
Historical Relevance of The Color Purple

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* holds immense historical and societal relevance among a thirty year spectrum of time periods and movements, including the Harlem Renaissance, the gradual development of both civil and women's rights, the destruction of rich African civilizations by European companies, and the onset of World War II. Over the course of a person's lifetime, prominent social issues and their consequential historical significance go through an evolution of sorts, as new problems emerge with each new age. The life of Miss Celie, a poor, southern, black woman of the early to mid 1900s evolves with the issues of historical significance within her lifetime. Walker uses Celie as an emblem of what it meant to grow and develop in the United States during a time period in which slavery was a recently abolished practice. Celie represents, in a sense, an entire population of mistreated black women as they began to fight for their rights, find their pride and worth, and consequently refuse to stand for the abuse they had endured for so long. In stark contrast, Walker also uses Nettie's journey to display the horrifying destruction of African culture by white Europeans in pursuit of power and wealth. In even further analysis and development of historical significance, Walker uses Shug Avery to demonstrate the relevance of Black culture and the Harlem Renaissance. Finally- and perhaps most importantly- Walker uses the historical context of her novel as a foundation on which to analyze the presence of God, and what it truly means to understand the importance of the simple beauty of finding your purpose in such an omnipresent world of significance indifferent to time or place. She, in fact, uses the setting of oppression and abuse to demonstrate how irrelevant setting is to finding one's life purpose. *The Color Purple* is so rich with historical context and related analysis of said context, it would be impossible to examine the novel without noticing the importance of historical setting and Walker's masterful manipulation of it.

In the early 1900s, poor southern communities of African Americans in which abuse was tolerated and considered normal were common. Because African Americans had just recently gained their basic human right to freedom, there was also a startling lack of education among black Americans. Both of these issues influenced the beginning of Celie's life in a drastic way. Her stepfather molested her and harshly got rid of the resultant children, scolding her to "not never tell nobody but God," (Walker, 3). He also frequently abused her before practically selling her to Mister, an abusive black man described in the musical as someone who "holds his whip as if he got a horse waitin'," to whom she became a wife (Russell, 27). Mister continued the abuse of Celie's childhood, perpetuated the accepted rape of Celie, and further threatened her safety at all times. In this historical culture, "a grown child [was] a dangerous thing," (Walker, 59). Celie, like so many others, was, in her nature as a grown young woman, an innocent and undeserving target for culturally appropriate abuse and destructive behavior; she was an object to be "sold" (Walker, 26). As Celie's life progresses, she finally learns to stand up to her domestic oppressors and demand that she be treated as more than a human. She forces Mister to acknowledge that she is a person worthy of dignity in stating, subtly but powerfully, "I'm here," (Walker, 196). Celie evolved into a strong woman as the women of the United States simultaneously evolved into a united front demanding equality. This historical moment of Women's Suffrage is perfectly aligned with Celie's story, demonstrating the importance of monumental societal and political events in the life of an individual. In the same effect, the isolation of the African American community from the rest of the United States due to lack of tolerance and education correlates with Celie's isolation from a life of freedom and happiness.

As she gained her freedom and her voice, the United States made progress in the battle for civil rights and gaining freedom and a voice for the black community (Alice, 1).

Celie's sister Nettie also follows an evolution of historical significance outside of the United States as her own life progresses. Nettie escapes the jaws of oppression and abuse when she is allowed to go to school on her own merit and determination. Nettie "[wants] to know how the world goes," so she uses her perseverance to find a home with a preacher's family (Russell, 7). She and the family travel as missionaries to a western African village to spend time with a tribe known as the Olinka. The Olinka are a blossoming African tribe rich with tradition and culture, and Nettie's life changes drastically as she learns of her heritage. As her life evolves in this homeland, she notes that "it's like black seeing black for the first time... so beautifully stitched in time," (Russell, 76). This village, so representative of Nettie's livelihood and growth as an African American, is destroyed by a European rubber company in the search for greed and wealth. These white Europeans destroyed this village with complete disregard for the culture and well-being of those who live within it, just as white Americans had done to black cultures in the United States. Nettie watches as the white men demolish the "Olinka's God," by destroying the sacred roof-leaves on the tops of their village homes, and a new era began within her as this era of destruction began in Africa (Novel, 5). As Nettie and the family with which she was traveling began the voyage home after a long journey as refugees with the Olinka, their ship is struck down by German missiles (Novel, 5). The onset of World War II becomes a part of the narrative of Nettie and Celie's lives as the world changes around them.

When Shug Avery, a famous singer from Memphis during the Harlem Renaissance, enters Celie's life, the narrative and the significance of its historical setting takes on a whole new meaning. *The Color Purple* is told entirely by Celie's personal letters to both her sister and to God, as the importance of religion and a relationship with her God is perhaps one of the most significant aspects of Celie's life. At a time in which Celie's relationship with God is nearly disrupted from her anger over the circumstances with which she has been faced, Shug provides new light in a period of darkness. Shug tells Celie, "God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it... God ain't a he or a she, but a It... Don't look like nothing. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it," (Walker, 148). Shug eliminates the very relevance of time or place in stating that God is simply everything; It is the very existence of purpose and being; It is recognizing that no matter what time or place, everything is meant to be here. Walker's use of historical context and the significance of setting is brought full circle in her final analysis that what matters, regardless of context or setting, is acknowledging the beauty and purpose of everything.

Works Cited

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