BOOK REVIEWS

The Color Purple: A Moral Tale. By Alice Walker. New York: Harcourt, 1982. 245 pp. $11.95.

By Ernece B. Kelley

The Color Purple is the first novel by a black writer to win the coveted Pulitzer Prize. It is Alice Walker's third fictional work. And it is one which lends itself to various interpretations: it is a coming-of-age work; it is a work about sexual and racial oppression, a work about the redemptive power of love and/or a feminist novel. (Walker prefers "womanist" because it is free of a racist history).

The story line and cast of characters revolve about the fate of two sisters who are separated as teenagers. Celie, the principal voice, remains at "home" in the South and struggles to create a life of personal worth and meaning. Her sister Nettie, befriended by a missionary couple who take her to Africa, attempts to make a meaningful life for herself as well. The two write letters; Nettie writes to Celie and Celie writes first to God and then to Nettie. Their letters give form to the novel.

Working within the epistolary tradition, which has historically embraced absurdist qualities, Walker accordingly blends harsh realism with fantasy of comic dimensions. Plot directions reverse themselves. Coincidences blossom on page after page. Characters, thought dead, reappear. Children given to strangers pass into the hands of loving relatives. All of this before the backdrop of extreme cruelty.

Walker employs incongruous language to extend this mixing of the sober with the melodramatically silly: "I heard this somebody crying . . . Oh, boo-hoo, and boo-hoo . . . He blow his nose, look up at me out of the two eyes close like fists . . . She [Sofia] do what she want, don't pay

me no mind at all. I try to beat her, she black my eyes. Oh, boo-hoo, he cry. Boo-hoo-hoo" (p.56). The situation is a serious one; husband and wife have had a fight. But the language is comic in its reduction of a man's tears to the comic strip vocabulary of "boo-hoo."

Criticisms, however, that Walker's character development is reductive or that her plot lines are unbelievable, miss the point of the novel. While it is true that most of the male characters are weak, self-centered, or cruel, and that most of the female characters are kind, loving, or compassionate, this quality, rather than being a shortcoming, is a clue to the nature of the novel.

It is a fable, a moral fable with the worldview that men are victims of *any* culture which encourages them to dominate, for domination kills the spirit. Women, the victims both of men's domination and of their own passivity, can change and learn to share power with men. It is love which can rescue both men and women.

Embellishing this view, making it rich and complex, are varieties of ways of loving and gradations of domination. Albert, unrelentingly and irrationally cruel to Celie, his wife, softens gradually and then only when threatened by the woman he really loves. But his son Harpo makes changes swiftly when his wife directly challenges his "authority." And Nettie, whose only adult love for many years is her sister Celie, despite thirty years of silence and of not knowing her conditions and whereabouts, contrasts sharply with Shug, who loves many people at the same time and loves with abandon and passion.

Men love too. But they first must struggle through the barriers of culturally transmitted patterns of dominance. Only Samuel, the missionary, is the exception here, but even his ability to love with full knowledge is thwarted because he marries Corrine, who was " . . . so quiet. . . . And she could erase herself, her spirit, with a swiftness that truly startled, when she knew the people around her could not respect it" (p. 199).

In the final analysis, the women are stronger and better than the men because they do not dominate with their superior understanding and insight. Instead, they share and cooperate, not because they are innately better, but because they aren't culturally conditioned to dominate. This is not to say that they don't want to punish or hurt. Celie, for example, has the impulse to avenge Albert's inhumanity, but it is sublimated. She sews: "A needle and not a razor in my hand, I think" (p. 125).

Women loving women is one of the more controversial aspects of the novel. Shug and Celie have a total relationship. They come to it by different routes, to be sure. Shug has been with many men, but wears them all lightly: "I would never be fool enough to take any of them seriously . . . but some mens can be a lot of fun" (p. 211), she says. Celie, on the other hand, has only experienced loving her sister and God; both loves are mixed generously with longing since both are inaccessible.

Celie loves no man. But she's drawn to Shug the first time she sees her photograph. "An all night long I stare at it. An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery" (p. 8). When they eventually meet, Celie takes care of a burned-out Shug. Their relationship evolves slowly, and despite separation and Shug's love for old and new male friends, they are, at the end of the novel, very much a couple.

