

“The Color Purple (Walker, 1982)”

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The *Color Purple* is an epistolary novel, published in 1982 by Alice Walker (1944-), an African American writer from Eatonton, Georgia. The novel chronicles the story of two poor sisters, Celie and Nettie, who lived in rural Georgia in the early twentieth century. Celie is a young woman who is sexually abused and impregnated twice by her father (who, she later discovers, is her stepfather) and she is forced to marry a widower farmer, named "Mister" (Albert), in order to take care of his home and of his four children. Sexually harassed by her stepfather, Nettie moves for a while into Celie and Albert's house. She discovers how Celie is tyrannized by her husband and incites her to revolt. But Nettie who is also harassed by Albert is finally thrown out of her sister's house and becomes later a Christian missionary teacher in West Africa.

The novel addresses many issues to highlight the condition of African American women in society, as they are victims of race, class and gender exploitation. Walker draws Southern women's life in particular, without stereotyping but with a clear perception of people who suffer physical or psychic injury in defining and asserting their identities. By showing the emotional and physical abuse Celie suffers from her stepfather and later from her husband, the novel raises the question of gender oppression in its more complex forms. Nettie's experience in Africa does not reveal a better situation but confirms the universality of oppression: the girls are not permitted to participate in the education provided by the missionaries and are considered the property of their father and then of their husband.

The theme of oppression is omnipresent in the novel and can be interpreted as an allegory of slavery. Indeed, many situations in *The Color Purple* are reminiscent of the slavery period: Celie's rape by her stepfather, the theft of her children, Celie's marriage, her hard work and constant abuse, her need of literacy as a way to get her freedom. The novel proposes unconventional ways of resistance to oppression. This resistance can be viewed through Celie's ability to survive and through the way she finds her salvation. In her letters to God, Celie tells the story of her life experience as daughter, wife, sister and mother. The act of writing becomes a crucial medium of self-discovery and self-acceptance and helps her to break down the wall of silence around her. Walker puts the spiritual growth of Celie and Nettie as the starting point of their emancipation. Celie's struggle for self-empowerment, sexual freedom, and spiritual growth is encouraged by Shug, a blues singer (who is also her husband's mistress), and their relation defies social conventions. Together the two women discover letters from Nettie, that "Mister" kept hidden. By reading them, Celie learns that her two children are alive and have been adopted by Nettie's benefactors, a preacher and his wife. Empowered by the existence of Nettie and her children, and strengthened by Shug's love, Celie finds the courage to leave her oppressive household.

She meets other Black women who shape her life: Sofia, the strong-willed daughter-in-law whose strength and courage inspire her; Mary Agnes (Squeak), who find herself in music. Celie, Nettie, Sofia and Mary Agnes, whose consciousness allows them to gain control over their lives, become involved in a close sisterhood. This solidarity and Celie's creativity allow her to move briefly to Shug's residence in Memphis, where she opens her own sewing business. After the death of her stepfather, she returns to Georgia to live in her newly inherited house. There she achieves a satisfying financial security and independence, and manages to reconcile with "Mister". At the end of the novel, Celie is reunited not only with her sister but also with her grown son and daughter.

In her personal life and in her art, Walker insists upon exploring both the cultural and psychological past, through the pain of slavery and segregation, for a meaningful synthesis. Walker's work relies upon her experience as a Black woman and upon the political ferment of the 1960s and 1970s. The novel's narrative structure, the use of the vernacular (Black English) and blues poetics made it an original piece of writing.

In 1983 the novel won the Pulitzer Prize for literature, and in 1985 was adapted into a movie directed and produced by Steven Spielberg. At its release, the movie became the subject of much critics and controversy for its stark portrayal of physical and mental violence against women, its negative portrayal of black males, and the crude depiction of taboo subjects: incest and female homosexuality. The adaptation of the novel into a movie was not so accurate; it had neglected the process of showing Celie's reflections and remained ambiguous dealing with the lesbian relationship. Some African American civil rights leaders did not agree with the production by Spielberg, and many feminists and gay criticized the use of humor in the film when dealing with Celie's abuse and the lesbian relation. Nevertheless, it was a first time that Hollywood had focused so accurately on the theme of black male-female relationship, in contrast with the traditional "mammy" stereotypes. The movie was nominated for eleven Academy Awards, but won none of them. Nevertheless, it has had a great success among the audience.

Ten years after the film's release, Walker expressed her satisfaction with the production in a 1996 book entitled *The Same River Twice. Honoring the Difficult*, which includes also articles about the film's production and letters from fans.

Further reading: Gates, Henry Louis, and K. A. Appiah, eds., *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, New York: Amistad Press, 1993 ; Hooks, Bell, *Ain't I a woman. Black women and feminism*, Boston, South End Press, 1984.