

Language as a Symbol in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Abstract

This paper discusses how language is used as a symbol in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Alice Walker is an effective storyteller and she uses language style, diction, and tone, etc. to impressively characterize her characters in *The Color Purple*. In addition, language brings in the aura of regional characteristics, emotional expressions and beliefs practiced in American South.

Key word: language use, characterization, regional accent and aura.

A Novel of Letters

R. Erin Huskey (2009) writes,

“Alice Walker demonstrates that social change begins on a very personal level. By telling the stories of these characters through their letters, she offers an intensely personal and individualized engagement with the revitalization of **language** and form--both literary and bodily--to signal that alternatives for community start with individual growth and commitment to the self. Through the form, **language**, and content of the novel, she transforms historically oppressive dominant literary forms and asserts voice as represented by the tangible object of the novel. This is an object or text that symbolizes Walker's personal transformation and envisions the possibility of transformation in the reader. This latter transformation is dependent on the internalization of the novel's message: neither Celie nor any other character can help anyone in the community until they

first figure out how to help themselves. The novel is a textual act of testifying and witnessing to inspire the reader to transform his/her life and the terms in which he/she thinks about the self.”

Alice Walker and Her Style

Alice Walker is an effective storyteller, who has her roots in Georgia. The place – the South is steeped in history. Hanging out in these places and talking with the people around is a far more enriching experience than just going into solitude. If they cannot speak, they can at least imagine, their inferiority being inviolate and be who they are. Through act, word or imagination, they naturally seek to be characteristically and spontaneously themselves. Alice Walker’s snappy showcase of style is enlivened by realistic and rough visuals. She steers away the readers from touristy landmarks to hang out with the Southern locals, to tell the readers about their terrible experiences.

Increasing Awareness

After meeting each one of them, we can see her people become increasingly conscious about the happenings around. She tells the story of black women whom she knows, not with petal-strewn, red carpet that doubled as a catwalk, neither with flower sprinkled racks and delicate floral bracelets, nor with head wreaths as give away to guests, but with the story that looked perfect enough to roll out the trends of many generations. One should begin to understand Walker as a spokesperson for black women. She believes in listening to black women, especially young women, whose rocky, bumpy roads she has also travelled.

Classic in Afro-American Literature

Alice Walker’s significant body of work has won critical appreciation and acclaim and has become the matrix for much of what is classic and what is nurturing in the field of Afro-American letters. Her writings enjoy a large audience that comprises of a heterogeneous readership of both Blacks and Whites, women and men. She became one of America’s most influential writers. She gained notoriety for her taboo-breaking and morally challenging depictions.

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Interplay of Language, Power and Gender

Tanritanir and Hasan (2011) observe,

Epistolarity or letter-writing as a literary form in fiction is a powerful genre for women writers interested in using novel to examine modern society critically and present a world better than the one they have had. Since letter-writing reveals the thinking processes of the characters, it has the potential of making the letter a means of expressing their own voices. In feminist works **language** and the adequacy of **language** come under careful scrutiny. There have been novels that **use** letter-writing to focus on the reconstruction of the self, especially women-self. Two of such works are Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982).

Alice Walker's novels particularly display a tremendous interplay of language, power and gender. Her conscious use of rural African slang produces, along with the new narrative style, an intimate impact on her readers with her characters. Her manipulation of the black southerners' use of the English language – Black English – adds to the natural discourse of her characters. Walker's use of Black English shows her concern about her cultural heritage. Her use of Black English is a clear indication of her taking hold proudly, of the black identity through the language they used.

Celie's Language

For instance, if one goes deep into the study of Celie's language and its impact on other characters in *The Color Purple*, one can understand that the style not only enriches other characters, but enriches the dimensions of her own new narrative. Moreover, *The Color Purple*'s language proves to be a challenge to any reader. Celie's first letter to God in *The Color Purple* starts with a correction "I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl ..." (1).

Language Errors in Aid of Portraying Characters

And it is not the end of 'mistakes'. There are spelling errors, fragmented sentences, uncomfortable subject-verb agreement and so on. This particular language style embellishes her

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character, though a reader may think that Alice Walker is poor in English. As a writer, she plays many roles and the one mentioned above is an uneducated, poor Black girl, who was raped when she was 12, by her stepfather (later revealed). Alice Walker, through the use of her language, describes the character in one superb stroke. But when it comes to Nettie, Alice Walker shows a different kind of English – educated English, though black.

