

## Two Observations on the Structure and Voice of *The Color Purple*

### *First Note:*

Since its publication in 1982, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* has attracted a good deal of critical commentary in addition to a wide general audience. The MLA International Bibliography lists better than half a hundred journal articles and contributions to books, and there have, in addition, been a number of significant extended discussions in books devoted to Afro-American literature, among them *The Afro-American Novel and its Traditions*, by Bernard Bell, *The Signifying Monkey* by Henry Louis Gates, and *Inspiriting Influences* by Michael Awkward.

Commentators have focused on several themes, including, most notably, Walker's relation to Zora Neale Hurston in general and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in particular, on Walker's use of vernacular speech, and on the themes of lesbianism, male violence toward females, and the refiguring of Christian religiosity. But although several commentators have discussed Walker's use of the epistolary genre, almost no attention has been paid to the purely formal and structural aspects of *The Color Purple*. The purpose of these brief observations is to call attention to certain striking formal or structural features of Walker's novel, in an effort to complicate somewhat our reading of it.

*The Color Purple* consists of a single line of direct discourse, uttered, we assume, by the man whom the main character, Celie, knows as Pa, followed by a series of ninety-two letters, several of which are embedded within other letters, and five of which are somewhat ambiguously introduced by a comment from Celie, italicized. Fifty-five of the letters are written by Celie to God [or "G-o-d" in one case]; twenty-two are written by Celie's sister, Nettie, to Celie; fourteen are written by Celie to Nettie; and the last letter is addressed by Celie "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God."

[The opening line of direct discourse, for those who do not recall or have not read the novel, is: "*You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy.*"]

The first fifty-five of Celie's letters to God are unsigned. Now, a letter to God is, in the Christian tradition in which Celie is situated, a prayer. And the appropriate ending for a prayer is the expression of affirmation, "Amen." So the absence of the word "amen" from these fifty-five letters can be taken by us, I think, as Walker's formal expression of Celie's inability to affirm or accept or consent to the God in whom she has been told by Pa to confide. She writes the prayers, but she is unable to bring them to a satisfactory, and satisfied, closure.

In Celie's forty-ninth letter to God is embedded Nettie's first letter to her. There follow fourteen more letters from Nettie to Celie, interspersed with Celie's letters to God, until, in her fifty-fifth letter, Celie packs it in with God. "You must be sleep," she writes abruptly. Now she turns her epistolary attentions to Nettie. Her first letter to Nettie is unsigned, but Nettie's sixteenth letter to Celie, which comes next in the series, ends with the injunction "Pray for us." Celie's very next letter, her second to Nettie, begins with the flat, dramatic announcement, "I don't write to God no more, I write to you." And this letter, in which Celie reports an extended conversation with Shug in which her conception of God is radically called into question, *is* signed "Amen"! Celie is

finally able to utter this word, though only as an affirmation of her relationship with her sister, not as an affirmation of God's presence.

Celie now writes six more letters to Nettie signed "Amen," [including the fourth in the series, in which we get the characteristic call-and-response of the Black church, "Amen, say Shug. Amen, amen."] In the ninth letter to Nettie, Celie announces that Pa is dead, and *this* letter is not signed "Amen," nor are any of the subsequent letters to Nettie.

At the very end of the novel, after Celie has written herself into existence as a sexually, morally, and socially complete woman; after she has gathered about her the whole extended family of players in her complex, self-assured psycho-drama; after her proper sister Nettie has returned from her brush with Spelman College, W. E. B. DuBois, President Tubman, Africa, missionary work, New York, and all the other icons and symbols of socially acceptable Negro upward mobility -- in short, after Walker has established dramatically that true self-discovery requires the courageous taking possession of an authentic authorial voice, *and after Celie has successfully recreated God in a form suitable to be the object and recipient of prayer*, NOW Celie can finally undertake and complete the act of prayer. And so we get the final letter of the novel, which is indeed a prayer to God, concluded by the word "Amen."

A few words about this analysis before I move on to the second Note. *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel, which is to say a novel consisting of a series of letters. Every doctoral student in any English Literature program learns that the epistolary form was the first form of the novel, exemplified by the classic eighteenth century novels of Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, *Clarissa*, and *Sir Charles Grandison*. [I never studied English Literature, but I was married for twenty-three years to a distinguished scholar of the subject, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, whose doctoral dissertation was on Samuel Richardson, later published as *Samuel Richardson and the Eighteenth Century Puritan Character*, so I absorbed all of this as pillow talk, as it were.] Now, for as long as I can recall, scholars of literature have been alerted to the significance of the formal structural features of works of fiction or poetry, and they are forever explaining to naive readers that one cannot really understand what a novel is about unless one pays attention to narrative voice and all the rest of that stuff. For a late twentieth century author to adopt the form of the epistolary novel is a clear signal to any sophisticated reader that *something important is happening here to which attention must be paid*. It is simply astonishing that not one of the extremely sophisticated critics I have cited even so much as asks the question, "Why did Walker choose to write an epistolary novel?" These critics would never make the mistake of failing to examine the form of Joyce's *Ulysses* or *Finnegan's Wake*. Indeed, they would not even make the mistake of failing to ask such questions about *Invisible Man*. So why on earth did they not ask it about *The Color Purple*?

