

Ansley Gasque-Carter

Dr. Hirsch

Eng 203 A61

1 April 2009

Research Paper Final Draft

### Character Development and Subjectivity in *The Color Purple*

Many people experience hardships through life and learn to live despite the chaos that ensues. This can be seen as adaptation and character development. The novel *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker is about the development of the main character named Celie through the abuse of her childhood and the abuse that continues into her marriage. As a child, Celie's father, who she later comes to find out is her step father, rapes and beats her countless times. Celie has two children by her father, Alphonso, who gets rid of the children. A man named Mr. \_\_\_ emerges and has a crush on Celie's little sister, Nettie, and asks for her hand in marriage. Alphonso also wants Nettie, so he pushes for a marriage between Celie and Mr. \_\_\_ instead. Mr. \_\_\_ agrees to the arrangement after much thought and consideration. Celie is then married into a miserable situation in which the children from Mr. \_\_\_'s previous marriage are mean and disrespectful to her; and Mr. \_\_\_ beats her and has his way with her. Nettie runs away from her home with Alphonso and goes to live with Celie and Mr. \_\_\_ for a while and then leaves their house and is not seen or heard from for decades even though she had promised to write. When Celie's step-children grow up and get married, Celie makes friends with her new daughter-in-law Sofia, who is Harpo's wife. Then, when Mr. \_\_\_'s long-time mistress Shug Avery moves into the house because of her illness, Celie also makes friends with her and they become lovers. With the friendship of Sofia and Shug, Celie not only learns that she needs to stand up for herself and

have more confidence, but that she is also entitled to express herself and have a life full of joys. After becoming friends with Shug Avery, Celie finds out that her sister has been writing her letters for years and that Mr. \_\_\_ has been hiding them. Through the letters Celie learns that Nettie was taken in by a missionary couple named Samuel and Corrine, and that she is now living in Africa with them. But what is even more amazing is that the couple she is living with adopted Celie's missing children. Nettie and her new family live in Africa for a number of years and help a village by teaching the children and adults and fight to keep a road from being built through the village. Corrine dies and Samuel and Nettie get married. The story continues as Celie becomes more comfortable and confident in herself and her abilities. Celie is old and at peace with everyone when her sister arrives home with her new husband and Celie's children (Walker). *The Color Purple* is a post modern novel in which the story develops by showing the subjective inner-workings of the main character, revealing how Celie endures chaos and abuse in her early life, and eventually healing and developing a unique life perspective due to her relationships with female friends.

Subjectivity is an innovation in the post modern era. Emphasis is taken off of objectivity and put on subjectivity, as can be seen in *The Color Purple*. Celie begins telling her story by writing letters to God. After living through many abuses, Celie begins to trust God less and less until she eventually stops writing letters to God and starts writing letters to her sister instead. Celie tells her sister: "I don't write to God no more. I write to you. What happen to God? ast Shug. Who that? I say" (Walker 192). Celie uses subjective behavior by recording her thoughts as letters to tell the story of her life. Throughout the novel, Celie continues to write letters to someone. She does not change the way she is telling her story; she continues to record her life for someone. This is the definition of subjectivity. Writing letters is subjective because it is

biased in that the story is told from one point of view (Hirsch and Carr “More on Postmodernism”). Celie’s letters are an example of “interlocutory, or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the “other(s),” but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity” (Henderson 3). While Celie is writing letters to God, she is also portraying her relationship with others through these letters. The letters are her internal dialogue put onto paper. Subjectivity is also described as the stream of consciousness (Hirsch & Carr “More on Postmodernism”). Celie shows stream of consciousness because her thoughts are uninterrupted. They flow. Hilde Hein says that “consciousness becomes a kind of ‘inner speech’ reflecting the ‘outer word’ in a process that links the psyche, language, and social interaction” (121). This can better be explained by Lev Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory of private speech. This theory says that children talk to themselves out loud to guide them through activities. As they get older, their speech becomes more silent and internal (Berk 234). Celie shows the world her private speech, and therefore her stream of consciousness, by writing these letters to God. The audience also learns about the abuse that Celie endures throughout her life and how she handles it.

