

Together Our Salvation

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One of the principal themes of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is that individuals can ultimately triumph over difficult circumstances. In the novel, "difficult circumstances" run the gambit from racism, sexism, rape and quasi-slavery to psychological and emotional conflicts revolving around self-esteem and personal identity. What is the crucial link between forming alliances with others and the rich, exhilarating sense of liberation that pervades the book's final pages?

After the man she thinks is her father "sells" her to Mr. -----, Celie is relegated to the status of domestic servant and forced to comply with her new husband's every whim. She does all the work, raises his children, and even endures forced sexual intercourse. Separated from her sister Nettie, Celie is utterly alone in the world, beaten down and without hope. It is the strong-willed Sofia, the wife of Mr. -----'s son Harpo, who gives Celie her first lesson in self-respect. After assuring the younger woman that although she loves Harpo, "I'll kill him before I let him beat me," Sofia continues her exchange with an initially listless Celie:

You remind me of my mama. She under my daddy thumb. Naw, she under my daddy foot.
Anything he say, goes. She never stand up for herself...

Well, sometime Mr.----- git on me pretty hard, I say. But he my husband. I shrug my
shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last always.

You ought to bash Mr. ----- head open, she say. Think about heaven later.

Not much funny to me. That funny. I laugh. She laugh. Then us both laugh so hard us flop
down on the step.

Let's make quilt pieces out of these messed up curtains, she say. And I run git my pattern
book.

I sleeps like a baby now. (43-44)

From this point on, Celie realizes, however dimly, that she can follow Sofia's example and learn to fight like her sister-in-law. This maturation process occurs slowly as *The Color Purple* unfolds, and the bond of mutual support and cooperation between Celie and Sofia (aptly symbolized by the quilt they begin to sew together) is the critical first step toward Celie's eventual emancipation.

Building on the success of her relationship with Sofia, Celie finds the first real love of her life, Shug Avery. Shug -- Albert's erstwhile girlfriend -- embodies the concept of reciprocal love, something Celie is only beginning to understand. As critic Bonnie TuSmith notes, she is the "existential outsider who has rejected destructive social norms, (acting) as a catalyst for change in Celie's world. Rather than expound some self-righteous principle, Shug lives her philosophy and shows by example." Shug draws Celie out by asking sympathetic questions about Celie's marriage to Mr. ----- . When Celie opens up enough to relate how she was raped by her stepfather, concluding plaintively, "nobody ever love me," Shug responds, "I love you, Miss Celie." An instant later, she impulsively kisses Celie. The sexual relationship that ensues between the two women marks Celie's introduction to authentic erotic love; with Shug, she learns to express love by giving and receiving physical pleasure and emotional nurturance. In allowing herself to be touched (in every sense of the word) by Shug, Celie learns what it is to be *alive*, and to want more from life than simple survival.

When Celie realizes the truth about her family history ("a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again"), and that she has a right to a fuller, more rewarding life, she becomes deeply embittered. She denounces the God she'd previously believed in wholeheartedly, and even questions "His" existence. Yet once again, because of the strong bond she has formed with another woman, Celie is able to envision a more enlightened, inclusive concept of God, and one that adds immeasurably to her rapidly growing store of wisdom. "God," Shug reveals to Celie, "ain't a he or a she but a It. God is everything. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. (God is) that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all." Celie's

incredulity melts as she muses, "now that my eyes opening, I feel like a fool. Next to any little scrub of a bush in my yard, Mr. ----- 's evil sort of shrink."

Through her relationship with Shug, Celie becomes strong enough to stand up to Mr. ----- with a tongue-lashing scarcely imaginable in the books first section. In one fell swoop, Celie informs Albert that she is leaving him to live with Shug and Squeak in Memphis, that she is prepared to defend herself should he attempt to stop her, and that, basically, she refuses to put up with any more of his shit. Albert, needless to say, is completely stunned. "You bitch," he sputters, "what will people say, you running off to Memphis like you don't have a house to look after?" Grady, Shug's new love interest, attempts to elucidate Albert's complaint and unwittingly highlights the masculine fear of impotence and abandonment that compels Albert and Harpo to control the women in their lives. "A woman can't get a man if peoples talk," states Grady, and although his words are couched in terms of societal injunctions against *women* who are whispered about, clearly it is male insecurity regarding social acceptance and what constitutes masculinity that is at stake.

