

Graphic content in the color purple: necessary or potentially damaging

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Graphic Content in “ The Color Purple Necessary or Potentially Damaging?
Introduction Alice Walker’s “ The Color Purple” opens with a graphic description of the incestuous rape of a fourteen year old girl by her father. Other scenes in the book describe violence against women, racial beatings and lesbian sex in detail. Critical reception of the book is mixed, with some praising it for its realistic portrayal of the problems black women face. Others view its graphic content as extreme, unnecessary and potentially damaging to readers. This content has seen the book banned by several school boards. Is Walker’s graphic content necessary, or does it merely shock the reader yet add nothing of value to the book? Discussion The controversy surrounding the book is centered on its use of language in describing brutal and painful scenes. Walker shines a spotlight on the nightmarish life of poor black people in the rural South. The book’s mixed reception can be seen in Trudier Harris’ critical essay “ On The Color Purple, Stereotypes and Silence”. She questions the excessive brutality Celie endures “ while she just sat there like a bale of cotton with a vagina” (Harris, p. 155). According to Harris, most people may be uncomfortable with the book but are afraid to criticize it due to its popularity. She however praises the use of “ Black folk” language in the first person narrative as excellent and revealing. According to Harris, the book’s prose underscores the challenges the protagonist faces from her point of view. According to Foerstel, the banning of the book in several schools is based on unfounded fears. Overly-concerned parents are the main instigators of book banning. These parents insist that they do not want their children exposed to depraved content because they fear that it may affect them negatively. Yet former students who read the book while young are

quoted as praising it. The scenes depict real and difficult issues that must be confronted at some point in life. One student says she never considered any pornographic or violent motives in the book (Foerstel, p. 207). She recounts how the book's prose affected her emotionally and enlightened her. The positive and lasting effect that the book has on the students is a sign that the book's content has no psychologically damaging effects on readers. The themes explored in the book are critical and impart lifelong lessons to the reader. Hogeland writes that the language used in the book sensitizes the reader to extremely delicate subjects. She terms the anti-pornography movement's focus on the book misplaced, adding that the book's focus on matters of sexuality is laudable. By tackling incest and child sexual abuse head on, Walker brings a taboo subject out into the light (p. 97). The protagonist's achievement of personal freedom through a highly taboo lesbian relationship demonstrates the importance of following one's instincts, even if it means going against society. The message of the book is inspirational, especially to young women. That society sees fit to deem these messages immoral is a display of immaturity and unwillingness to accept women's liberation. Conclusion "The Color Purple" is a book with a powerful message about gender and race relations. The only way to pass this message is through frank and candid language. It is sometimes necessary to shock people out of their complacency to make them understand the harsh realities of life. Alice Walker's graphic content accomplishes its purpose by eliciting such emotional responses in its readers. Works Cited Foerstel, H. Banned in the U. S. A. : A Reference Guide to Book Censorship in Schools and Public Libraries. Connecticut: Greenwood. 2002. Print. Harris, T. " On the

Color Purple, Stereotypes, and Silence” in Black American Literature Forum Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 155-161. Missouri: St. Louis University. Print. Hogeland, L. Feminism and its Fictions: The Consciousness-Raising Novel and the Women’s Liberation Movement. Pennsylvania. University of Pennsylvania. 1998. Print. Essay Outline: The Color Purple. I. Introduction a. “ The Color Purple” contains graphic descriptions of sex and violence. b. Thesis statement: Is the graphic content necessary or harmful? II. Body: Discussion, Criticisms and Supports. a. Mixed reception to the book’s “ Black Folk” language. b. Unfounded book banning by concerned parents. c. Critical exploration of important and sensitive themes. III. Conclusion a. The necessity of the graphic descriptions to the book’s core message.