The Color Purple

from Brewer's Dictionary of Modern Phrase and Fable

A novel (1982), written in the form of letters, by the US writer Alice Walker (b.1944), which won the Pulitzer prize for fiction. A young black woman, Celie, having been raped as a child by her father and borne him two children, who are then taken away from her, is married off to a violent bully. She is helped by her husband's mistress, a blues singer, to appreciate herself, the pleasures of sexual love and the role of God in the proliferation of love and beauty. His presence is especially evident in the color purple. A film version (1985) was directed by Steven Spielberg, with Whoopi Goldberg as Celie.

Summary Article: Color Purple, The
from The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature

Published in 1982, presented with the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award in 1983, and adapted into a major Hollywood film directed by Steven Spielberg in 1985, The Color Purple is Alice Walker’s third and most controversial novel. In its creative engagement with the epistolary form, the book shows how a poor, uneducated African American woman endures pain and hardship to become, through the nurturing of communal black womanhood, a fully constituted subject of strength, self-confidence, and desire.

The narrative begins with fourteen-year-old Celie’s revelation to God that she is physically and sexually abused by a man, Alphonso, who she believes to be her natural father. He later gives away the two children she has by him. When Celie is married off to Mr.____, she worries that her younger sister, Nettie, will have to endure similar abuse from their Pa. Nettie comes to live with Celie and Mr.____, but his intense jealousy over their tight-knit relationship forces Nettie to leave the house and subsequently move to Africa. Incredibly, the missionaries in whose custody Nettie is placed happen to adopt Celie’s two children.

Mr.____ only perpetuates the cycle of violence that typified Celie’s life with Alphonso, (who later turns out to be her stepfather). Mr.____ also withholds psychic and affective comfort from Celie by hiding the numerous letters Nettie mails to her from Africa. The downtrodden Celie internalizes feelings of abjection and worthlessness to the point where she convinces her stepson, Harpo, to beat his own wife, the defiant and physically imposing Sofia Butler, into submission, which he does not succeed in doing.

The turning point in the narrative comes with the arrival of Shug Avery, also known as “The Queen Honeybee,” a spirited, sexy, and flamboyant blues singer who lives by her own rules and refuses to obey the dictates of patriarchal authority; the latter, as embodied by Mr.____, is deflated by his submission to her demands. Though an occasional lover to Mr.____, it is Celie with whom Shug eventually develops a deep and meaningful bond. In their emotional exchanges and sexual encounters, Shug enables Celie to recognize her own beauty and self-sufficiency and thus to leave Albert. The couple settles in Memphis, where Celie makes a living by tailoring personalized, seemingly ungendered, pants for those she loves. Imbued with self-determination, Celie later visits a distraught Mr.____, whose first name is revealed to be Albert, upon her stepfather’s death. A momentous reunion occurs when Nettie and the children return from Africa; a corresponding reconciliation has Celie and Albert agreeing to be friends.

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Walker’s novel has elicited vituperative reactions in both academic venues and the popular media. The sections on Africa have been deemed culturally biased; the frank depiction of lesbian sexuality has been summarily censored on moral grounds; and the putatively “harsh” treatment of black men, especially in the film, has been construed as an indication of Walker’s selling out to the white establishment. That the book sparked such fiery, if not sometimes misguided, debate underscores the invaluable discursive effect it has had on black women’s writing, African American literature, popular culture, and race relations in the United States. (See also African American Novel, African American Lesbian Literature)

Further Reading


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