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Period 2

Alice Walker Literary Criticism

Alice Walker is an African American woman who wrote many books, short stories, poems, and essays. Her most famous work was and remains *The Color Purple*, which follows the life of an African American woman named Celie in the early twentieth century. Walker was born on February 9th, 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia. Both of her parents were underpaid sharecroppers. Her childhood was pretty typical considering where and when she lived. Considering how common racism was in that era, she dealt with racism as a child. She also had to fight against sexism and gender roles in society because of the time period in which she lived. Walker grew up in a house without gender roles for most of her childhood which influenced her beliefs and the way she wrote. Along with the way her household was run, Walker's love of fairness stemmed from being treated so unfairly as an African American and as a woman which also influenced her writing. For all of her childhood, Walker was raised by very religious Methodist parents, but she rejected the teachings because, "raised as a Methodist by devout parents, early in life she observed church hypocrisy, especially the silencing of the women who cleaned the church and kept it alive" (Gaylor). Walker's childhood was mostly uneventful, but one traumatizing experience happened to her at the age of eight. One of her brothers shot her in the eye with a bb gun while playing "cowboys and indians". Her brothers lied about what happened, so they could escape punishment. They succeeded and the whole incident was written of as an accident. Lying about what happened to her impacted her love of fairness and the truth. Physically, she lost the sight of her right eye, and psychologically, she lost her bubbly, outgoing personality. Consequently, she became more introverted and started to notice and

understand her feelings and the people around her. Many different events shaped Alice Walker into the person and writer she is today which are obvious in *The Color Purple*. In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker focuses on the themes of religion, racism, feminism and or womanism. (Gaylor)

The novel *The Color Purple* is set in the south in the early 1900s and centers around Celie, and other African American women. Celie lives with her sisters, mother, and mother's boyfriend, Alphonso. Celie becomes pregnant twice by Alphonso, but the children are taken from her soon after birth. When her mother dies, she is married to a man called only Mr. She is not treated very well in her new life with Mr. After finally being able to escape, Celie's favorite sister Nettie runs away from Alphonso and comes and lives with Celie. Nettie is forced to leave after she refuses Mr.'s sexual advances. One of Mr.'s children who Celie raised, Harpo, falls in love with and marries a strong women named Sofia, and he moves out. Harpo struggles with the decision to treat his wife kindly or following in his father's footsteps and abuse her. Celie tells Harpo to beat his wife because that is all she has ever known. Harpo attempts to beat Sofia, but she fights back and hurts him instead. Sofia confronts Celie about the advice she gave to Harpo and Celie explains all the abuse she deals with on a daily basis. After their talk, they form a strong women to women friendship. A little while later, an independent jazz singer named Shug Avery becomes sick and Mr. takes her in. Mr. is in love with Shug and has always been. After seeing pictures of Shug, Celie had started to worship her, so she was glad when she came to live with them. Mr.'s father does not approve of him housing the "sinful" lady. Celie is offended because of how highly she thinks of Shug and spits in his water. Rebelling against Mr.'s father is the first time that she has felt united with Mr. and it is all thanks to Shug. (Walker)

The beginning of the novel has a substantial amount of religion and sexism. Religion, as I will show you, is very important in the beginning of the novel. Celie lives in a very suppressing

household, and overall time in history. The book opens with, "You better not never tell nobody but God. I'd kill your mammy" (Walker 1). According to Professor Hajare, with Shri Shankarrao Bezalwar Arts & Commerce College in India, "She is so powerless that the only person she can talk to is God" (Hajare). Even though her life is a struggle, she never tells any other women or children her sorrows except God. Celie wrote the day Nettie was leaving, " But I just say, never mine, never mine, long as I can spell G-O-D I got somebody along" (Walker 18). Celie's only motivation in life is heaven. "This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways" (Walker 44). God also gives her the strength to endure her struggles. At this point in the novel, religion is very important to Celie, and it is really her only hope. Her faith and hope for a wonderful afterlife is what gets her through such a rough patch in her life. (MacColl)

Next, sexism and feminism play a very big role in the beginning part of the novel and on Celie's life. Celie experiences much sexism, but it is not until strong women are introduced into her life that she starts to experience feminism. While growing up, Celie was treated very poorly by her "pa" who abused her. Then, she was basically sold into a marriage with a husband who treats her just as poorly. "She is sexually brutalized by her stepfather and exploited as a commodity by him and the man she marries" (Harris). She has never experienced any kind of niceness or even decency from a man throughout the first part of the book. Celie and her sister Nettie are very close. Their relationship is a very whole, pure, miracle that motivates Celie. The relationship between the two of them is so strong Celie does whatever she can to protect her. Celie takes the abuse of "Pa", marries Mr., and makes a little bit of a stand against Mr. to protect Nettie. The first woman to come into Celie's life and show her the ways of standing up for herself is Sofia, Harpo's wife. "...Sofia, a black woman who does fight back" (Harris). Harpo attempts to beat Sofia, and she fights him back just as hard. "They fighting like two mens" (Walker 39). Celie is jealous of Sofia's ability to fight, but it inspires her. The two form a friendship, one of very few

