

Candidate 1 evidence

How does 'The Color Purple' reveal the themes of oppression and empowerment?

'The Color Purple' by Alice Walker is an epistolary novel written in 1982. The book is set in rural Georgia, Southern US in the 1930s. The main character Celie, is a young black girl born into poverty and segregation. She is raped repeatedly by her stepfather and subsequently has two children, who are taken away from her. Celie is separated from her beloved sister Nettie and then forced into a marriage to provide childcare to a man with three children. Celie has a life-long fascination for the black singer Shug Avery who has taken charge of her own identity and the two become friends. Through Shug and other black women - Sofia and 'Squeak', Celie discovers the power of narrative and her personal transformation frees her from her past, reuniting her with the ones she loves. 'The Color Purple' explores two important themes. One is oppression, the state of being subject to abusive treatment, which is shown through Celie's interaction with her husband, her friends and her narrative voice, highlighted by her letters that she writes. The other is empowerment, which is defined as the transformative process of becoming stronger and more confident. This is highlighted through Celie's voice, her interaction with her friends, Nettie's long-lost letters and financial freedom. These themes are important as Walker is conscious of uncovering writing from black women, some of whom have experienced slavery, many of whom have lived with racism, and raising the profile of black women in the literary world by giving them a voice.

'The Color Purple' explores what life was like for black women in the Southern US in the period between the later 19th century and World War 2. Walker calls this period of time 'suspended life'¹ for women because they were lost in a time of no hope or progress. The aftermath of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery in 1965 left the

¹ 'The Color Purple' York Notes, York Press 1996, pg. 7

black people the right to vote and freedom. However, they were easy targets for injustice. This is shown via the way Celie and her friends are abused mentally and physically. The way Celie is treated by men reflects the theme of oppression. The beginning of the book is disturbing as we realise that Celie was raped by her stepfather and innocently explains what happens in blunt terms, referring to the: 'thing up 'gainst my hip'². He continues to abuse her and Celie becomes pregnant twice but believes her father 'kilt it'³ and sold the other. From a young age Celie was forced to be a nanny to her siblings and run the house. She receives no help and is forced to grow up fast. She is married off but can only refer to her husband as 'Mr...' and remains passive in her marriage, considering this a survival technique. Celie tells her sister that she 'don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive.'⁴ Celie's method of survival is to keep her head down and remain obedient to her husband's commands. The abuse women received by men was thought of as acceptable since an obedient wife was regarded as a good wife. Men hitting women to make them 'mind' was normal and expected. Celie is told 'when a woman marry she sponse' to keep a decent house and a clean family'.⁵ The oppression of women is shown in a social hierarchy with women beneath men and only there to satisfy a man's desires, provide child care and to manage a house. Failure to do so would result in a beating but sometimes, like Celie, women were beaten because: 'Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good beating.'⁶ However, the theme of empowerment can also be shown through black women. The novel is set in the age of jazz and blues singing, the character Shug Avery reflecting the women singers of the time, for example Bessie Smith, a singer of the age. Their independence is shown through Shug who portrays their spirited characters. This type of personality contrasts to women like Celie, who struggles to break her expected role and maintain the role of a housewife.⁷ Shug empowers Celie by becoming Celie's friend and influencing Celie

² Alice Walker, 'The Color Purple', Weindenfeld & Nicolson 2017, pg. 3

³ Alice Walker, 'The Color Purple', Weindenfeld & Nicolson 2017, pg. 4

⁴ Ibid. pg.18

⁵ Ibid. pg.20

⁶ Ibid. pg.35

⁷ 'The Color Purple', York Notes, York Press 1996, pg.8

to break away from the traditional views of society and gain independence for herself. With Shug's encouragement, Celie sets up her own clothes business 'Folkspants, Unlimited'. This gives Celie a sense of empowerment as she breaks away from the traditional gender roles and has the freedom to be creative, as well as seeking financial freedom, symbolising liberation from patriarchy. Therefore, Walker's portrayal of the black women in the book, especially Celie, effectively shows the theme of oppression but also the theme of empowerment by overcoming the problems faced in the Southern States of America.

