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AP Literature and Composition

11 November 2014

Purple

“Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (Yahwon). Alice Walker views herself as a womanist. Although a womanist and feminist are similar, the two terms are not exactly the same. According to Professor Tamara Baeouboeuf-Lafonant:

[Womanism] focuses on the experiences and knowledge bases of black women [which] recognizes and interrogates the social realities of slavery, segregation, sexism, and economic exploitation this group has experienced during its history in the United States. Furthermore, womanism examines these realities and black women’s responses without them as variation or derivation of black male or white female behavior and social circumstances. (Yahwon)

Walker’s womanist mindset is evident throughout her novel, *The Color Purple* and is overall the main theme of the novel.

Walker utilized several literary devices to express the novels true meaning of womanism. Celie’s diary entries evoke a very personal atmosphere of the novel and keep the structure of the novel parallel. The several diary entries are not the only things that make the novel personable. Celie’s narration of the novel and recounting of personal experiences also make the novel personal. Walker’s language throughout the novel helps expand the detailed descriptions of her characters and the scenes. Walker’s plot structure resembles one of a movie with conflict, climax, and resolution which displays the development of Celie. Each letter, or diary entry, is important to the entire novel as a whole. The organic unity of Walker’s novel through dependent letters leads to a well-developed story line. The dynamic and static characters also affected the development of the characters and the novel. Finally, Walker’s stated, hidden, universal, and contextual symbols throughout the novel not only develop the story as a whole, but develop the characters as well.

Alice Walker was born on February 9th, 1944. Her parents were sharecroppers in Georgia. As a young girl, Walker was involved in a BB gun accident while playing with her two brothers. The accident left Walker with a white scarring above her right eye. She took part in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960’s and was an active womanist (“Alice Malsenior Walker”). In 1967, Walker married a white civil rights attorney named Melvin Leventhal. Walker and Leventhal’s daughter, Rebecca Grant, was born in Jackson, Mississippi in 1969. Walker divorced her husband Leventhal in 1977 and then moved to California. Alice Walker continues to write and live in California to this day (Whitted). Walker has been writing for the last fifty years (Duerden 62).

Celie was the main character in *The Color Purple.* Although Celie was not based off of Walker, the two shared qualities. Celie viewed herself as ugly and unwanted, while Walker felt ugly and disfigured after the BB gun accident. Celie’s character was created as a part of Walker’s subconscious who still felt disfigured years after the accident. Celie was raped as a child by her stepfather. The sexual abuse forced Celie to feel ugly, broken, and disgusting. After the rape, Celie never again felt interest in sexual activities. The activities served as a reminder of the horrible, reoccurring rape she went through as a child.

Celie was confused on what her stepfather did to her in the beginning of the novel. Celie did not like sex then and after being married, she still did not enjoy sex. Since her father had raped her, all she remembered was the pain from the rape when participating in sexual intercourse with her husband. Celie’s husband’s ex-lover, Shug, showed up one day, which was the turning point in Celie’s life. Shug was a woman with great confidence, which Celie was attracted to. Shug became Celie’s best friend and towards the middle of the novel, Celie experimented sex with Shug. She finally found pleasure in this activity. Later, Celie expresses she is in love with Shug even though she is a woman. Celie is an example of black lesbian shamelessness. Christopher Lewis states, “Walker connects Celie and her cultivation of black shamelessness not only to the history of African diasporic religious practice, but also to Hughes and the work of an earlier black queer writer” (158). Walker took this opportunity to display a rare occurrence in her novel: gay sexual orientation.

Alice Walker is an active womanist. This active part of her life is demonstrated in *The Color Purple* through Celie. Once Celie was married off, her husband did not view her as an equal in their relationship. Shug pushed Celie to stand up to her husband and the encouragement eventually led to Celie leaving her husband and becoming independent. Celie was the example of a woman who fought for her right to be equal. Kumar and Mummachi who are critics from Language in India state, “She focuses on the evolution of female wholeness: the development of identity and community in Celie” (163). Walker’s purpose in the novel was to develop Celie into an independent, equal person. Celie’s fight for her equality is related back to Walker’s push for equal rights for all women.

*The Color Puple* was personal. The novel was filled with letters from Celie and Nettie. The letters started off with Celie writing to God. The letters moved into Celie and her sister, Nettie, writing back and forth to each other until the last letter which was written from Celie to God. In these letters, Celie expressed her feelings and opinions of the other characters. The letters suited as a diary for Celie where she could express her feelings, which in turn, developed a relationship with the reader and Celie.

The letters not only made the novel personable, but also demonstrated Celie’s strong religious faith. Celie found comfort in talking to God about her problems and life. Celie confided in God with her issues. When Celie was raped by her stepfather, he told her “You better not never told nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (Walker 1). This is where the letters start. Celie cannot tell anyone else about what had happened except God. Kumar and Mummachi state, “Celie writes to God because her step-father called Alphonso warned her not to tell anybody of what he did to her” (163). She uses the letters to express herself and tell God about the dark secret instead of keeping it all bottled up inside of her. As the letters progressed, Celie grew as a person.

