

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) is the work that has made a writer who has published consistently good writing over the past decade and a half into something resembling a national treasure. Earlier works, like her collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble* (1973), and her poems, collected under the title *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* (1973), have won awards.¹ And there are other novels, short stories, poems, and essays that have attracted critical attention.² But with *The Color Purple*, which won both the American Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, Alice Walker has made it onto everyone's reading list, bringing into our consciousness with clarity and power the long-submerged voice of a black woman raised southern and poor. Although Celie, the novel's principal narrator/character, speaks initially from a deeply regional and isolated perspective, both she and the novel ultimately achieve a vision which escapes the limitations of time and space. *The Color Purple* is a novel that explores the process by which one discovers one's essential value, and learns to claim one's own birthright. It is about the magical recovery of truth that a world caught in lies has all but obscured.

Shug Avery, the high-living, self-affirming spirit through whom the transformation of the principal narrator/character takes place reveals the secret at a crucial point: "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. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord" (p. 177).³

Celie, to whom Shug delivered that discourse, knows trouble and sorrow in the quick of her flesh. A nineteenth century novelist in the realist or naturalist mode would have used a figure like Celie to show the world in all its horror. Such a novelist might have evoked our pity, perhaps our shame, but he would not have been able to make Celie anything more than a victim, or perhaps a victimizer in her turn. Celie comes to adolescence in an atmosphere of ignorance, poverty, and cruelty. The oldest of a brood of children whose mother proves physically and emotionally unfit for her burdens, Celie is left not only with the household duties, but her father's unfilled sexual appetite to take care of. Raped, battered, rendered sterile after giving birth to two children spirited away from her in their infancy by her father, she is married off by the time she is seventeen to a man who doesn't really want her, on the expectation that she will raise his children for him. Celie's father convinces the reluctant suitor to take her saying, "she ugly . . . but she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do

¹ *In Love and Trouble* won the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters' Rosenthal Award; *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* won the Lillian Smith Award.

² Alice Walker has two novels previous to *The Color Purple*: *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970); and *Meridian* (1976). In addition she has an early collection of poems, *Once* (1968); a second collection of short stories, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981); an anthology of works by Zora Neale Hurston, *I Love Myself When I am Laughing* (1979); and a recently published collection of essays drawn from writings over the past twelve years, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983).

³ All quotes come from *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1983).

everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it" (p. 18).

What saves Celie has something to do with the very construction of the novel in which we find her. Overwhelming though is the effort to snuff out all spark of life in her, numbing though is her experience in rape, beatings, and the toil of raising the unkempt children of the man she knows only as "Mr.____," Celie escapes total annihilation by writing. She does not write after the fact, but as she goes along: letters to God from a person who has no one. Both the act of writing and the interlocutor chosen give notice to the level at which Celie engages us as a character. Rather than constituting a kind of mask, as the autobiographical writings of countless other heroes do, Celie's letters to God offer a vision of her and her environment that is without guile or any effort to distort. Celie's freedom in her letters to reflect on what is happening to her engage her, all unknowing, in exactly the search for self and God that Shug described in the passage quoted above (p. 177).

Celie does not write, of course, with such lofty intentions. God is not problematic for her, nor is she looking for self-unfoldment. She starts out just wanting a sign "letting me know what is happening to me" (p. 11). Her letters, not to the reader, not to any figure in her day-to-day life, not to anyone with power to judge her, have the effect of turning her from object to subject. They record not only the events of her life, but the process by which she becomes aware of her innate value as a being capable of loving and being loved. The particular epistolary structure that Alice Walker has chosen allows Celie, as no other structure could, to be transformed, and in her turn, to transform her world. Silent, yet attentive as the God to whom Celie writes, Alice Walker creates the space in which her character can develop on her own terms.

As Celie evolves, as she allows herself to open windows and doors out to a life that becomes correspondingly full and rich, so also does the God to whom she writes. God, Celie eventually comes to know, is not a big white bearded man with blue eyes up in the sky, is not, in fact, a man at all, and is not separate from her. Neither is she a poor beaten black woman, ground lower than the earth, but rather, part of God, and part of all that is. Over the course of her years of writing, Celie spiritualizes for God, and God materializes for Celie. The amalgam of spirit and matter that the novel achieves through Celie reaches out beyond the borders of the work to catch its absent/present author as well. Beyond Celie's consciousness, yet one with it, the author has addressed the book in her turn to "the Spirit, without whose assistance neither this book nor I would have been written." Like Celie, Alice Walker is both author and character, the writer through whom Spirit expresses, the being in whom Spirit is. Rarely does one find so explicit the process of interpenetration by which author and character create themselves in one another, as in this work.