Celie actually has. The next woman to come into Celie's life is the notoriously "naughty" jazz singer, Shug Avery. Ever since seeing a picture of Shug, Celie had idolized her. Shug and Celie start the beginning of a friendship that will save Celie from the joyless oppressed life she has been living. "She is eventually introduced to another way of living by the strong female characters of Sofia and Shug who embrace her in a kind of sisterhood, which is a way for oppressed women to resist patriarchy" (Zare). The first time Celie truly stands up for something is when Mr.'s dad comes to her house and starts to talk poorly about Shug. Therefore, Celie spits in his water. The themes of sexism and feminism continue to grow throughout the rest of the book. (Shelton)

The middle of the novel starts with Celie caring for sick Shug. Celie takes care of Shug, and despite Shug being rude at first, the two become friends. Sophia has grown frustrated with Harpo trying to control her, so she moves out and takes the kids with her. Now that Harpo is all alone he builds a stage. Shug, who is now fully back to herself thanks to Celie, performs on the stage. Shug promises to stay with Celie until Mr. stops beating her. One day, Sophia returns for a visit and brings her new professional fighter boyfriend. When she arrives, she learns that Harpo has a girlfriend named Squeak whom she then fights. In town, Sophia runs into the mayor's wife, Miss Millie. Miss Millie offers Sophia the job of being her maid, and Sophia turns her down because she is too strong and independent to be a maid. The mayor hits Sophia for refusing which causes Sophia to hit the mayor. Sophia is badly beaten by the police and sentenced to 12 years in prison. The three women attempt to get Sophia out of jail, but they are unsuccessful. Sophia is let out of jail, but she must become Miss Millie's maid. Shug returns for a visit, and she and Celie become more than friends even though Shug is recently married to a man named Grady. Shug helps Celie find the letters from her sister, Nettie, that Mr. had been hiding. She is very angry at Mr. because he knew that Nettie was her world. In her moment of

rage, she considers killing him, but Shug stops her. The story then shifts to Nettie's letters. Nettie befriends a missionary couple who unknowingly adopted both of Celie's children. When the couple, Samuel and Corrine, go to Africa for work, Nettie and the children accompany them. Nettie and her group are brought to the Olinka people. Olivia, Celie's daughter, starts going to school and Nettie realizes women are not seen as equals there in Africa either. Since Nettie has no children, she is viewed as almost worthless. Olivia makes a very good friend named Tashi. Meanwhile, Corrine starts to distance herself from Nettie because the people and herself are suspicious of whether Nettie is Adam and Olivia's mother. Nettie starts to break away from the views of the Olinka on women. Tashi's father dies and her mother allows her to go to school and get educated now. Workers build a road through their town, and there's nothing the people can do it because they are African in the early 1900s and therefore have no rights or power. (Walker)

Racism is most prominent in the middle section of the novel. When Sofia hits the mayor, she gets very badly and unfairly injured. She gets sentenced a much longer sentence in jail than a white woman would have. African Americans have very little rights as it is, but once Sofia hits a white man, she was treated even worse. Her time in jail breaks her, and she loses her fighting spirit. The women attempt to get Sofia out of jail by dressing Squeak up like a white woman. Their only hope is to try to be a white woman because, as an African American, they have absolutely no power. Sofia is let out of jail only to become Miss Millie's maid, a position not unlike a slave. Yet again, an African American is serving a white person and it does not fit Sofia in any way. One day, Sofia says to Celie, "Have you ever seen a white person and a colored sitting side by side in a car, when one of 'em wasn't showing the other one how to drive it or clean it?" (Walker 109). Meanwhile, in Africa, white men build a road through the Olinka village without the African's consent. There is nothing they can do about it because they can not fight back against the whites even though they stole their land and are now forcing them to pay for it.

“Walker thus suggests, on a large scale, world-wide colonial oppression of which racial oppression in the United States is but one manifestation” (Shelton). Considering the time period of this novel, it is no surprise that racism plays a part in the characters' lives. (Walker)

As always, there is the underlying theme of sexism and feminism. Shug is still a large figure in Celie's life in the middle of the novel. Their relationship is healing Celie mentally. “Celie is allowed to bask in the discovery of the good feelings emotionally” (Harris). A grand turning point is when Shug comes back and helps Celie find Nettie's letters which had been hidden from her for years. Finding the letters that had she had been deprived of for so long ignites Celie's anger that had been pushed down her whole life. “The case of hiding letters of Nettie from her shatters her capacity to endure and she gradually learns to resist.” (Hajare). This is a large turning point because, “Celie finally is able to break away from the oppression of her life and leave her husband” (Hajare). Back in Africa, the Olinka do not see men and women as equals. “The social structure of the Olinka tribe is rigidly patriarchal, with the men ruling and the women not being educated since the only role available to them is wife and mother. At the same time, the women, who frequently share the same husband, band together in friendship” (Shelton). Nettie decides to take a stand against their rigid gender roles. She confronts the tribe leader, “The world is changing, I said. It is no longer a world for just boys and men” (Walker 167). In their own ways, both worlds apart, Nettie and Celie are standing up for themselves and women all around them. (Hajare)

To end the novel, Since Corrine is very sick, Nettie has to care for her despite Corrine's growing suspicion of Nettie because the children look very similar to Nettie. Nettie discovers that the man they called “Pa” is not actually their biological father. The news frees Celie from the belief that the children she had with Pa are her own siblings. She goes to confront Alfonso, “Pa”, but he has not changed and does not apologize for keeping such a big secret from her.