I really do think there is only one possible answer. *The Color Purple* is a novel by a Black woman in which themes of lesbianism and abusive treatment of Black women by Black men come up. It just never occurs to the critics, including such sophisticated writers as Henry Louis Gates, that Walker might actually be a thoughtful, self-aware, intelligent author whose authorial choices are made deliberately for some deliberate artistic purpose.

*Second Note:*

A number of commentators on *The Color Purple* have written critically or disparagingly about the contrast between the power and immediacy of Celie's narration and the stilted formality of Nettie's letters, with their implausibly proper English and lengthy, tedious, quasi-Ethnographic accounts of the African people in whose midst she spends so many years as a missionary. Once again, in this day of super-sophistication about matters of literary voice, none of the commentators has thought to ask why Walker, who clearly has the authorial skill to create the compelling voice of Celie, chooses to conjure so unappealing a voice as that of Nettie. Walker's choice may, of course, be a literary mistake, but it is manifestly impossible that it is a mere accident or oversight.

There are some clues in Nettie's letters to which we ought to pay attention in our attempt to discover Walker's aims. Consider first of all the contrast in diction and grammar of the two sets of letters. These are sisters, after all, raised in the same household and educated, such as may be, in the same school. Yet one writes in a direct, forceful, compelling, semi-literate dialect, and the other writes in stilted, educated, boring correct English. Later on, I will suggest that this is one of the clues to what the novel is about, what its message is, but for the moment, let us simply note that since Walker wrote both sets of letters, she could perfectly well have made Nettie's letters as compelling as Celie's, had she chosen to do so.

The letters written by Celie exhibit a subtle progressive development, whereas those written by Nettie might all have been written at the same time. One example will suffice. Celie always refers to the man to whom she has been married as "Mr. ----." In the earlier letters, she consistently misuses the possessive case, writing "Mr. ---- children" on page 25 or "Mr. ---- daddy" on page 58. Then, in the dramatic and pivotal letter to Nettie, in which she announces that she is not writing to God any longer, she uses it correctly. -- "Mr. ----'s evil" on page 179, thereby signifying linguistically a growth in self-command and assurance. Nettie, on the other hand, uses the possessive correctly from the very beginning -- see her second letter, p. 119 -- "the Reverend Mr. ----'s place."

Nettie follows a path in the novel that is stereotypically the correct path -- what today we would call, in a different context, P.C. She leaves the rural South, goes North, becomes involved with Christian missionaries off to do good works in Africa. The couple she joins are virtually a caricature -- the woman, Corinne, went to Spelman Institute [later Spelman College]; her husband, Samuel, met the young W. E. B. DuBois. The two of them met President Tubman in Liberia [which, as it happens, is historically impossible. Tubman did not become president of Liberia until much later.] Nettie's letters are filled with pseudo-anthropological accounts of African customs -- in which, incidentally, can be found striking parallels to Celie's life, marked by direct and unmistakable verbal echoes. [One example: Nettie says of the Olinka: "There is a way that men speak to women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions." Celie, in one of her letters, says "I know white people never listen to coloured, period, If they do, they only listen long enough to be able to tell you what to do."]

One would *expect* Nettie, who has escaped from the degradation of her childhood, to return and take Celie away to Harlem at the end of the novel. Instead, Walker inverts the expected conclusion by having Celie gather Nettie and the rest of her extended "family" about her at the

end of the novel. It is Celie, not Nettie, who has actually taken the longest and most productive journey. Surely, it seems to me, this central structural feature of the novel must signal Walker's rejection of [or, as they say in literary circles, revision of] the dominant literary tradition and dominant theses of the Harlem literary renaissance. I am not simply calling attention to Walker's reversal or revision of the representation of male and female roles within the Afro-American literary tradition. At stake here too is the role of the rural South versus the urban North, etc. What is especially interesting is that Walker, the person, followed Nettie's path, but she has written a novel in which Celie is the compelling central figure.

In short, a great deal is going on in *the Color Purple*, as in any novel. But it seems clear from these elementary facts about the formal structure of the work that Walker has chosen to write a story about the process by which a Black woman can achieve the possibility of successful prayer, and at the same time, to call into question standard evaluative assumptions within the Afro-American literary tradition about the centrality of the Southern rural experience and the Northern flowering of the Harlem Renaissance. It is also possible that attention to these formal features of the novel will help readers to resist the temptation to construe it as a naive expression of Walker's unmediated attitudes toward Lesbianism or the mistreatment of Black women by Black men.