

"god love all them
feelings": sex and
spiritual embodiment
in the color purple



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In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Shug Avery introduces the novel's protagonist, Celie, to the concept of religious embodiment. Critic Anne-Janine Morey, in her book *Religion and Sexuality in American Literature*, defines embodiment as "the unreconciled relation of body and spirit" (3). In Western theology, God (the Word) and the flesh are conceived as binary oppositions, with the divine operating on a metaphysical plane. While popular theology asserts that the body, with all its attendant yearnings and desires, is completely separate from the soul, which is typically associated with spirituality and the divine, analogies and metaphors that link the spiritual with the sexual can be found in the Bible itself, such as in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians and the Song of Songs. Both of these Biblical texts explicitly and metaphorically compare Christ's relationship with the Church to the relationship between two lovers. This analogy considerably complicates the Judeo-Christian narrative that spiritual fulfillment and sexuality are diametrically opposed, positing instead that the achievement of the former is largely contingent on the recognition and indulgence of the latter.

Shug Avery's theological persuasions follow this more sex- and body-positive interpretation of God's Word. For Shug, God is not an immutable, abstract entity; rather, He is present in all material things, especially the human body. In one of the novel's key scenes, Shug asks Celie, "[H]ave you ever felt God in church? I never did. [...] Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God" (Walker 193). Shug's articulation suggests that God is other people, and only through human connection can this divine presence be encountered. Shug then asks Celie what she imagines God to look like, to

which Celie responds, " He big and old and tall and graybearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted" (194). Shug answers, "[T]hat's the one that's in the white folks bible" (194), which implies that people make God in their own image rather than the opposite. She sums up her philosophy: " God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it" (195).

Shug's philosophy influences Celie's own spiritual rebirth, which is inextricably bound to her sexual awakening. Prior to Shug's appearance, Celie endures a loveless half-existence with her husband, Albert. Given the sexual abuse Celie endures at the hands of her stepfather, it is unsurprising that she never imagines sex as a conceivably pleasurable experience. When Celie describes her sex life with Albert to Shug, she remarks, " Why, Miss Celie. You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you" (77). Only through Shug does Celie finally experience the possibility of a pleasurable sexuality and unearth her own latent lesbianism. It is Shug who initiates Celie's transformation from an oppressed and sexless housewife to a liberated woman, represented by the scene in which Shug compels Celie to inspect her own vagina in the mirror. By uncovering the source of her femininity and the nexus of her repressed desire, Celie begins the process of finding God through self-knowledge.

Celie's newfound sexuality complements her spiritual transformation. The aforementioned scene in which Celie finally looks at her vagina echoes Shug's later injunction that only those willing to search inside themselves discover God. For Shug, and, later, for Celie, spirituality is contingent on a healthy sexuality. When Celie reprimands Shug for speaking suggestively <https://assignbuster.com/god-love-all-them-feelings-sex-and-spiritual-embodiment-in-the-color-purple/>

during their theological conversation, Shug rebuts, " God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves ' em you enjoys ' em a lot more. You can just relax, [...] and praise God by liking what you like" (196). The two seemingly irreconcilable forces of sex and spirituality become fused in an almost Whitmanesque fashion. Toward the end of the novel, after Shug returns to Celie after a six-month excursion with a new lover, Celie prefaces her final letter with the declaration: " Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God" (285). Celie takes the sexual energy that Shug awakens within her and channels it into an overwhelming love for everything that is both spiritual and physical, thereby uniting the two polar opposites of sexuality and spirituality into a more complete whole. Works Cited Morey, Ann-Janine. Religion and Sexuality in American Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. Print. Walker, Alice. The Color Purple. Orlando: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006. Print.