

READING ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE* :

A SPECULATIVE ESSAY BY WAY OF
AN INTRODUCTION

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I

Alice Walker has the credentials for the authentic modern black woman's voice—the youngest of eight children born to sharecropper parents in rural Georgia forty-three years ago, she also has an East Coast college education (Sarah Lawrence), a visit to Africa, Civil Rights movement involvement, marriage (dissolved) to a white Civil Rights lawyer and motherhood of a seventeen-year-old daughter in her biography. She has enhanced these life experiences with an acute sense of her own female ancestress' history—from stories and pictures of her grandmothers from generations past to her re-finding of Zora Neale Hurston's work, Alice Walker has stitched and displayed to eager audiences her own dazzling quilt of black women's matrilineage.

One of the striking stories of her start in life is in Mary Helen Washington's essay about her mother's three gifts to her when she was a teenager—all made on her mother's maidwork salary of less than \$20 a week—a sewing machine when Alice was 15 or 16, a typewriter when she was in high school, and a suitcase as high school graduation gift. Thus validated by her mother to create for herself and to go out into the world, Walker does not forget the wellspring of her inspiration, a wellspring that is not only black women's validation and support of each other, but their life stories. Alice Walker often says she began to

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re-tell her mother's stories because they were being lost, the voices were being lost, the women's lives contained in the stories were being lost.

The Color Purple, Alice Walker's third novel, was published in June 1982, and takes place from 1909 to 1943—the year before Alice Walker was born—or if we agree that it spans 35 years—to 1944, the year of her birth. One reviewer has said that this “color purple” is to be seen as “a miracle of nature” symbolizing “the miracle of human possibilities.” