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Critical Analysis

Literary Interpretation

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Feminist Theory Lens

The Color Purple is a well-known historical fiction piece following a Southern black woman in America in the early 1900s. Celie, the main character, is raised in an environment where her father constantly tells her that she is ugly, and she is repeatedly raped by him. He got her pregnant two times, and after Celie gave birth to both of the babies, one boy, and one girl, he immediately took them away against her will. On the other hand, Celie's younger sister, Nettie, was always told how beautiful she was and had an older man whose wife had passed away trying to marry her. Her father wouldn't let Mister marry Nettie, but he offered him, Celie, prefacing that she was ugly, but she could watch after his children. Celie, reluctant to leave Nettie and not even wanting to marry Mister, heads out for her new life. She fears that her father will do the same things to Nettie that he has done to her because throughout the story and the film, we see that Celie takes on the responsibility of watching after Nettie. Mister's children immediately abused Celie, throwing a brick at her head as soon as she walked into the front yard. This was a small taste of what was to come for Celie. Mister abused Celie any chance he got, and she was constantly doing all of the housework and looking after the kids. He had sex with her against her will, but from a young age, she was taught that that's just how it was, so she didn't see anything

wrong with it. Shortly after she moved in with Mister, her sister Nettie showed up, saying that their father kept trying to do things with her that she wasn't comfortable with, so she ran away. Celie was excited to see her sister again but was worried about what Mister might do to her. Knowing that it wouldn't last, Nettie taught Celi how to read and write so that they could write each other letters from wherever they were and always stay in touch.

After Mister tried to seduce Nettie, she hit him, which angered Mister, and he kicked her out of the house. Nettie wrote to Celie all the time, but Mister hid the letters, so Celie never got the chance to read them. Nettie ends up in Africa with the children that Celie gave birth to years ago, where she uncovers that their father wasn't actually their birth father. Celie makes friends with a few powerful women who show her how to stand up for herself and help her come into her own. One of those friends was Mister's mistress, Shug, who had the most significant impact on Celie. The story ends with Mister paying for Nettie and her family to come back to America to live with Celie in the house that she acquired after her father's death. The theoretical lens that I have chosen to look at within this piece is the feminist theory; Alice Walker conveys her message by using many literary elements such as setting, narrator and point of view, and characterization.

The setting of *The Color Purple* plays a big role in conveying the message to the audience. The story is set in Georgia in the early 1900s. This was right around the time of the Women's Suffrage Movement. Women did not have many rights and were taught from a young age that their role was to bear and raise the children while their husbands basically did whatever they wanted. The women had to cook, clean, and please their husbands even if they did not want to. Throughout *The Color Purple*, in both the film and the text, we see that Celie fell victim to her time period. She was raped and impregnated by her father, who made her swear not to tell

anybody, and it continued with her new husband after she was arranged to marry Mister against her will. She wasn't even allowed to attend school and had to learn from her younger sister Nettie. "My little sister Nettie is got a boyfriend in the same shape almost as Pa. ...I tell Nettie to keep at her books" (Walker 11). Nettie is younger than Celie, but she already has men looking to marry her so that she can take care of their children. It was not uncommon for women at a young age to stop attending school because their families gave them away to marry a man much older than them. Even their father married a girl Celie's age after their mother passed away. Women did not have the freedom to make their own choices during this time period, and the few that did were viewed by society as outcasts and most likely shunned by their families.

The narrator and point of view may be the most important literary element that Alice Walker uses in *The Color Purple*. In the book, we see Celie praying to God and telling him all that she goes through. However, in the film, I think it strikes the audience more because we see just how vulnerable she is. We, as the audience, would not be privy to this knowledge without the book being written from Celie and occasionally Nettie's point of view. "Dear God I seen my baby girl. I know it was her. She looked just like me and my daddy" (Spielberg 1985). Her daughter was ripped away from her seconds after birth by her father and given to a family that could not have their own children. There are many times throughout *The Color Purple* where we get to see inside Celie's head, which is significant because, at a young age, her father told her not to tell anyone anything except for God. Celie felt like God was the only person she could trust and the only person that would listen to her, so she kept everything inside. Most things she didn't even tell her sister Nettie who she was very close to. I think during this time period, it was very common for young girls to be told to keep quiet and just deal with everything that happened to

them on their own, so hearing Celie's prayers and confessions to God gives us a major insight into how she feels about everything that has occurred.

Characterization plays another significant role in conveying Alice Walker's message. Celie was a timid girl who didn't know how a man should treat a woman because she had always only been treated poorly by them. She thought that was just how life was supposed to be until she met women who showed her otherwise. She meets Shug later on in the story, who just so happens to be Mister's mistress, and they become really close. Shug is the foil character that shows Celie that she is important. "She say this song I'm bout to sing is call Miss Celie's song" (Walker 70). Celie has been treated poorly by every man she has ever met, and Shug makes her feel loved and teaches her how to love herself. Shug takes Celie under her wing and helps her gain a sense of identity and independence. Shug also tells Celie that she won't leave until she knows that Mister Albert won't beat her. Celie ends up moving to Tennessee with Shug, where she really comes into her own. She finds things that she enjoys doing and even talks to her sister Nettie again after years of Mister Albert throwing away her letters. Shug doing all of these things for Celie also helps her relationship with Mister Albert, and they work together to get Nettie and Celie's children back to America for Celie.

Looking at *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker through the Feminist Theory lens, we see how she conveys her messages through the use of many literary elements like setting, narrator and point of view, and characterization.

Work Cited

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