Linguistic Experience

Early critical collections, compiled in Harold Bloom's *Alice Walker*, discuss a wide range of themes which includes the 'linguistic experience' too. They conclude that this linguistic experience brings in some natural discourse element into the treatment of the novel. Walker's use of language exhibits new strategies in the narration of stories. Celie is a chaotic character and so her language is. In the 1960s, Black English was a quite distinct dialect. It was used widely and consistently. This dialect has its own sound system, structural system and vocabulary system. Alice Walker brings alive her predecessors by using the linguistic features abundantly present in those days.

Role of Standard English

Through Nettie's character, Alice Walker proves that she does not want to neglect the Standard English. Even as the story grows, Walker introduces improvements in Celie's use of the language, but she is still left with her own style. She expresses herself through the following lines: "My mind run up on a thought, git confuse, run back and sort of lay down" (215). When Celie starts her own business, she is advised to speak like the white American but she refuses to lose her identity.

Confidence and Language Use

It is not Celie's proficiency in the language that matters, but it is her confidence. This is what Alice Walker wants to impress upon the readers. A reader, who wants to understand a character better, needs to read letters aloud to get the spoken English effect. Celie's reported speech in writing is bad. But when the reader speaks it, grammatical errors do not hinder the comprehension. For example, when one reads silently, "Last spring after the little Lucius come I

heard them ...” (1) sound chaotic. But when the same lines are read aloud, they sound like Celie is speaking to the readers.

Own Grammatical Rules

If a reader makes an attempt to find out a recurring pattern of errors, he will be able to understand that Celie has her own grammatical rules. Alice Walker makes her language speak for her characters. The use of double negation in some parts communicates a strong sense of warning: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mummy”. (1) In another sentence, “But I don’t never get used to it” (1) expresses her inability to comply with the situation. This is her own grammar which Alice Walker has put into her system.

Eye Dialect

Another language system that Walker consciously imposes on her readers is “eye dialect” (Hsiao, 99). Hsiao points out, “Walker’s use of “eye dialect” demonstrates the fact that Celie’s letters cling to the oral tradition of her people.” Eye dialect is defined as “the literary use of misspellings that are intended to convey a speaker’s lack of education or use of humorously dialectal pronunciations but that are actually no more than respellings of standard pronunciations, as wimmin for “women,” wuz for “was,” and peepul for “people.” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/eye+dialect>)

Eye dialect refers to deviant forms that “represent the standard pronunciation in a quasi-phonetic spelling” (Sauer, 130). Words like tho (5), flue, direar (14), Orkestra (24). Through this eye dialect, Walker creates an impact on her readers that Celie wants to stay with her oral tradition.

Conventional and Educational Nettie

Contrary to Celie’s language, what Walker wanted to introduce through Nettie is a ‘conventional and educational’ (Fifer, 155) language. Alice Walker faithfully records the dialogue that her characters speak. On the other hand, Alice Walker wants to inform her readers that her characters do write, but they speak more. In other words, Alice Walker tells her readers that the powers prevented her characters, particularly her women, from getting educated

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exposing the discrimination. For Alice Walker, language is not the only means of communication. She used it as a mirror to reflect the growing images of her women characters.

Epistolary - Letters

Walker shows the changes that happen in Celie's character through her letters. In her later letters, she signs and she names other characters, which means Celie is slowly becoming self-confident. Language plays a key role in *The Color Purple* to show the process of growth of the female characters from nothing to a status. In addition to finding more words to express herself, something else that distinguishes Celie's letters is the spoken form of her language. As seen with sewing and quilt making, Celie's language becomes more creative and expressive. Alice Walker makes Celie's letters very personal and emotional. But she makes the content of Nettie's letters' to read like a textbook. The epistolary form of *The Color Purple* makes Alice Walker's narrative technique, appear as a differently patterned quilt.

An epistolary novel, *The Color Purple*, which is a Pulitzer winning novel, proves to be a challenge to any reader, because of her use of language and readers find its use exciting and perplexing. In this novel, the novelist makes use of language as a symbol to reflect the growth of her women characters from subjugation to emergence. As they grow, their use of language grows. Thus, in Alice Walker's novels language plays a dynamic role in setting the rhythm and theme of the novel.

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