple**, Celie
says, "I couldn't understand why us have life at
all if all it can do is make you feel bad" (246). And
like O'Connor, Walker has the truth spoken by
the most unlikely of characters. Albert says at
the end of the book:

You ast yourself one question. It leads
to fifteen. I start to wonder why us need
love. Why us suffer. Why us black. Why
us men and women. Where do children
really come from. And if you ast yourself
why you black or a man or woman or a
bush it don't mean nothing if you don't
ast why you here period (27).

Then to Celie, he poignantly answers his own
questions:

I think us here to wonder, myself...The
more I wonder, he say, the more I love.
And people start to love you back I
bet, I say.
They do, he say, surprise (247).

I recommend that everyone read this book
and that it be studied by mature students in high
school and college classes, despite my mis-
givings that it may have to be defended to a
censorship committee in order to claim its right
to be part of the English curriculum. Some
misguided censors will probably charge that
the book is anti-white, anti-male, anti-God,
anti-parent, and anti-nuclear family. It will be
difficult to convince them that the book is about
beauty, truth, love and the triumph of the human
spirit.

In speaking of her creative talent, Alice Walker spoke of how it often served as an antidote to depression and even suicidal urges. In fact, she dedicates the book thus:

To the Spirit:
Without whose assistance
neither this book
nor I
would have been
written

At the end of the novel she adds a page:

I thank everybody in this book for
coming.

A.W., author and medium

In the O'Brien interview Walker expressed the hope that someday a generation of men and women would read her work because, as she says: "It is a true account of my feelings, my perceptions and my imagination, and because it will reveal something to them of their own selves." And she concludes: "The gift of loneliness is sometimes a radical vision of society or one's people that has not been previously taken into account."

I believe the gift of loneliness that produced this remarkable book is a precious gift to the world and ultimately will be a gift to immortality.

This article is a reprint from the **Illinois English Bulletin** 72 (Winter, 1985), with author's revisions for **LAJM**.

A Review: Measures For Research and Evaluation In The English Language Arts by Diane Allen National Council of Teachers of English

A second volume of a book widely used by education researchers is now available from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and the National Council of Teachers of English. Volume 2 of **Measures for Research and Evaluation in the English Language Arts** reveals trends in the language arts since 1975, when Volume 1 appeared.

Authors William T. Fagan, University of Alberta; Charles R. Cooper, University of California—San Diego; and Julie M. Jensen, University of Texas at Austin, have included some 86 measures in the new collection. They cite the age range of students with which each instrument has been used (from preschool through post-secondary and adult), describe its purpose, and explain the instrument itself. They include sample items, data on the directions given to those taking the tests, and procedures for scoring.

The book is useful for researchers considering instrument designs for their own research, for faculty conducting research seminars, and for graduate students seeking topics which can be expanded or replicated with other groups for dissertation research. It brings together descriptions of unpublished instruments from scattered sources, obtained through the ERIC database and inquiry within the profession.

Volume 2 reflects increasing emphasis on developing theoretical positions as a framework for interpreting research data. It shows how researchers have broadened their view to see reading as a constructive, rather than a reproductive, process and documents the recent interest in studying both reading and writing as processes. It reveals a new emphasis on children's language behavior in natural contexts.

(Measures for Research and Evaluation in the English Language Arts, Volume 2, by William T. Fagan, Charles R. Cooper, and Julie M. Jensen. 245 pages, paperbound. Price: \$16.75; NCTE members \$13.00. NCTE Stock No. 31018.)