Meanwhile, Nettie is still trying to convince Corrine that she is not the childrens' mother, but Corrine will not believe her. Finally, Corrine believes, but sadly passes. Celie is now mentally healed enough to realize how awful and unfair her childhood was and how God ignored her. Therefore, she sheds her belief of a white male God. She is finally starting to feel angry about all that she has had to endure, especially at the hands of men. Shug introduces Celie to the belief that God is everything and that the point of life is to enjoy oneself. Celie, Shug, and Squeak shed their husbands and move to Memphis. Memphis is just as segregated, but it does not bother the women. Celie has always been a great seamstress, but she has now fallen in love with making pants. She starts up a business selling her "folkspants". Back at home, Shug and Celie leaving Mr., Albert, broke him mentally. Back in Africa, Nettie and the rest of the village people are being expelled from Africa because of the white men stealing their land. Nettie notices that she loves Samuel and they get married. They plan on coming back to America. Alfonso dies and Celie comes home to inherit his land which sets her up financially. Shug, always needing fun and something new, falls in love with a young man and leaves Celie. One day, Celie gets a telegram that the boat Nettie and her family were on sunk. Celie has lost almost all the people of importance to her now and suffers from depression. Despite his abuse and her attempt to kill him, Albert and Celie become friends. Albert has grown as a person and now accepts women as equal and breaks gender roles. Celie and Nettie are finally reunited. Everyone has become one big family and they can live out the rest of their days together. (Walker)

Religion becomes important again, but a different type of religion than the typical Christianity. Celie's rage is awoken from being ignored by God for so long. "Celie feels that she has been consistently betrayed by God, whom she imagines as a "big and old and tall and graybearded" white man, but Shug teaches her to think of God in a new way, as a force that all people carry inside them, but few recognize." (Marvin). She says about God in her moment of

realization, "And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful, and lowdown" (Walker 199). Celie now stops writing to God completely and switches to writing to Nettie. Shug introduces Celie to the belief that God is everything and has no defined gender or race. "Shug accomplishes a blues conversion by changing Celie's concept of God from a stern white man who demands sacrifice and devotion to an all-encompassing (It) who strives to please people by creating beauty for them to enjoy" (Marvin). This way of viewing religion entices Celie because there are no men involved. "Shug extends the realm of the sacred to include all of creation, and she provides Celie with a bridge to a new spirituality free from the domination of an angry, white, male God" (Marvin). Celie's transition between strict patriarchal Christianity and freeing belief of oneness with the world is very important to the novel. (Marvin)

Lastly, gender roles are broken and the theme of feminism shines through in the end part of the novel. At last, Celie makes her stand against Mr. and men in general when she leaves and goes to Memphis. "And your dead body just the welcome mat I need" (Walker 207). She is done with the men in her life treating her so poorly and underappreciating her. "It is clearly not a man that Celie wants" (Harris). Her time in Memphis made her break free from the hold men had on her and made her an independent woman. "When she wore the first pair of pants, it was a sign that she was breaking out of the role the men in her life had assigned to her" (Harris). Celie doesn't need a man even though society is telling her she does. Celie does very well without a man in her life. "Along with Shug, Celie manages to start up her pants business and gets existence. She gets money, power of fortitude and acquaintance" (Hajare). Celie has completed her transformation into "an independent, creative businesswoman" (Harris). Even Mr., who is now referred to as Albert, has changed as a person. "Ultimately both men find a kind of salvation because women stand up to them and because they finally accept their own softer, more domestic impulses" (Shelton). Everyone is better off now and can actually enjoy

themselves. "Because each individual becomes worthy in his or her own eyes and in the eyes of others, the separation between men and women is destroyed, and fulfilling human relationships can develop" (Shelton).

The themes of religion, racism, feminism, and or womanism are very prevalent in Alice Walker's, *The Color Purple*. Many events and people influenced her writing and the themes she focuses on. Where and when she grew up influenced her ability to write about racism and feminism. How she was raised also made her interested in the ideas of religion in many forms. Walker has always loved fairness, and has done much to make the world an equal place for everyone. Walker lived most of her life as an activist and her writing is just one way that she changed the world. Alice Walker is leaving a legacy of not just an author, but also as a civil rights activist, and a woman who changed the world's view of gender roles. "Walker's work extends past its southern roots, calling on Americans to debate the role of race, womanhood, and resistance in social movements and the larger society today" (Farmer).

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