The Color Purple Essay, Research Paper

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The Color Purple

Change over time was a theory that was first realized by the Greeks and, only thousands of years later, accepted as fact. As time goes by, things change. And this change is never more evident than in human growth and development. But what is it that causes human metamorphosis to occur? Oftentimes, the change comes from within, simply the innate desire to improve oneself. Other times, the transformation is directly the result of outside influences; such as a significant event or inspiration from respected individuals and role models. The latter is the case in Alice Walker?s The Color Purple. In this novel, Walker uses the influence of other strong female characters to act as catalysts on Celie?s journey of self-discovery.

Inspired by Sophia, Celie is able to establish her independence from her abusive husband. Celie knows she is controlled by Mr.\_\_\_ and acknowledges this when she ??think ?bout how every time (she) jump when Mr.\_\_\_ call (her)? (Purple, 38). Celie?s weakness is justified, considering that male domination is a constant in her life. Passed from one chauvinistic man to another, women in subordinate roles is all she knows and can relate to. As put by critic Donna

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Winchell, ?At first fighting back does not even seem an option, survival seems the best she can hope for, in this world at least? (86). However, witnessing the relationship between her son-in-law Harpo and his wife Sophia brings Celie to the realization that such abuse is not necessary and instills in her the desire to stand up for herself. This is evident in Celie?s envy of Sophia?s strength towards Harpo; ?I say it because I?m jealous of you. I say it because you do what I can?t? (Purple, 42). Celie longs for the courage she finds in Sophia. Years of abuse has made her feel that she cannot assert her own independence, and that she is powerless against her husband?s controlling ways.

This desire to improve, coupled with the encouragement of Sophia, moves Celie to assert herself. Sophia persuades Celie to stand up for herself; ?You ought to bash Mr.\_\_\_ head open, she say. Think about heaven later? (Purple, 44). She emphasizes to Celie that she needs to start caring about the life she is presently living. Sophia tries to make her realize that she doesn?t have to put up with the way Mr.\_\_\_ treats her. And, finally, Celie is able to find it within herself to leave Mr.\_\_\_; ?You a lowdown dog is what is wrong, I say. It?s time to leave you and enter creation. And your dead body is just the welcome mat I need? (Purple, 207). The opposition Celie exhibits is the first time she directly stands up for herself. Her defiance shows that she realizes that Mr.\_\_\_?s treatment of her is inappropriate, and she is no longer willing to put up with such abuse. She finally

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finds the confidence and power to take the first step to break away from the restraints of her old life and start over on her own.

Celie?s ability eventually to stand up and leave Mr.\_\_\_ is also due in part to her ?discovering a definition of God that is large enough to encompass even the poor, ugly black woman that she feels herself to be? (Winchell, 86). This growth is initiated by ?the arrival of Shug, (which) is the final turning point in Celie?s search for identity? (Barret).

Love is noticeably absent from much of Celie?s life. The men in her life have never lost an opportunity to remind her that she is worthless; ?But what you got? You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people?You not that good a cook either? (Purple, 89). This kind of verbal abuse, attacks, not only on her physical appearance but also on her person, is an everyday part of Celie?s life, leaving her with a minimal sense of self-worth. In addition, the only people that Celie has ever loved, her sister Nettie and her two children, are taken away from her. She is left only with her husband, who she feels little for except fear. Sex, usually meant as an expression of love, holds no pleasure for her with Albert, as she tells Shug;

?Mr.\_\_\_ can tell you, I don?t like it at all. What is it like? He git up on you heist your nightgown around your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain?t there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep.

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?She start to laugh. Do his business, she say. Do his business. Why, Miss Celie. You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you.

?That what it feel like, I say? (Purple, 81).

Celie views sex with her husband as a duty that she must perform to fulfill the selfish needs of a man who has no regard for her or her feelings, and uses her only as a tool to fulfill his needs. Celie is left with the feeling of objectification and with no love for herself.

This changes, however, when Shug instills in Celie her view of God. Celie?s former view of God as white and male is rejected when she learns, with Shug?s assistance, traumatizing information about her family. She is angered by all that God has allowed to happen to her;

?What God do for me? I ast.

?She say, Celie! Like she shock. He give you life, good health, and a good woman that love you to death.

?Yeah, I say, and he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won?t ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful and lowdown.

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?She say, Miss Celie, You better hush. God might hear you.

?Let ?im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place? (Purple, 199-200).

Celie?s view of God as masculine leads to her belief that God holds the same contempt for her as other males in her life have shown. Though she acknowledges the gifts He has given her, the hurt He has bestowed upon her is much greater. The One she has always relied on, God has now lost her devotion and respect. Such a God cannot love a poor, black woman, and Celie is yet again alone in the world.

However, ?unlike Celie, who derives her sense of self from the dominant white and male theology, Shug is a self-invented character whose sense of self is not male inscribed. Her theology allows a divine, self-authorized sense of self? (Henderson, 16). Shug explains to Celie her genderless God;

?Here is the thing, says Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside it?

?It? I ast.

?Yeah, It. God ain?t a he or a she, but a It.

?But what do it look like? I ast.

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?Don?t look like nothing, she say. It ain?t a picture show. It ain?t something you can look at apart from everything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. 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? (Purple, 202-203).

Shug?s view of God as neither male or female allows Celie to realize that the trials she has faced do not stem from His contempt of her. Rather, she is able to see God as one with all people, including herself. She can now look at herself, not as worthless, but as possessing some of His divine qualities.

In addition to Shug offering Celie a sense of divinity, she also paints a God human enough to share her need for love and compassionate enough to rejoice with His people when they find it;

?Listen, God love everything you love?and a mess of stuff you don?t. But more than anything else, God love admiration.

?You saying God vain? I ast.

?Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don?t notice it.

?What it do when it pissed off? I ast?

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?Oh, it make something else. People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back?

?You mean it want to be loved, just like the bible say.

?Yes, Celie, she say. Everything want to be loved? (Purple, 91).

Like Celie, Shug?s God is always striving for acknowledgement and acceptance. He wants His people to appreciate life, He is not one to bestow pain upon them. He does love Celie, and wishes her to love in return. From these shared qualities, Celie is able to overthrow her ?big and old and tall and greybearded and white God and replace Him with a sense of spirit, commonality and moral goodness? (Kaplan, 137), which in turn allows her to love herself for who she is.

As a result of the inspiration and encouragement Sophia provides, Celie is able to establish her independence and develop away from the constricting bonds of her previous life. From Shug, Celie learns to love herself again through redefining her concept of God. ?Celie gathers strength from (these) women, and their shared oppression is (her) chief agency of redemption? (Smith, 63). Their influences and experiences allow Celie to develop from a passive victim to a proactive, confident woman. ?(She) goes herself to find the courage to change and grow? (Winchell, 87), and from these changes comes the power to take control

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and designate her own course in life. All it takes is a few good friends, the desire to change, and a little bit of time.

Bibliography

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