Color Purple Essay, Research Paper

Alice Walker’s novel, The Color Purple, follows Celie down the winding road of her life. As a poor black girl living in the South, Celie endures and overcomes many hardships. As the novel opens, the readers learn that she has been raped repeatedly by her father, then later is forced into a loveless marriage with a man who treats her like a slave. Celie does not stand up for herself, and therefore gets taken advantage of in many ways, but through the friendships that she takes part in, she eventually learns to stand up for herself. “Celie is a terrorized, passive girl with little belief in herself who undergoes a major transformation in attitude and becomes a …courageous and willful woman” (Taylor, Masterpieces 107). Though the characters of Nettie and Sofia play an important role in the development of Celie’s life, it is Shug who plays the most important role by teaching and encouraging her to find pride, self-esteem, strength, and love.

Sofia is a fighter and indirectly teaches Celie to stand up for herself. In the South, during the 1930’s, blacks worked for whites, and black women were expected to “mind” their husbands. Sofia does not fit this norm, in fact, she defies it. Sofia is married to Celie’s step-son, Harpo, yet refuses to be pushed around by him. She has had to fight “all [her] life” (Walker 42), for as a black women, it is her only defense against black men and a white society. Sofia tries to solve all of her problems by means of physical violence. While this may not be the best way to deal with her hardships, it is good for Celie to see that it is possible for a black women to stand up for herself and to fight for her rights. When Harpo tries to control Sofia, she fights back, beating him, and exposing her will to fight for what she believes in. Celie’s traditional values come out when she gives Harpo the suggestion to beat Sofia to get her to listen to him. When Sofia hears about this, she immediately confronts Celie about it. Sofia is honest and goes after what she knows is right. When confronted on the street by the white mayor’s wife and asked to be her maid, Sofia is insulted. She curses and throws punches at the mayor himself. Even after she is beaten by the police and taken to jail, Sofia does not back down. Sofia’s visible courage to fight against unknown odds is an inspiration for Celie who mirrors this later in life. Sofia shows Celie how to stand up to men and to life’s injustices, and most importantly teaches Celie to fight.

Nettie’s courage, self-esteem, and ability to stand up for her self, are a positive influence on Celie. Nettie, Celie’s younger sister, plays a major part in her transformation. She is a well educated, mannered girl with the will to fight for her herself. Nettie displays a certain amount of strength when dealing with men, despite the racist, sexist world she lives in. She fought off Fonso’s sexual advances and escaped him, then later fought off Mr.\_\_\_\_\_’s advances and escaped him. She disobeys Mr.\_\_\_\_\_’s order to stop writing Celie, ignoring his threat, even encouraging Celie to fight back. Nettie’s will to fight for what she believes in, eventually makes an impression on Celie. Slowly, guided by Nettie’s invisible hand, Celie is transformed from a meek, accepting slave, to a women filled with fury and the will to fight. When Celie did not receive any letters from Nettie, she feared that Nettie was dead. Then, after finding out that Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ had been withholding Nettie’s letters all along, she was outraged. That rage enabled her to “break out of a lifetime of resigned suffering” (Taylor, Masterplots 313) and to move on with her life. Celie’s continuous love for Nettie has been a sustaining source of strength for her. Now that she knows Nettie is alive, Celie’s confidence level soars, giving her the power to do anything, even stand up to the men who have forced her into submission for so long. Even in the first letter Nettie stressed the importance of Celie’s need to fight: “You’ve got to fight to get away from Albert [Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ ]. He ain’t no good” (Walker 131). It was Nettie’s encouraging words that lead Celie to realize the true anger she had trapped inside of her.

Nettie displays courage and knowledge of her self-worth. After being separated from Celie, Nettie travels to Africa with a black missionary couple and their two adopted children. She defies all odds when working with an African tribe, the Olinka, teaching them “traditional religion and values” (Taylor, Masterplots 313). The Olinka look down on unmarried women, therefore, they think very poorly of Nettie. After being told by an Olinka woman that she is nothing but a “missionary’s drudge” (Walker 162), Nettie defends her honor, saying: “I am something” (162). Through Nettie’s letters, Celie is able to witness Nettie’s incredible act of courage. Celie watches as Nettie travels to an unknown country, to live with people she knows nothing about. Nettie changes her lifestyle completely around, and then tries to teach people about something they have never thought about before. As Celie watches her, she gradually learns to mirror her strength and apply it in her own life. Later, white men come, and destroy the tribe’s village. Because of this horrible tragedy, Nettie is compelled to accept protection under the shelter of human love. Just as Nettie is learning to trust and accept help from others, Celie is learning the same thing back in Georgia.