Not all Celie's letters go to God. About half way through the novel Shug discovers in Mr.____'s trunk a pile of unopened letters to Celie from her sister Nettie, letters intercepted to punish Nettie, who had refused Mr.____'s overtures. After the unearthing of the letters, Celie directs her written words to Nettie. The remaining pages of the novel are taken up with the series of letters Nettie, living with missionaries among the Olinkas in Africa, has written over the years to Celie, and those letters which Celie writes in response. Though the recipient is no longer God, the act of faith each sister performs in continuing the writing is no less important. Both write to a beloved other whose likelihood of receiving what has been sent is never assured. In one of her first letters Nettie says:

I wrote a letter to you almost every day on the ship coming to Africa. But by the time we docked I was so down, I tore them into little pieces and dropped them into the water. Albert [Mr.____] is not going to let you have my letters and so what use is there in writing them. That's the way I felt when I tore them up and sent them to you on the waves. But now I feel different.

I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was. Well, now I know what you meant. And whether God will read letters or no, I know you will go on writing them; which is guidance enough for me. Anyway, when I don't write to you I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart. I am so *lonely*, Celie. (p. 122)

The writing, for both Celie and Nettie, is a tactic of survival. The imagined loving recipient, though never appearing to answer, both sustains the writer and is sustained by the other's constant evocation of her. *The Color Purple* is, among other things, the story of Celie and Nettie's creation, through writing, of the faith necessary to bring about their reunion, and to piece together, like the quilts Celie likes to make, something new and beautiful from the seemingly useless scraps of their ravaged lives.

If the structure reveals the novel to be a work permeated with, inspired, and informed by Spirit, the content no less reveals Its workings. Spirit, in the novel, works through dream, through image, and through the word, both written and spoken. Both Celie and Mr._____, for example, experience trouble with Spirit. Celie's difficulty comes because she has behaved in an unloving way toward her stepdaughter-in-law, Sofia. She writes: "For over a month I have trouble sleeping. . . . Sometimes I git a few hours sleep. Then just when it look like it ought to be getting good, I wakes up . . . What it is? I ast myself. A little voice say, Something you done wrong. Somebody spirit you sin against. . . . Way late one night it come to me. Sofia. I sin against Sofia spirit" (p. 45). When Celie confesses to being a fool and jealous, the struggle ends, making way for Celie and Sofia to be friends.

Much further along in the novel, Celie experiences Spirit as strength. Shored up by Shug's love, and armed now with the knowledge that she and Nettie are not children of the man they thought they were, Celie is finally able to stand up to Mr._____. He uses every threat and insult in his arsenal to keep Celie from going off to Memphis with Shug. She tells him: "Until you do right by me . . . everything you even dream about will fail. I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees. . . . Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice, I say. Then I say, You better stop talking because all I'm telling you ain't coming just from me. Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words" (p. 187).

True to her prophecy, Mr._____ does undergo a purging by Spirit, a purging that finally restores him to life, love, and kindness. Celie can scarcely believe the transformation, when she returns home for a visit. Sofia explains: "He couldn't sleep. . . . At night he thought he heard bats outside the door. Other things rattling in the chimney. But the worst part was having to listen to his own heart. It did pretty well as long as there was daylight, but soon as night come, it went crazy. Beating so loud it shook the room. Sound like drums. . . . What make him pull through? I ast. Oh, she say, Harpo [Sofia's husband] made him send you the rest of your sister's letters. Right after that he start to improve. You know meanness kill, she say" (pp. 201-01).

If Spirit works to give strength to the weak and torment to the evildoer, it also works through the imagination. For Celie, the figure who most captivates her imagination is the scandalous Shug Avery, Mr._____'s beloved, and the object of the town's gossip. Celie is strongly drawn to Shug from long before she ever sees her. Before she is married to Mr._____, she finds and keeps a picture of her: "I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail. She grinning

with her foot up on somebody motocar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some. I ast her [her stepmother] to give me the picture. An all night long I stare at it. An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery. She be dress to kill, whirling and laughing" (p. 16).

Shug Avery stands for everything Celie is not—for beauty, love, power, attractiveness, freedom. When Mr._____ brings her to their house, ill, and the object of the town's approbrium, Celie ministers to her, fueled by the power of her image of Shug, and indifferent to Shug's own initial cruelty. The pleasure of being in Shug's presence is the beginning of the process by which Celie pries herself loose from the image of what life is that the world has stamped on her. During a visit from Mr._____'s brother, Tobias, Shug says: "All womens not alike . . . believe it or not. Oh, I believe it, he say. Just can't prove it to the world. First time I think about the world. What the world got to do with anything, I think. Then I see myself there quilting tween Shug Avery and Mr._____. Us three set together gainst Tobias. . . . For the first time in my life, I feel just right" (pp. 60-61).