The narrative of the book is told through letters from Celie to God and then later via her sister, Nettie. 'The Color Purple' is written to form part of a genre of epistolary novels, echoing the female gothic period novelists⁸ from the 18th century such as Mary Shelley (1797-1851)⁹. The letters were a way of writing about the plight of women insulted and abused by villainous men, expressing the theme of oppression in the first person to validate the female experience. Celie's letters allow her to write about the pain and suffering she feels. Critic Mel Watkins, writes that the suffering on black women 'was largely ignored by most black writers until the early 1960's'.¹⁰ Walker is able to show the themes of oppression and empowerment by giving black women a narrative voice through Celie. Celie, at the beginning of the novel writes to God as it gives her a means of self-expression and is her only outlet. Celie doubts that God cares for her because of her constant misery and abuse. The letters highlight the power of communication as Celie gains strength from writing letters to God and later to her sister. Her first letter to God is written when she is raped for the first time as she asks for a 'sign': 'Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.'¹¹ Celie does not realise she is pregnant due to her lack of education and as a young girl is very scared. She seeks guidance through God as she lacked that from her mother. Celie's abuse leaves her with no voice and no self-confidence. Since she is constantly told she is 'ugly', 'evil' and 'she ain't smart

⁸ 'The Color Purple' York Notes, York Press 1996, pg.10

⁹ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/gothic-literature>

¹⁰ <http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/98/10/04/specials/walker-color.html>

¹¹ Alice Walker, 'The Color Purple', Weindenfeld & Nicolson 2017, pg.3

either'¹² by her stepfather. Consequently, she grows up believing she is worthless. Walker's use of non-standard English allows the reader to understand Celie's lack of education has affected her literacy but also gives Celie a fresh and dynamic voice, which is unique. Celie's survival method of remaining to avoid more abuse changes during the book slowly, as her friend Shug teaches Celie to love herself and stand up to her abusive husband. Celie's empowerment comes from finding long lost letters from her sister Nettie, which her husband hid from her. Confronting him, gives her strength to stand up for herself. By finding Nettie's long-lost letters and accusing her husband of cruelty, Celie is liberated. Celie's change in beliefs about God empower her as she questions: 'What God do for me?'¹³, highlighting that she is beginning to think for herself. Shug's lessons about focusing on the beauty of the world around her empowers to move out and start a business. Significantly, Celie's ability to collect her thoughts and feelings is shown through her verbal battle with her husband in which she curses him in the climax of the novel, stating: 'until you do me right everything you touch will crumble'¹⁴. This is the first time Celie fights back and it gives her a sense of control over her life. Her husband's infamous retaliation of: 'You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman'¹⁵ has no effect on Celie at all, showing her growth in confidence, demonstrating the theme of empowerment. Celie's personal growth transforms her into a happy and independent woman. Her creativity and love for sewing gives her self-expression, through creativity, which results into a profitable and successful business. After being voiceless for so long, Celie is now content, fulfilled and self-sufficient. Though Celie suffered from years of hardship she says in her final letter 'Don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this is the youngest us ever felt.'¹⁶ Therefore theme of oppression is highlighted through Celie's narrative of abuse but she transforms herself via the empowerment of finds a narrative voice on the page and orally when confronting her husband.

¹² Ibid. pg.10

¹³Alice Walker, 'The Color Purple', Weindenfeld & Nicolson 2017, pg.173

¹⁴ Ibid. pg.187

¹⁵ Ibid. pg.187

¹⁶ Ibid. pg.261

Shug Avery is an important character in the novel as she helps Celie find her narrative voice and sense of self-worth. Celie's first impressions of Shug recall her as: the 'most beautiful woman I ever saw.'¹⁷ Celie is fascinated by Shug since she is everything that Celie is not. Shug is known for having dubious morals and dressing scandalously like 'wearing dresses all up her leg'¹⁸. Celie who's never owned her own dress, is infatuated by Shug's beauty and the fact she's in control of her own life. The two characters contrast as unlike Celie, who is subjected to harsh treatment, Shug refuses to allow anyone to dominate her. Shug expresses her identity in singing and her involvement with men, which is on her terms, instead of theirs. Shug teaches Celie to love and fight for herself by empowering her through kindness. After Shug dedicates a song to her, Celie states: 'First time somebody made something and named it after me.'¹⁹ This is the first time Celie has felt loved. Shug's 'tight red dress'²⁰ is a symbol of her empowerment and control whereas, in contrast, Celie wears 'churchgoing clothes'²¹ highlighting her modesty. Shug continues to help Celie find her voice by making sure she is never beaten again by her husband. Shug teaches Celie to love her body by encouraging her to look at herself in the mirror and calls her a 'virgin'²² symbolising new beginnings and how the power of words can create a new narrative and perspective. Celie learns a new outlook on life and God through Shug as she is taught that God isn't a man, God is an 'It' and that God is 'Everything that is or ever was or ever will be'²³. Celie's perspective changes as she learns that her treatment was wrong, not enjoying sex was okay because she wasn't in love and that God tries to please us, not the other way around. Once Celie understands this, she is able to love the world and herself, starting with telling her husband that he is a 'lowdown dog'²⁴. The language here conveys an angrier tone, showing how Celie will no longer believe that she is worthless. Once she is finished giving her husband a piece of her mind, she moves out and goes to live with Shug.