Celie’s language in the letters demonstrates her growing confidence. As Celie continues to write her letters, the readers are introduced to more characters. Celie becomes more descriptive and voices her opinion on what is happening in the world around her. In the beginning of the novel, the letters were short, sweet, and to the point. Celie would express her feelings and then end her letter. As the novel went on, the letters’ length continued to gradually increase. The increase in length of the letters and the description displays Celie is evolving in her life. Kumar and Mummachi state, “*The Color Purple* is a story of Celie's survival and her personal growth that happen to be written as a series of letters” (163). Celie is growing with confidence and expanding herself which is demonstrated through the language. The letters discuss Celie’s personal life and display her growth through that.

Celie’s letters evoke a personal atmosphere. Throughout the letters, Celie expresses her deep thoughts, feelings, and secrets. These letters resemble a diary for Celie. Celie states, “First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it” (Walker 1). Walker uses the letters as her diary to confide in God about this tragic incident where she was raped by her stepfather. The letters allow the readers to feel for Celie and the pain she is going through. The letters are where Celie can talk about her life as she grows older.

The structure of Walker’s novel remains parallel. Each letter is started off the same way and when Celie is writing to God, she never signs her letters. When Celie starts writing letters to her sister, the structure alters slightly but then remains parallel for the rest of the novel. In Celie’s letters to Nettie, she starts to sign them because they are actual letters to be sent and not diary entries to God.

Celie speaks in terms of slang. Instead of speaking proper English, she speaks informal with grammatical and spelling mistakes. The grammatical and spelling mistakes are evident throughout the entire novel. There is one letter that seems to have the most grammatical errors in the entire novel. Celie states in this letter:

Dear God,

That’s it, say Shug. Pack your stuff. You coming back to Tennessee with me.

But I feels daze.

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.

You must be sleep. (Walker 177)

There are many grammatical mistakes in this letter to God. A lot of the sentences are fragments

and many words are not used in the correct way. The mistakes demonstrate the lack of education Celie received. Tanritanir and Hasan who are critics in an article from Language in India state:

There are spelling errors, fragmented sentences, uncomfortable subject-verb agreement and so on. This particular language style embellishes her 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). (Raghunath 112)

The mistakes in the letters throughout the novel portray Alice Walker’s character of an uneducated black woman: Celie.

*The Color Purple* also contains a few letters from Nettie. In contrast to Celie’s informal language, Nettie speaks proper English. In one letter from Nettie to Celie, she states, “If they [the children, Adam and Olivia] are not yours, he said, whose are they? But I had some questions for him [Samuel] first” (Walker 174). Nettie’s letters do not contain grammatical or spelling errors. The lack of mistakes in Nettie’s letter compared to the mistakes in Celie’s letter demonstrates that Nettie received a better education than Celie. Nettie received a better education than Celie because Celie was essentially the caretaker of the household when her mother was sick and she was pregnant twice as a child. Tanritanir and Hasan state, “But when it comes to Nettie, Alice Walker shows a different kind of English--educated English, though black” (Raghunath 112). Walker portrayed Nettie as an educated black woman through the language in the novel.

*The Color Purple* portrays the true life of an African American woman. African American’s were not equal to whites, but the men still viewed themselves superior to women. Celie was physically, mentally, and sexually abused throughout the novel. Celie was first sexually and mentally abused by her stepfather. When she married her husband, who goes unnamed, he continued the abuse cycle. He would constantly put her down and would beat her frequently in front of his children if Celie did not do what he asked. Kumar and Mummachi state, “This [abuse] reminds her [Celie] of her father's view about women and to the reader it echoes the white master's view about his slaves before the abolition of slavery” (163). Celie’s husband resembles the master and he views Celie as not only a slave, but his slave. The fact that he thought he could abuse Celie demonstrates that he sees himself superior to her. Inequality was not only demonstrated between sexes, but also races.

Inequality between races was evident throughout the novel. Sofia, Harpo’s wife, was involved in an incident with whites. The mayor’s wife asked Sofia to be her maid and Sofia refused in a not-so-polite way. Sofia was rude to the mayor’s wife, which resulted in him slapping her. Sofia had a tough side and started to beat the mayor back. The police were called and when they intervened, the police beat Sofia for attacking a white man. The mayor, who started the fight, did not get in trouble at all by police and Sofia was the only one who went to jail. These actions display that African Americans were not treated as equals to whites. African Americans were treated worse as the whites believed they were superior.

Celie has an ongoing conflict with her husband throughout the novel. Celie’s husband looks down on her and restricts her from being her own person. Celie accepts that until she meets Shug, her husband’s ex-lover. Shug gives Celie the idea to stand up to her husband. Shug pushes Celie to stand up for herself and be her own person. The climax of the novel is when Celie tells her husband that she is leaving with Shug and ends up yelling at him in an angry tone. Celie finally leaves her husband which is the resolution to the conflict between them.

Celie starts her own business making pants. Shug gave her the motivation for her newly

found business. Celie started out by making pants for Harpo and Sofia’s children. After she gave the children their pants, more people were asking for her to make them pants. Shug insisted Celie should get people to work for her and use the dining room as her factory. The encouragement

Shug gave Celie was the start of Celie’s booming pant business.

