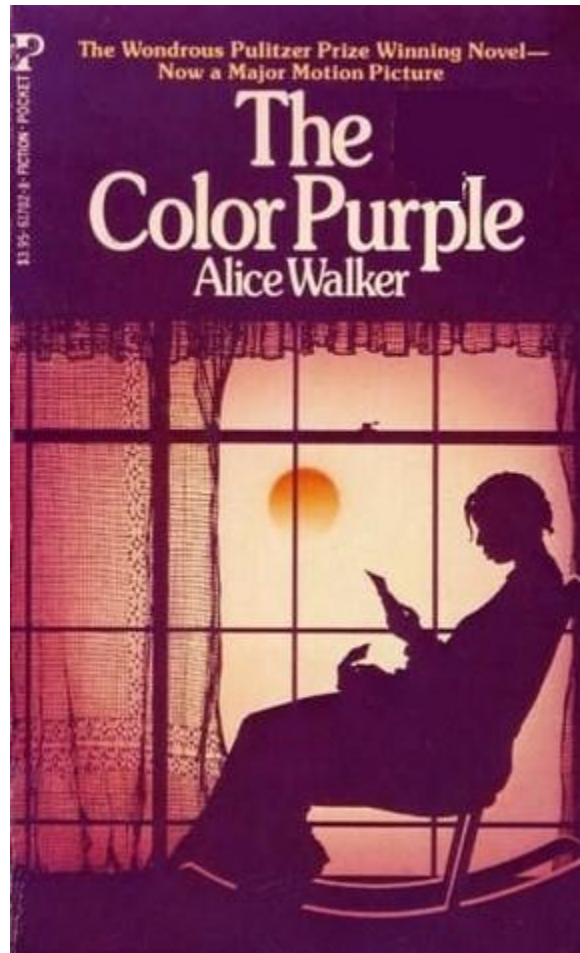


Gender and Sexuality in *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

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Epistolary Novel

The book *The Color Purple* comes under the category of novel. The novel is an epistolary novel made up of letters written by Celie to God and by Nettie to Celie. The epistolary novel is fictitious narrative in the form of letters. In such a novel the author poses as the editor of

the letters that have somehow come to his possession. The first epistolary novel in English appeared in 1678. It was translation from Portuguese book called *Portuguese letters*. Several fictional writings in letter form appeared during the Restoration period. The most outstanding was Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. Richardson was the first master of this form. Later many writers like Smollett, Fanny Burney, Swinburne and others wrote epistolary novels.

The Color Purple

The Color Purple is a fable and it is a fantasy. It is not simply a movie of social history it is particularly a history of black women. It is more about the oppression of black women than about black people. Critics of Walker have stated that she has portrayed black men as cruel in her works, which has sustained stereotypes of black male violence.

Historical Background

Alice Walker was active in the social events in her time, speaking out against injustice during civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s. Her feminism and activism in women's issues reflect the novels of Zora Neale Hurston, a writer in 1930s. Alice Walker set *The Color Purple* during the same time period as Hurston's novel. Hurston's novels drew criticism for its portrayal of black men as abusive. Hurston was criticized by her black peers as well. It was believed that by commenting upon the unequal relationship between black men and women, Hurston diverted the attention from the social inequality of blacks and whites.

Celie

The novel *The Color Purple* focuses upon the growth and development of a girl named Celie raped at 14years by her own father and then was forced into a marriage with a cruel older man. Celie learns to be quiet and submissive. The person she cares most about her sister Nettie is forced out of her own home and kicked out of Celie's home by her husband who had married Celie so that she could take care of his children and work for him since he is already love with Shug Avery.

When Shug Avery falls ill, he keeps her at his home. Thanks to Celie's care, Shug is able to recover and the two women begin friendship. Overtime, Celie learns to stand up for herself

and gain self-respect. Celie also learns how to love, as the two women become lovers as well as friends. Shug promises Celie that she will stay and protect her from the abuse of her husband.

Nettie

Nettie, meanwhile, finds refuge at the home of Samuel, the local reverend, and his wife, Corrine and Samuel have two adopted children, Adam and Olivia. Celie is actually the mother of these children; they were taken from her by her father before she married Mr.... Eventually the entire family, including Nettie, is sent to Africa for work as missionaries. They attempt to teach African children about Christianity. Nettie becomes involved in the struggle to educate a young African girl. Tashi, despite the wishes of her father, who believes that women should follow the custom of striving to become good wives. Nettie also enters a conflict with Corrine, who believes that Adam and Olivia are the result of an affair Nettie had with Samuel. Corrine is convinced that this is what happened because the children resemble Nettie so closely.

Nettie tells Samuel and Corrine that Celie is the children's original mother, but by now Corrine doesn't believe anything she says. When Corrine falls ill with a fever and comes close to death, Nettie becomes more desperate to make her believe the truth. Finally, Corrine remembers an early meeting that she had with Celie and dies understanding that Nettie had never had a relationship with Samuel. As the years pass however, Nettie and Samuel fall in love and marry.

Eventually the missionaries are unable to save the Olinka tribe, whose land has been taken by developers. They plan to return to America and rescue Celie from her unhappy marriage. Nettie chronicles her adventures in Africa by writing letters to Celie twice a year. These letters, however, are taken by Mr....and hidden from Celie who believes her sister is gone forever.

When Celie, with Shug's help finds out that Mr....has been hiding these, she make a stand and leaves Mr....'s house. She learns how to live life on her own and how to take care of others, all the while waiting for Nettie. After her departure from Mr... 's farm. Mr....and his son Harpo learn to be kinder to each other and to others. Celie enjoys a life of independence and eventually accepts and reconciles with the people who have treated her cruelly.

The climax of the novel occurs when Nettie returns with Samuel, Olivia, Adam and Tashi who has married Adam. After a tearful reunion, Celie after all her suffering is the happiest she has ever felt in her life.

Unique Structure of the Novel

The unique structure of the novel should be noted. Walker uses first-person narration that is the action of the novel and it is written through the eyes of the character Celie.

Celie's narration takes place in the form of letters, first to God, then her sister Nettie. Nettie's adventures are told through her point of view, through letters written to Celie. Therefore the plot of the text is actually two separate stories loosely connected through Celie's relationship with Nettie. Celie and Nettie comment on their shared experiences such as Celie's relationship with Mr... and the discovery of Celie's children, allowing the reader to fill the gaps left by only one perspective in narration.

Gender and Sexuality

Gender is the range of characteristics pertaining to and differentiating between masculinity and femininity.

Sexuality is diverse and deeply personal understanding. Our sexuality is about the sexual feeling and attraction we feel towards other people, not about who we have sex with.

What does sexuality mean?

1. Feeling or attraction to other people
2. Sexual thoughts and feelings
3. Sexual preferences

There are number of prominent themes in this novel. Gender and sexuality is the main theme in this novel. Alice Walker challenges and subverts both male and female gender roles with her strong characters. Initially, Celie is passive and subservient young woman, systematically beaten down and abused by men. She is prime example of the voiceless black

women of the era. Although the novel was published in 1982, its themes of gender roles, sexism, racial identity and racism are still relevant today.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*, 1983.

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