¹⁷ Ibid. pg.8

¹⁸ Ibid. pg.21

¹⁹ Alice Walker, 'The Color Purple', Weindenfeld & Nicolson 2017, pg.70

²⁰ Ibid. pg.70

²¹ Ibid. pg.69

²² Ibid. pg.74

²³ Ibid. pg.176

²⁴ Ibid. pg.180

Without Shug, Celie would never learn that she is valued and creative. Shug's encouragement to sew 'pants' for everyone, gives Celie a chance to make her own way in the world without being controlled by men. Shug inspires Celie to create her own business, helping her to find a new passage in her life for her passion and Celie's newfound creativity turns her from being treated like an object by men to taking control of her life, giving her more personal and financial freedom. Both Shug and Celie help each other find who they really are and bring out the best in each other, as they both felt confined in their roles because of society's perception of them. Shug becomes Celie's role model and helps Celie to find a new outlook on life. Celie begins to grow stronger and find who she truly is, how to love and what it means, thus, highlighting the theme of empowerment.

Although Shug plays a huge role in Celie's empowerment, Celie's friends, Sofia and Squeak are also important in showing the themes of oppression and empowerment. Sofia is Celie's first friend and a role model to Celie. Like Shug, Sofia contrasts with Celie since she has the courage to fight back against her husband's abuse and later walks out. Celie tells Sofia: 'I'm jealous of you'²⁵ since Celie lacks a voice and ability to defend herself. Celie also has an admiration for Sofia and Celie's use of language to her husband, when she eventually stands up to him reflects Sofia's tone with: 'your dead body is just the welcome mat I need'²⁶. Celie's language and tone are sarcastic but full of anger, reflecting the way Sofia would speak to men as she wouldn't take nonsense. This is shown with Sofia 'walking ahead'²⁷ of her husband, showing a superior nature and standing 'big, strong, healthy'²⁸. Celie's behaviour is reflected through the character 'Squeak'. The name 'Squeak' suggests a timid and meek character, reflecting Celie's character. The nickname is belittling and conveys a quietness much like Celie's abuse and survival strategy. The 'teenouncy voice'²⁹ of Squeak reflects Celie's lack of narrative voice and ability to speak to convey her thoughts and emotions. Celie sees herself in 'Squeak' and by encouraging Squeak'

²⁵ Alice Walker, 'The Color Purple', Weindenfeld & Nicolson 2017, pg.39

²⁶ Ibid. pg.180

²⁷ Ibid. pg.31

²⁸ Ibid. pg.187

²⁹ Ibid. pg.78

to: 'Make Harpo call you by your real name'³⁰, Mary Agnes, builds Celie's narrative voice by helping her friends. Celie's encouragement of Squeak makes Celie think about her abuse but she doesn't have the confidence to strike back herself until Nettie's letters to her are discovered and given to her, a turning point for Celie. Therefore, it can be argued that Celie is empowered through other women and her abuse and oppression is cleverly shown through them too.