As a subjective work, Celie tells how she lives with chaos throughout her life in the form of abuse. By living with abuse and organizing her life around it, Celie epitomizes postmodern concepts by living in the chaos that she calls life (Hirsch and Carr “Postmodernism”). *The Color Purple* opens with Celie’s step-father telling her: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (Walker 1). Celie takes Alphonso’s advice because her mother was already dying and Celie did not want to speed up the process. Thus, Celie endures the sexual abuse and does not tell anyone about it until later in her life. Christine Froula says that this is common in abuse. The victim is “prohibited by her father from speaking about the abuse, [...] [has] desire

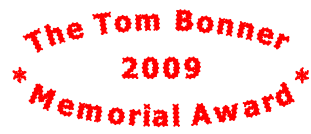
to end the abuse and fear that if she speaks she will destroy the family structure that is her only security” (622-23). Celie does not want to kill her mother, so she keeps quiet and only writes letters to God about the abuse. Not only does Celie live with different forms of abuse, but she does her best to protect her sister from also experiencing it. Celie says: “I ast [Alphonso] to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick. But he just ast me what I’m talking bout. I tell him I can fix myself up for him. I duck into my room and come out wearing horsehair, feathers, and a pair of our new mammy high heel shoes. He beat me for dressing trampy but he do it to me anyway” (Walker 7). Celie shows that while she understands and accepts the abuse in her life, she does not want her sister to have the same kind of life. She protects Nettie as best as she can from the physical and sexual abuses that she suffers. Elizabeth Campbell states that in relation to postmodern works, the “...women have been doubly oppressed, from outside by a chauvinistic imperialism and from within by a patriarchy which itself has felt oppressed by outside forces” (332). She is saying that Celie is abused by the men in her life because they in a sense are being abused. Celie lives her life in a time where people are still seeing black and white. There is not yet total acceptance of different races. Because the men that Celie has lived with have suffered through racial tensions and feel that they have no control in their lives, they feel the need to take control of someone and Celie is the common target. Because she was abused as a child Celie shows that she accepts the abuse, she does not like it, but she does not fight back and comes to believe that she will live her life out as a victim. Celie is beaten down in this aspect until she meets Sofia and Shug Avery.

After all the abuse in her life, it is no wonder that Celie becomes angry and bitter, but through the support of female friends Celie develops a new and unique perspective on life. As a reaction to the sexual and physical abuse in her life, Celie does not like men in any sense of the

term. When talking to Shug, Celie says that she does not like having sex with Mr. \_\_. She goes further into detail with Shug and says: “Most times I pretend I ain’t there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep. She start to laugh. Do his business, she say. Why, Miss Celie. You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you. That what it feel like, I say” (Walker 77). Later, Celie tells Shug about the sexual abuse she endured as a child and her story can be taken as an answer as to why she does not like men. After her recounts, Celie and Shug have sex (Walker 111-13). This is obvious closure for Celie. She has never felt loved before and the affection that Shug shows her creates the idea that she prefers women. She has never been physically or sexually abused by a woman, so she feels safe and loved by them. Rosemary Hennessy says that “critiques of sexuality are postmodern to the extent that they participate in postmodernity’s historical and critical remapping of social relations, but at the same time they maintain that sexuality is a material practice that shapes and is shaped by social totalities like capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism” (33). This supports Celie’s reaction to her childhood abuse as being a postmodern decision because she is trying to make sense of a chaotic and disorganized world in a way that makes sense to her (Hirsch and Carr “Postmodernism”). Celie looks back on all the hardships of her life and finally says “What God do for me? [...] he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won’t ever see again. Anyhow [...] the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (Walker 192). Celie is angry that God has given her no breaks in life. She realizes that all of her hardships have been at the hands of men and the God that she prays to is portrayed as a man. Realizing a distinct correlation with these two facts, Celie becomes mistrustful of God and no longer cares to pray to him or worship him. Just like all the mortal men in her life, God has

betrayed and abused her. Shug Avery sets Celie straight about her ideas on God and Sofia has been telling her to stand up for herself almost since they met (Walker 195, 42). Shanyn Fiske says that because these women share their experiences with each other, it “binds them in a healing bond of friendship as Celie tentatively emerges from her habitual numbness” (par 4). Through the support of both Shug and Sofia, Celie comes to peace with mortal men as is shown when she sits on the porch with her husband and they talk about a number of different things (Walker 272). When Celie is old she begins writing to God again and shows that she has made peace with him when she says: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (Walker 285). Celie has listened to Shug’s advice about God and has experienced Him. She takes Shug’s idea of God not being man, but being everything, and this helps her to get over her mistrust of men and come to peace with her life. Faith in humanity and in one’s self is what ultimately leads Celie to happiness, and we should all learn from this.

Walker’s *The Color Purple* portrays real-life situations through a fictional cast. It is a book about friendship and finding who you really are even through the hardships one might experience in life. These life lessons come from reading about Celie’s experiences and how she puts order to her life even through all the physical and emotional damage that she has endured. *The Color Purple* is a postmodern novel in which the story develops by showing the subjective inner-workings of the main character, revealing how Celie endures chaos and abuse in her early life, and eventually healing and developing a unique life perspective due to her relationships with female friends. Celie shows the subjectivity of the postmodern era by writing letters to God and telling her life story through these letters. Celie shares stories of her physical and sexual abuse first by her step-father and then by her husband. Even though Celie endures abuse, she is able to organize her life around this chaos. Celie shares her life story with her female friends and they



inspire her and give her advice to change her life so that she can better enjoy it. Celie takes this advice and comes to peace with her life near the end of it. This is an inspirational novel that not only uses many aspects that exemplify the postmodern period in literature, but also inspire others to find truth and happiness in one's life.