Walker's delineation of their relationship is interesting in that it is significantly different from a "lesbian" relationship as defined by critic-writer Rita Mae Brown: "Men . . . define lesbianism . . . as sex between women. However . . . it is a different way of life. It is a life that draws its strength, support, and direction from women."[1] Neither Shug nor Celie draws her support and strength from women exclusively or even preponderantly. In fact, Shug leaves Celie to be with Germaine, a boy who is a third her age and

[1] Rita Mae Brown, "The Shape of Things to Come," in *Lesbianism and the Women's Movement*, ed. Nancy Myron and Charlotte Bunch (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1975), p. 69.

size. And before Germaine, Shug was married to Grady; she has loved Albert (Celie's husband) through all these relationships, whereas Celie grows to have sure and nurturing relationships with Albert and his son Harpo. She even wants to know more about the "father" who abandoned her and forced her to marry Albert.

As the focus of the novel, Celie tells her own story without the intermediary of a narrator. She speaks Black English, but her sister Nettie does not. Groomed to be a missionary-helper, Nettie has been trained in the language of trade. Walker carefully puts in the mouths of her characters the kind of language which their training and life experiences would make likely.

And without a hint of the polemical, Walker makes the point that the limits of Black English are only those imposed by the mind and imagination of the writer. She shows the reader its multifaceted expressiveness in experiences ranging widely from Celie's grief ("But sleep remain a stranger to this night" [p. 212]), to her joy ("And us so happy . . . I think this the youngest us ever felt" [p. 244]), to her wisdom ("If you know your heart sorry . . . that mean it not quite as spoilt as you think" [p. 239]). The zero copula, the marking of present time without the *-s* ending, the marking of past time without the *-ed* ending, in short, the reliance on context for expressing various frames—all these characteristics of Black English dance across the pages of this novel making a persuasive case for the power and poetry of the language. The cadence and grammar of Black English are the major poetic devices here as Walker makes comparatively little use of metaphor, simile, or symbol.

Part of the grace of the novel rests in Walker's artful paralleling of experiences in West Africa with those in the Southern part of the United States. In so doing, she gives color and drama to the thesis of African survivalisms. The Olinka people, for example, live in round houses; Shug Avery wants to build a round house. Africans sing when

they're tired; so do Southern blacks. And a half-remembered African remedy is administered by Celie to a sick child thousands of miles from Africa.

It is, in fact, in her shuttling between the two continents that Walker makes certain missteps. In Nettie's letters about her African experiences, the novelist fails to differentiate between myth and fact through either shifts in tone or style. As a consequence, readers can't tell when she is expressing her own thoughtful criticisms of the people and their culture and when she is merely repeating what others have said. "I think Africans are very much like white people back home, in that they think they are the center of the universe and that everything that is done is done for them" (p. 143), Nettie writes. And it is written in the same voice as, "The Olinka do not believe girls should be educated" (p. 132). While the latter is bolstered by specific events, the former is not. Walker moves on from the remark, leaving readers wondering if it is not likely that any peoples isolated as are the Olinkas would not think that a road which is coming *toward* them is *for* them.

With this novel, Alice Walker turns stereotypes of black and African peoples on their heads and, at the same time, creates memorable portraits of women who, in particular, struggle against unbelievable brutality to realize themselves as full, worthwhile human beings. Worth special note in this regard is Sofia's response to Miss Eleanor Jane, now a grown woman, but for twelve years a little white girl whom Sofia cared for.

Rising to her full Amazon stature, Sofia explains that she, indeed, does *not* love Miss Jane's infant son, Reynolds Stanley. The setting is classic and evokes images of all those hundreds of literary and cinematic maids who felt compelled to feign love for the offspring of their white employers. She says, "But all the colored women that say they love yours is lying. They don't love Reynolds Stanley any more than I do. But if you so badly raise as to ast 'em, what you expect them to say? Some colored people so scared of

white-folks they claim to love the cotton gin" (p. 225).

But Walker's primary interest is in the relations between blacks; she seems hopeful while mindful of the formidable obstacles. The tableau which closes the novel—Nettie and Celie reunited and surrounded by Celie's children, relatives, lovers, and former lovers—with all its improbableness, elicits yet another image, the final verse of Margaret Walker's "For My People":

> Let a second generation full of
> courage issue forth . . . let a beauty
> full of healing and a strength of
> final clenching be the pulsing in
> our spirits and our blood.[3]

[3] Margaret Walker, "For My People," in *Dark Symphony*, ed. James A. Emanuel and Theodore L. Gross (New York: The Free Press, 1968), p. 496.