That image of the three of them anticipates the end of the novel, when, purged by Spirit and redeemed by their love for Shug and her love for them, Celie and Mr._____ learn to appreciate each other's company, and the three of them live in happiness, free of the world Tobias represents.

Spirit also dwells in naming. Mr._____ becomes "Albert" when he ceases to be Celie's oppressor and becomes her friend. Squeak, Harpo's wife after Sofia leaves him, also undergoes a name change. Celie asks her one day, "What your real name? . . . She say, Mary Agnes. Make Harpo call you by your real name, I say. Then maybe he see you even when he trouble" (p. 85). Later, when she decides to go to Memphis with Shug and Celie, she affirms her name: "Listen Squeak, say Harpo. You can't go to Memphis. That's all there is to it. Mary Agnes, say Squeak. Squeak, Mary Agnes, what difference do it make? It make a lot, say Squeak. When I was Mary Agnes I could sing in public" (p. 183).

Naming, imaging, the book shows in countless ways, make not only a lot of difference. They make all the difference. When Celie and Nettie write, they are also, slowly, painfully, rewriting, and reimaging. Their story is the action of replacing false images with true ones, of lies with truth, a slow scraping away, through the work of love and attention, the counterfeit picture to reveal beneath it, all unexpected, another altogether.

For Celie's part, the effort involves above all replacing her image of God as man with a sense of God in everything:

Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. . . . Man corrupt everything, say Shug. . . . He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plopp himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock. But this hard work. Let me tell you. He been there so long he don't want to budge. He threaten lightning, floods and earthquakes. (p. 179)

The work of opening up the vision to see past "man" has tremendous implications for Nettie as well as for Celie. The beginnings of the breakup come through Nettie, who reveals that the man who raised her and Celie was not in fact their father. Their true father, it turns out, had been a farmer and merchant too prosperous for his white neighbors' liking. They burned his store and hung him when Celie was a baby and Nettie still unborn. Their mother went mad with the horror

of it, but lived to bear the man who next married her four more children. That man, whom the girls called "Pa," never told them who their real father was.

In what was to be the last letter she addressed to God, Celie reacts to the undoing of her false sense of herself that Nettie's news provoked, writing, "My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not Pa" (p. 163). Shortly after absorbing that news, she and Shug go to visit "Pa." Not insignificantly, it is at his house that Celie notices the beauties of nature:

Well, it was a bright Spring day, sort of chill at first, like it be round Easter, and the first thing us notice soon as we turn into the lane is how green everything is, like even though the ground everywhere else not warmed up good, Pa's land is warm and ready to go. Then all along the road there's Easter lilies and jonquils and daffodils and all kinds of little early wildflowers. Then us notice all the birds singing they little cans off, all up and down the hedge, that itself is putting out little yellow flowers smell like Virginia creeper. It all so different from the rest of the country us drive through, it make us real quiet. I know this sound funny, Nettie, but even the sun seemed to stand a little longer over our heads. (pp. 164-65)

It is as if once "Pa" has been knocked off the log, the whole of nature is free to rush in. When later she is able also to shake Mr. _____ from his place of dominance in her life, Celie will begin to tap her own powers of creativity and love for the first time.

The story of their true origins is also liberating for Nettie, who has been burdened by the suspicions of the missionary's wife, Corrine, that Nettie was their adoptive children's mother and that Corrine's husband, Samuel, was their father. The repressed anger and jealousy Corrine held toward Nettie and Samuel brought her to her deathbed, where Samuel finally revealed what he knew of the children's origin, and Nettie explained that their mother was Celie. The information allowed Corrine to die in peace, and left the door open for Nettie and Samuel eventually to declare their love for one another and to be married. Once again the novel reveals the action of the imagination, corrosive on Corrine's part, liberating for Nettie, on the lives of the characters.

The dislodging of "Pa" from his place of power has the effect of freeing the major protagonists from the consequences of erroneous thinking. Celie moves to Memphis with Shug, and Corrine gives up her suspicions regarding Nettie and Samuel and dies, making their marriage possible. Celie's children, Olivia and Adam, though ignorant of their adoptive status, are freed of the taint of incest, and Adam also makes a decision based on love shortly after the genealogical errors of his true mother and aunt have been revealed. Perhaps as important, the discovery of "Pa's" usurpation affects the novel itself, turning it from history, with all its emphasis on power and control, to romance, whose main focus is love and redemption.

Celie and Nettie's true parents are cast in an archetypal mold, and have about them a magical aspect belonging more to myth than to history. Neither has a name, and when they die, they are buried together in an unmarked grave. They belong to a reality that eludes the clutches of history. Of their parents Nettie writes: "Once upon a time, there was a well-to-do farmer who owned his own property near town. . . . And as he did so well farming and everything he turned his hand to prospered, he decided to open a store. . . . Well, his store did so well that he talked two of his brother into helping him run it, and . . . they were doing better and better" (p. 160).

