

Free essay on the epistolary writing form in the color purple

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When the volcano inside Mount Tambora erupted in 1815, the ash in the sky left the next summer very dreary and cold. When the eighteen-year-old Mary Godwin traveled with her lover, Percy Shelley, to Switzerland to visit Lord Byron, the weather was so miserable that the group could never take part in the outdoor activities they had planned; instead, they had to amuse themselves indoors. After spending one evening talking about the possibility of returning dead bodies to life and reading German ghost stories, Lord Byron suggested a bet for the group - that each of them would write a supernatural story. Mary's story would later grow into one of the first epistolary novels: *Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus*. Told primarily in letters and diary entries, this story detailed the attempt of Victor Frankenstein to defeat the laws of life and death (Sunstein). Other noted epistolary novels that have followed include *Flowers for Algernon*, *The Woman in White*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. One of the benefits of the epistolary format is that it allows for a more direct expression of emotion and feeling (Duncan). The letters that Celie writes in *The Color Purple* allow for vivid self-expression and are a powerful form of writing.

Much of the criticism out there about *The Color Purple* has to do with the ways in which the use of the epistolary format shows the protagonist's development from a child, who is cowed and has no voice, into an autonomous, strong woman who has control over her life, reflected by the control that she shows over the progression of the novel. Henry Louis Gates, in *The Signifying Monkey*, indicates that, by using this format, Walker is actually rewriting Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in some important ways (Gates). However, Gates' analysis is not quite accurate, as

The Color Purple is different from Hurston's work in a number of ways; Walker deviates from the typical epistolary structure in both the way she sets the story up and in the rhetoric found in Celie's letters. She does this to show the marginalization of Celie within her society, on the basis of her use of nonstandard dialect in her writing. One of the effects of the use of dialect is that it makes the reader feel like he is listening to the narrator speak, rather than actually reading written text. This is actually what makes the epistolary format appealing to authors, because it allows the direct expression of the personality of a character, who has the freedom to express thoughts and feelings without the filter of a third-person narrator, or even the self-consciousness that often keeps a first-person narrator focused on the task of storytelling. The vast majority of The Color Purple is written in the dialect of rural blacks; as a result, most of the novel rolls out of the page to the reader as though one were listening to people talking. Perhaps the most important event in the story is that Celie discovers a voice independent of her letters, but as the novel comes to a close, the letters remain behind as proof of this development; until Celie develops the ability to use her own voice, the letters are the only sign that Celie lived.

The most powerful element of Celie's letters is the defiance with which she speaks. It becomes clear during the book that the use of dialect is a form of protest for her. Because her identity is her voice, if she made her language standard, she would be ceding her identity to those who control language standards - in this case, the white majority in American during the years between World War I and World War II. Writing in dialect, of course, as a matter of protest, dates back to Twain and earlier; however, Celie is not only

taking it upon herself to revise the English language for her own ends; also, she is changing the genre of the epistolary novel as she goes along. As an African-American woman, Alice Walker had as part of her purpose in this story the goal of fighting the corrosive effects that colonialism had both on the colonizers and the native peoples who were dispossessed.

Earlier novels in the epistolary tradition came from Great Britain. While *Frankenstein* deviated from this tradition in its subject matter, the typical epistolary novel during this time period had a white, British, literate protagonist who was single and was having trouble finding just the right man (Jorgensen). Of course, looking at this from a post-colonialist point of view, the struggles of a white woman whose wealth may, at least in part, have come from the exploitation of others might seem, at best, trivial. Celie appears in *The Color Purple* as the antithesis of this woman. Instead of perhaps being neglected by her father and waiting for the right man to show up with the right combination of charm and assets, Celie is sexually assaulted by her father and later compelled to marry a man who does not even love her. She does not find any significance in life until she leaves her marriage behind. While she is married, she stays in poverty and continues to be sexually assaulted. She considers herself undesirable; to the majority of American culture, she was less than human. Even though more than fifty years had passed since the end of the Civil War, African-Americans were still an untouchable class to others, thanks to the legacy of the Jim Crow era of laws in the South. Celie can write, because she grew up in a time period when education was universal (even if segregated). However, the standard English that she would have learned in her classroom does not make it into

her writing. She is the descendant of those whom the colonial process treated the most cruelly and was still in a class that was supposed to live under the white man's thumb.

In *The Color Purple*, the first line of the novel is the only one that is not filtered through Celie's linguistic nexus. The rest of the first page, though, lets the reader know that Celie has been the victim of rape; the fact that she would "not never tell nobody but God" (Walker, 7) is the reason why this narrative has appeared - it is where the pain from her experience has sublimated. Until Alphonso reveals Celie's abuse to the family, much later, no one else knows what has happened to her. Celie's story has two foundations: the rape itself, along with the resulting shame and suffering; and her inability to tell anyone but God about it. Instead, she writes about what has happened to her, and continues to do so through such other traumas as her mother's death and the continuing abuse she suffers as a child, even to the point where she is dragged out of her house unwillingly and forced to marry a man whom she can only bring herself to name, in the story, as "Mr. _____."

If one looks at Celie's story in comparison to that of Pamela Andrews, the protagonist of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (a 1740 novel of manners), the difference is stark. Pamela also comes from poverty, but she is beautiful, and she is employed by a lady who educates her far above what she could have expected in her position and gave her a pleasant place to live. The mistress passes away, and Pamela (then fifteen) is now the ward of "Mr. B," the son of her former mistress. At first, he gives her gifts and compliments, but it is clear that he wants to take her to bed. Pamela will

not sleep with him and attempts to escape back to the home of her parents. He foils her attempt and locks her up in an estate. She writes letters to her parents; it is these letters that cause Mr. B to fall in love with her; ultimately, they are married.

The Color Purple is a simple inversion of the story of Pamela. Celie is the opposite of a chaste child; instead, she has been sexually assaulted by her father. Instead of writing to her parents, Celie has no parents who care for her; instead, she only has God to write to. There is no wealthy landowner desirous of his lovely servant; instead, we only have a poor farmer marrying for practical reasons – he needs a housekeeper. Pamela is beautiful; everyone that Celie has sex with calls her ugly. Pamela's "reward" is that this odious man ultimately marries her, although it is difficult viewing this as a reward from a modern perspective. All that Celie has is her dissidence; any other value has either been taken from her by her rapist or by the racist white majority. All that Celie has is her voice; it is her voice that makes her immortal.

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