Shug Avery is a “confident, flamboyant,…independent” (Taylor, Masterpieces 107) women who befriends Celie and teaches her to respect herself, to love herself, and to assert her own independence. In the beginning, Shug is hateful to Celie, ridiculing her flaws and her incapability to stand up to Albert (Magill, Masterpieces 124). But following the theme of change, Shug’s views of Celie change, and Shug learns to respect her. It is their “unlikely friendship [that] changes Celie’s life” (Magill, Survey 2034). Her whole life, Celie has been virtually alone, with no one caring about her, and without her even caring about herself. Celie’s awakening from her world of isolation first begins when Shug sings a song she wrote for Celie, at Harpo’s jukebox. After hearing this song, Celie, for the first time since she and Nettie had been separated, felt love and compassion for another human being. This triggered something deep inside of Celie that she has not felt for years.

Shug cares deeply for Celie and looks out for her physical well-being. After Shug learns of Mr.\_\_\_\_\_’s continued beatings on Celie, promises Celie that she will not to leave their home “until I know Albert won’t even think about beating you” (Walker 79). And because of Shug’s presence, Mr.\_\_\_\_\_’s beatings lessen greatly. Shug even talks to Albert about being more gentle with Celie in bed, telling him he should even try to increase her pleasure. Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ does try to be more gentle, but fails in increasing her pleasure. After Mr.\_\_\_\_ retreats to his old abusive ways, Shug encourages Celie to leave him. The old Celie would never have the courage to leave her husband, but with Shug as her guide, and her continuous support, Celie decides to leave her husband and move to Memphis to live with Shug. Talking to Albert concerning Celie’s well-being, proves to Celie how much Shug cares about her. Shug loves Celie, and to Celie, that is the most important thing in the world. To Celie, Shug is perfect, her skin, her body, her way with men. Shug is the women Celie dreams of being. Knowing that someone like Shug could care about someone like her, is a major stepping stone in Celie’s transformation. Shug gives great pride and value to Celie’s life.

Shug decides to introduce Celie to options and practicality. Shug first makes Celie a pair of pants, Celie objects, saying “I ain’t no man” (152), but Shug finally convinces Celie it would be more practical for her to wear pants because she is the one who does all of the housework. Later, Celie begins making pants, and once in Memphis, Celie realizes “she has creative talent” (Taylor, Masterplots 312). She begins designing and making beautiful unique pants for both men and women. “The pants allow her a creative expression and suggest Celie’s liberation from men on an economic as well as physical level” (Magill, Survey 2035). Through the old Celie’s conservative eyes, she would have only been able to see men wearing pants. But now Celie is beginning to see men and women as equals, and soon realizes that it is not just men who can “wear the pants”. Celie remembers Sofia working in the yard “wearing a old pair of Harpo pants” (Walker 64), and realizes the independence a women can earn, by wearing something that is typically made for working males to wear. She takes great pride in her work. This is a stepping stone for Celie, for previous to this, she had never taken pride in anything she had ever done. Throughout it all Shug is very encouraging, telling Celie: “Girl, you on your way” (221).

Shug opens Celie’s eyes to a brand new world full of love and pleasure. When Shug moves in with Celie and Mr.\_\_\_\_\_, another remarkable transformation begins in Celie’s life. After years of sexual and verbal abuse, Celie has found no reason to love anyone, including herself. As a young girl, Celie had been raped by Mr.\_\_\_\_\_, then after she was married to Mr.\_\_\_\_\_, she experienced no pleasure during sex. Sex to her was a task, a womanly duty, performed for the pleasure of the husband. Celie could in fact be called a virgin, never loving, never feeling sexual pleasure of any kind. She is afraid of love because she never was given the opportunity to fully understand or experience it. Hate and violence had almost killed Celie, but Shug pulls out feelings of sexual love and self-love within Celie. Through their sexual experiences Shug teaches Celie to “appreciate her own body and to enjoy sexual pleasure” (Magill, Masterpieces 125). With these new feelings of love and pleasure alive inside of Celie, she could no longer be considered a virgin. These feelings “penetrate the core of female spiritual and emotional development” (King 163). What Shug does for Celie is a beautiful thing and affects her tremendously. This is important part of Celie’s transformation, for it finally allows her to grow as a woman.

Celie was living a restricted life “that she passively accepted” (Taylor, Masterplots 311-312), when, by the hand of God, she came into contact with three different women with similar characteristics. These women each taught and encouraged Celie to stand up for herself, and with their help Celie was able to grow as a woman. Sofia taught Celie to stand up for herself and showed her that it is not necessary to fit society’s norm. Celie’s continuous love for Nettie was a sustaining source of strength for her. Like Sofia, Nettie showed Celie how to stand up to the men who oppressed her. Nettie’s confidence and self-worth were things that Celie looked up to and eventually began to copy. Shug made the biggest difference in Celie’s life. Her strength, independence, and love for life were an inspiration for Celie from the beginning. She taught Celie how to stand up for herself, how to gain self-worth, and most importantly, how to love. Without Shug there to guide and support Celie, she would have been lost, in a world full of hate. But because of Shug and these other women, Celie was transformed, into a confident women. “Celie’s salvation is found within the refuge of female love and support. There she gains confidence and self-respect” (King 121).