What is most striking about this pivotal scene, however, is the strength and almost maternal wisdom demonstrated by Celie, Shug, Squeak and Sofia as they confront Harpo and Mr. ----- . Rather than light into Grady with indignation, the women collapse in laughter at the little-boy anxiety floating just beneath the surface of his remark: "Shug look at me and us giggle. Then us laugh sure nuff. Then Squeak start to laugh. Then Sofia. All us laugh and laugh. Shug say, Ain't they something? Us say um *hum*, and slap the table, wipe the water from our eyes." Even more unusual is the fact that Sofia volunteers to care for Suzie Q., *the daughter of her husband's girlfriend* (!) when Squeak decides to accompany Shug and Celie to Memphis. Because of the mutual support they have cultivated between themselves, the women are able to practice a "selfless generosity drawn from the black helping tradition... (deconstructing) stereotypes of catty women who fight over men (and creating) a radical vision of community." (TuSmith 83)

One of the elements in *The Color Purple* that makes it such a superior piece of literature is the extraordinary transformation that takes place in the relationship between Albert and Celie.

Instead of finishing her story with a liberated Celie leaving her oppressor in the proverbial dust (where, predictably, he will reap his just karmic desserts and self-destruct), Walker refuses to indulge the satisfaction of an easy ending. Though Walker could continue to demonize Albert, she allows him to grow instead, thereby setting the stage for a far more gratifying and nuanced conclusion.

After Celie leaves and Shug takes up with Grady, Albert falls apart, haunted by loneliness, humiliation and the first stirring of a guilty conscience. Forced to face himself honestly, he comes close to giving up on life. Yet the experience changes him profoundly, and by the time Celie returns from Memphis, he is a different man. Surprisingly, the two are able to find common ground in their love for Shug and the pain they share over losing out to Grady in winning her affections. Gradually, through their talks together, a much less guarded and more authentic Albert emerges, one who can admit he enjoyed sewing with his mama when he was a child ("everybody laughed at me, but you know, I liked it").

Although he never apologizes to Celie outright for his previous behavior toward her, it's obvious Albert is sorry for it. He is sympathetic, thoughtful and non-judgmental when addressing the subject of love in general, and Celie's love for Shug in particular ("When it comes to what folks do together with they bodies, he say, anybody's guess is as good as mine. But when you talk bout love I don't have to guess. I have love and I have been love. And I thank God he let me gain understanding enough to know love can't be halted just cause some peoples moan and groan"). By novel's end Celie and Albert have become true friends, able to show affection, respect and support for one another as they sit pleasantly together, "sewing, and talking, and smoking our pipes."

The last chapters of *The Color Purple* present both an entirely different portrait of the relationships between its central characters and the formation of an extended kin network that is, as TuSmith writes, "a vision of a new society." Harpo is no longer interested in controlling Sofia, Albert and Celie relate in a completely new manner, Shug returns home, and, at long last, Nettie (with husband Samuel and her sister's children, all grown and handsome, in tow) is reunited with Celie.

As the two sisters face each other, the sparse beauty of the final scene reflects the deep emotional attachments that Celie has formed, as well as the immense personal growth she's undergone:

I'm so scared I don't know what to do. Try to git up, almost fall. Shug reach down and give me a helping hand. Albert press me on the arm...

This my husband Samual, Nettie say, pointing up. These our children Olivia and Adam and this Adam's wife, Tashi, she say. I point up at my peoples. This Shug and Albert, I say...

I feel a little peculiar round the children. For one thing, they grown. And I see they think me and Nettie and Shug and Albert and Samual and Harpo and Sofia and Jack and Odessa real old and don't know what going on. But I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt. (293-295)

Because the characters in *The Color Purple* turn to one another for support, they are able to overcome the many obstacles to happiness that confront them. Whatever they don't have -- social status, education, proper upbringing, money -- is countered by the weight of the only thing they *do* have -- each other. It is the heartfelt love and respect that develops between Celie, Shug, and Albert (as well as Sofia, Harpo and the rest) that enables them to transcend their wretchedness and achieve the state of liberation they ultimately enjoy. What makes their deliverance so affecting is that even if readers know nothing at all about being poor, black and abused, it's a fair bet they understand what it means to be in pain and without hope. When the main characters blossom into the fully realized people they become by the end of the book, it's a lesson for the rest of us. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is a bittersweet reminder that whatever our circumstances, or -- as Albert demonstrates -- however late we may come to it, redemption is always possible.