Working Bibliography

Badikian-Gartler, Beatriz. "I Hear You Sister: Women of Color Speak (to Each Other)."

*International Fiction Review* 33.1 & 2 (2006): n. pag. Web. 1 Apr 2009.

Berk, Laura E. *Development through the Lifespan*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Illinois State University, 2007. Print.

Berlant, Lauren. "Race, Gender, and Nation in *The Color Purple*." *Critical Inquiry* 14.4 (1988): 831-859. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 Apr 2009.

Bobo, Jacqueline. "Sifting through the Controversy: Reading *The Color Purple*." *Callaloo* 39 (1989): 332-334. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 Apr 2009.

Campbell, Elizabeth. "Re-Visions, Re-Flections, Re-Creations: Epistolarity in Novels by Contemporary Women." *Twentieth Century Literature* 41.3 (1995): 332-348. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Apr 2009.

Cheung, King-Kok. "'Don't Tell:': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*." *PMLA* 103.2 (Mar 1988): 162-174. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 Apr 2009.

Clein, Anne C. "Presence with a Difference: Buddhists and Feminists on Subjectivity." *Hypatia* 9.4 (1994): 112-30. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Apr 2009.

Collins, Patricia Hill. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems* 33.6. (1986): S14-S32. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Apr 2009.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43.6. (1991): 1241-1299. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Apr 2009.



- Diawara, Manthia, ed. *Black American Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Fiske, Shany. "Piecing the Patchwork Self: A Reading of Walker's *The Color Purple*." *The Explicator* 66.3 (2008): 150. *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Gale. Web. 13 Apr 2009.
- Froula, Christine. "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History." *Signs* 11.4 (1986): 621-644. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 Apr 2009.
- Harris, Trudier. "On *The Color Purple*, Stereotypes, and Silence." *Black American Literature Forum* 8.4 (1984): 155-61. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 Apr 2009.
- Hein, Hilde, and Carolyn Korsmeyer, eds. *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1993. 121. Web. 1 April 2009.
- Henderson, Mae. "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics and Dialectics and The Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition." *The Scholar & Feminist XXX: Past Controversies, Present Challenges, Future Feminisms* 3.3 & 4.1: 33. *S&F Online*. Barnard Center for Research on Women, Barnard College. N.d. Web. 18 April 2009.
- Hennessy, Rosemary. "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture." *Cultural Critique* 29 (1994-1995): 31-76. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Apr 2009.
- Hirsch, Diane and Diane Carr. "More on Postmodernism." Midlands Technical College. West Columbia. N.d. 2009. Lecture.
- . "Postmodernism." Midlands Technical College. West Columbia. N.d. 2009. Lecture.
- Kadar, Marlene. *Essays on Life Writing*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992. Print.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc, 1982. Print.

Works Cited

- Berk, Laura E. *Development through the Lifespan*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Illinois State University, 2007. Print.
- Campbell, Elizabeth. "Re-Visions, Re-Flections, Re-Creations: Epistolarity in Novels by Contemporary Women." *Twentieth Century Literature* 41.3 (1995): 332-348. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Apr 2009.
- Fiske, Shanyun. "Piecing the Patchwork Self: A Reading of Walker's *The Color Purple*." *The Explicator* 66.3 (2008): 150. *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Gale. Web. 13 Apr 2009.
- Froula, Christine. "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History." *Signs* 11.4 (1986): 621-644. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 Apr 2009.
- Hein, Hilde, and Carolyn Korsmeyer, eds. *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1993. 121. Web. 1 April 2009.
- Henderson, Mae. "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics and Dialectics and The Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition." *The Scholar & Feminist XXX: Past Controversies, Present Challenges, Future Feminisms* 3.3 & 4.1: 33. *S&F Online*. Barnard Center for Research on Women, Barnard College. N.d. Web. 18 April 2009.
- Hennessy, Rosemary. "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture." *Cultural Critique* 29 (1994-1995): 31-76. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Apr 2009.
- Hirsch, Diane and Diane Carr. "More on Postmodernism." Midlands Technical College. West Columbia. N.d. 2009. Lecture.
- . "Postmodernism." Midlands Technical College. West Columbia. N.d. 2009. Lecture.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc, 1982. Print.