This "once upon a time" couple, prosperous, loving, is seemingly destroyed, its offspring and property taken over, raped, exploited by imposters. Yet the place that was theirs retains an aura of power and beauty about it, as Celie and Shug discovered when they went there to visit "Pa," right around Easter. The true parents' place is quite explicitly a place of resurrection, a place of fertility and abundance in a world otherwise cold, grey, and silent.

Even "Pa" seems to be preserved in youth in the magical spot belonging to Celie and Nettie's parents. Celie writes, "What shock Shug and shock me too is how young he look. He look . . . young for somebody to be anybody that got grown children and nearly grown grandchildren" (pp. 165-66). When they leave, she comments "The birds sing just as sweet when us leave as when us come. Then, look like as soon as us turn back on the main road, they stop. By the time us got to the cemetery, the sky grey" (p. 167). What could this place of natural wonder be if not the image of the Garden, the loving parents, the original inhabitants, God's children, expelled by greed and envy? The novel, we are now prepared to understand, is not after all a history. It is not truly chronological, and it does not really follow the fortunes of the main characters through thirty years from age 14 to age 54 or so. It is rather a story about the loss and recovery of origin, a story of separation, confused identity, and ultimate reunion, a story in which love and the action of Spirit overcomes the corrosive influence of time and physical power.

The point is reiterated on a global scale through Nettie, who has written to Celie of the Olinka tribe's theory of history. Celie tells it to Albert as follows:

They say just like they know history before the white children start to come, they know the future after the biggest of 'em leave. They say they know these particular children and they gon kill each other off, they still so mad bout being unwanted. Gon kill off a lot of other folk too who got some color. In fact, they gon kill off so much of the earth and the colored that everybody gon hate them just like they hate us today. Then they will become the new serpent. And wherever a white person is found he'll be crush by somebody not white, just like they do us today. And some of the Olinka peoples believe life will just go on and on like this forever. (p. 240)

There is another solution, however, that other Olinkas believe: "But some of 'em don't think like this. They think, after the biggest of the white folks no longer on the earth, the only way to stop making somebody the serpent is for everybody to accept everybody else as a child of God, or one mother's children, no matter what they look like or how they act" (pp. 240-41).

Counterposed, then, against the myth of eternal return, which is a time-bound, matter-oriented myth grounded in the notion of karma, is another, in which earth once again becomes the Garden, and its inhabitants children of "God, or one mother's children." It is in the light of this second, Spirit-centered myth that the question of genealogy, and more specifically, of Celie and Nettie's parentage, begins to make sense. What each sister discovers, in her lonely dialogue with the other, is that God is not "out there," but rather, within. God as man, God as roofleaf (as the Olinkas worship him), yields finally to God as Spirit, eternal within each being. Shug had explained it all to Celie shortly after she found out about her true parents: "She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me; that feeling of being a part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it" (p. 178).

Nettie had also come to this realization. In her next-to-last letter she wrote, "God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa, more spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone—a roofleaf or Christ—but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us" (p. 227).

Not long after Celie and Shug visited the place where "Pa" lived, they got word from his wife that he had died, and that the property actually belonged to Celie and Nettie, it having been left to them by their true parents. The novel ends when Nettie and Samuel and Celie's children Adam and Olivia return from Africa. The Department of Defense had declared them dead, sunk in their returning ship by German mines, but Celie never believed it, and kept on writing. Now it is nearing the 4th of July. Celie is on the porch sewing and talking with Shug and Albert. They see a car stop by the house, and all the ones they have loved so long come tumbling out. In true romance fashion, all that which was separated has been brought back together, and the ones redeemed by love have been restored to their rightful place, true heirs of the Garden, true sons and daughters of love, of Spirit.

History, of course, carries on. Time wears on its way. Outside, the gathering storms of World War II, and celebrations of the 4th of July. Harpo says, "White people busy celebrating they independence from England July 4th, so most black folks don't have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other" (p. 250). Underlining the difference between the outer and the inner self, Celie ends by noting, "I see they [her children] think me and Nettie and Shug and Albert real old and don't know much what going on. But I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt" (p. 251). In the Garden that is their true father and mother's land, love turns back the forces of darkness, the corrosions of time. There is room only for joy and celebration.

The last letter in the book, Celie's last letter, is addressed: "Dear God. Dear Stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God," and ends, "Amen." Celie has made her journey across the darkness of outer consciousness to an epiphany of Spirit. The lessons have been learned, history overcome, the world redeemed. Alice Walker has brought the novel back to its origins in romance, and we give thanks to her for letting the Spirit, which moved through Celie, move out through the author to us as well.