The colour purple is an important use of symbolism to show oppression and empowerment. Celie 'can't remember being the first one in my own dress'³¹ and when asked to pick a colour she chooses 'somethin purple'³². The colour purple is important since it has connotations of royalty³³ and she chooses it as Shug is 'like a queen'³⁴. Purple also stands for independence and freedom³⁵ of one's mind and feelings. Celie has never been able to express herself emotionally so choosing a colour such as purple is a way of expressing her feelings and gives a sense of empowerment. Ironically, the purple colour also appears in bruises, signs of physical abuse. When Sofia is beaten by the police for 'sassing the mayor's wife'³⁶ as she refused to become a white person's servant, she is beaten to the 'colour of an eggplant.'³⁷ The purple colour of the eggplant is symbolic of bruising, highlighting the oppression of black women through physical abuse. Purple is a mixture of red and blue and so the fierce red and calm blue represent creativity and wisdom but also spiritual freedom. When Celie makes Sofia a pair of 'pants' she makes 'one leg be purple, one leg be red'³⁸ highlighting Sofia's independence and headstrong character. In nature, the purple colour is rare and only occurs in certain wild plants, sometimes with sacred meanings. When Celie is evaluating her belief in God, since

³⁰ Ibid. pg.80

³¹ Ibid. pg.21

³² Alice Walker, 'The Color Purple', Weindenfeld & Nicolson 2017, pg.21

³³ <https://www.bourncreative.com/meaning-of-the-color-purple/>

³⁴ Alice Walker, 'The Color Purple', Weindenfeld & Nicolson 2017, pg.21

³⁵ <https://www.bourncreative.com/meaning-of-the-color-purple/>

³⁶ Alice Walker, 'The Color Purple', Weindenfeld & Nicolson 2017, pg.80

³⁷ Ibid. pg.82

³⁸ Ibid. pg.195

she 'don't write to God no more'³⁹ because 'the God I been writing to is a man'⁴⁰, Shug tells her that God wants to 'share a good thing'⁴¹, for example the beauty of nature, and 'it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.'⁴² Shug explains the importance of freedom to Celie. At the beginning of the book, Celie has no sense of the colour purple. She has such a horrible life with no time to enjoy nature—she's just surviving. Celie is dead emotionally, but is physically alive. Shug points out the concept of the colour purple to Celie. Shug says 'People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back'. Shug suggests that God does little things for people, for example creating the colour purple, just to make people. God wants people to notice the beauty of creation. According to Shug, enjoying the beauty of creation includes all of God's creation. Shug teaches Celie that enjoying life is exactly what God wants us to do. As Celie does learn to love life, she decorates her bedroom in her own home in all purples and reds; She writes: 'Everything in my room purple and red'⁴³ conveying her empowerment after a new outlook on life and God.

'The Color Purple' by Alice Walker effectively conveys the themes of oppression and empowerment, shown through the main character Celie. The book highlights the struggle for black women in the 1930s, in the Southern States of America. The physical and mental abuse that black women faced is effectively demonstrated through Celie as she is beaten by her stepfather and husband. The oppression of women is highlighted through Celie's abuse, leading to a lack of an audible voice and no self-confidence, leading to Celie adopting a survival strategy of remaining invisible. It is also shown through Celie being told that a woman's job is to look after the house and children, traditional gender roles. Celie breaks this by setting up her own business of making 'pants for women', highlighting the theme of empowerment in black women. Alice Walker cleverly shows Celie's unique narrative voice through

³⁹ Ibid. pg.173

⁴⁰ Ibid. pg.173

⁴¹ Ibid. pg.177

⁴² Ibid. pg.177

⁴³ Alice Walker, 'The Color Purple', Weindenfeld & Nicolson 2017, pg. 257

her letters, inspired by a tradition of gothic female writing in letters. Celie's character development through her letters highlights a personal change as she gains more confidence and independence. The very act of writing means that she becomes visible and audible at least to herself. Also, through Shug Celie starts to see the world as beautiful and herself as an asset in being able to create and be economically independent. The themes of oppression and empowerment are also shown through Celie's friends, who also experience suffering and redemption, or partial redemption. Celie's low self-esteem and abuse, pointed out by her friends, can be highlighted through the symbolism of the colour purple, which has connotations of bruising highlighting the theme of oppression. When Celie develops an understanding of the beauty of the world, symbolism of the colour purple is used to highlight Celie's empowerment. The colour purple here has connotations of royalty and freedom which could suggest why Celie picked these colours to wear and decorate with, since the colour empowers her. Therefore, Walker shows the themes of oppression and empowerment through the character development of Celie, her writing, the use of the epistolary form, friendships and the symbolism of the colour purple effectively .

Word Count: 3114

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