*The Color Purple* demonstrates organic unity. The entire novel depends on the letter before. Since the novel is a story of Celie’s life, each letter is critical. The previous letter leads to the next and so on. The end letters between Nettie and Celie finish off their relationship Celie spoke about in the beginning of the novel and ties everything together between them. The readers find out exactly what happened to Celie’s children and what Nettie has grown to be.

Celie is the persona of the novel. The novel is told in the first person point of view since

Celie is narrating it. Throughout the novel, Celie discusses what she sees, hears, and feels. Celie expresses her own judgments and opinions in the letters. Since Celie uses the letters as a form of a diary, she explains her thoughts and her secrets. Walker imagined Celie as a character and maintained her throughout the novel. Celie’s personal letters led to a sense of the novel functioning as a diary.

The novel, *The Color Purple*, is filled with letters from mostly Celie. The letters can also function as a diary because they express the events and experiences Celie has gone through in her life. In one entry, Celie states, “Dear God, I go visit Sofia, she still working on the roof. The darn thing leak, she say” (Walker 64). In this brief passage, Celie shares an experience from earlier that day. Although she is writing to God, the letter can still be viewed as a diary entry since it expressed an event and experience from that day. ‘Dear God’ functions as a ‘Dear Diary’ that most people start off their diaries with.

Walker’s descriptive language throughout the novel evokes imagery. Walker’s

descriptive writing allows the reader to imagine what is happening in Celie’s daily life. This is demonstrated in a passage where Celie is describing Harpo and Sofia walking towards her and her husband. Celie states, “I see ‘em coming way off up the road. They just be marching, hand in hand, like going to war. She in front a little. They come up on the porch, I speak and move some chairs closer to the railing. She sit down and start to fan herself with a hansker. It sure is hot, she say” (Walker 30). Walker’s detailed writing allows the reader to visualize what is happening throughout the entire novel. This visualization from descriptive language is important to understand Celie’s feelings and sights throughout her life displayed in the letters.

In *The Color Purple*, Celie never says her husband’s last name. Walker leaves the spot where his last name would go as a blank space. The empty space for the name signals Celie does not think anything of him. He is nothing to her and is essentially a blank space in her life. Celie has no feelings for her husband at all because of how much he has abused her over the years which is why she never says his last name. The blank space could also symbolize other meanings as well.

The blank space Walker leaves in *The Color Purple* when Celie says her husband’s name could also symbolize a swear word. Celie and other characters swear throughout the novel and say those words without thinking. Celie’s husband is very abusive to her. He degrades and abuses Celie daily throughout their entire marriage. The blank space where his name should be represents that his name is so bitter to her, she cannot even say it. After all the things he has continuously done to her over the years resulted in her disgust with him. Celie has no problem with swearing but she has a problem with saying his name. The blank space was not the only symbol in the novel.

Purple symbolizes many different things. Purple stands for pride and independence.

Purple also creates spiritual feelings and is associated with spirituality and God. Even though the color purple is not discussed frequently throughout the novel, the symbols are relevant through Celie. Celie is extremely religious and confides in God every day through her letters. Celie becomes more independent as the novel goes on. Celie begins to stand up for herself and eventually leaves her husband. Celie has pride in what she has become. She started her own business and found someone who she really loves: Shug. The color purple is a strong symbol that is a part of the entire novel (Bourn). The color purple resembles Celie finally becoming an independent woman when she left her husband.

Celie had enough with her husband and left him. Celie moved to Tennessee with Shug. When Celie came home, she visited her husband. While Celie was away, he repainted the living room white. White is a symbol of purity and new beginnings. Her husband’s repainting of the living room symbolizes a new beginning. The repainting symbolized a new beginning because Celie left him and he was all alone now to handle things on his own. The white paint also symbolized how he purified the house where he physically, mentally, and sexually abused Celie.

Walker has several dynamic characters in her novel. Two that stick out the most are Celie and her husband. Celie starts off the novel as shy and not knowing many people. As the novel goes on, Celie expands herself and grows as a person. Celie meets new people and learns to voice her own opinions. Her husband in the beginning of the novel was very mean. He physically and mentally abused Celie. After Celie left him, he changed. He became kind and was very nice to Celie when she came to visit him. The dynamic characters of the novel showed the growth of each character individually.

In contrast to Celie and her husband, Shug was a static character. Shug was already set in her ways when she met Celie. She had multiple men after her and a career of singing. Shug did whatever she wanted and never listened to what a man told her to do. She never changed her ways throughout the novel; she always went with how she felt. Shug encouraged Celie to be like this which is how Celie turned into a dynamic character.

In conclusion, Walker effectively utilized many literary terms throughout *The Color Purple* to accentuate and enhance the novel. The organic unity of the novel was based off each literary device working off one another. Walker’s language, characterization, letters, and symbols all worked together to develop the plot. Walker’s structure of the novel with the basic plot line allowed the readers to engage with the novel. Walker’s literary devices led to a well-developed story.

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