

# The color purple by alice walker: a literary analysis



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The novel *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker is a ground-breaking work in American fiction. The topic of emotional/physical abuse, especially that endured by black American women of earlier generations is not openly spoken about or documented in history books. By bringing focus to this sensitive, yet saddening, experience of black women, the novel attracted criticism, censorship and controversy. A careful study of the novel will reveal several themes, symbols and motifs woven-in by the author. This essay will confine itself to highlighting some of the major themes such as the representation (or lack thereof) of God, the interpretation of the color purple that is the title of the work, the symbolic value of the epistolary element in the novel, etc.

One of the prominent themes of the novel is the degree of suppression of the female African voice in early twentieth century American society. This is most evident from the events and circumstances in the life of the protagonist of the story, Celie. During her adolescent years, she was repeatedly raped and swears at by her stepfather. She even bears his child through the whole term, after which the child is taken away and presumably killed by her stepfather. The oppression and disparaging attitude exhibited by her stepfather is obvious in the following passage:

“ Well, next time you come you can look at her. She ugly. Don’t even look like she kin to Nettie. But she’ll make the better wife. She aint smart either, and I’ll just be fair, you have to watch her or she’ll give away everything you own. But she can work like a man.” (*The Color Purple*, Part 1, 1982)

If this was traumatic enough, the unfolding events of her adult life are equally saddening and depressing. Her tumultuous adult life is about finding peace and calm in an existence that is constantly threatened by the abusive husband Albert, while also navigating the emotional confusion caused by her sexual attraction toward Shug. Fortunately, though, her secret relationship with Shug serves to emancipate Celie to a degree, as she learns to act boldly and assertively like Shug. But the fact remains that the extent of abuse suffered by Celie is not only shocking but also touches the limits of individual tolerance.

Another important theme/symbol in the book is that of God, to whom Celie writes letters regularly, hoping vainly for benign divine intervention in her life. In all the doom and gloom that is Celie's life, the notion of God offers the only consolation and hope. Celie's letters addressed to God is also an effective literary device employed by Alice Walker. Through the course of the novel's narrative, one can see how Celie's interpretation of God gradually evolves. At first, her view of God is that of a powerful white male. This naive representation is a product of her personal past experiences and the structure of American society at the time. For example, she notes in one of her earlier letters:

" Yeah, I say, and he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown." (The Color Purple, Part 4, 1982)

But the friendship with Shug helps Celie to discard this view to a more nuanced understanding of God – one who is beyond gender, race, time or space. What Alice Walker trying to show the reader is the growing maturity and emancipation of Celie through the content of her letters. In other words, her letters reveal the evolution and stirrings of liberation within. Moreover, the letters act as powerful theological symbols, drawing upon the rich tradition of Christian epistolary.

Finally, the color purple is also a thematic element in the story, for it represents the pain and suffering endured by Celie. Drawing upon the idiom ‘beaten black and blue’, purple stands for the color of clotted blood. It is also a symbol of Celie’s sexual and physical violation, as she equates her private parts to this color. But as a reflection of her inner transformation, the color purple is used to represent positive things in life. This is evident in the passage where Shug remarks to Celie in a field of purple flowers thus: “ You must look at all the good and acknowledge them because God placed them all on earth”. (The Color Purple, Part 2, 1982) Eggplant, which takes a hue of purple, is referred in a similar context:

“ When I see Sofia I don’t know why she still alive. They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her teef like a piece of rubber. She can’t talk. And she just about the color of a eggplant.” (The Color Purple, Part 2, 1982)

Work Cited:

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982, ISBN 0151191530.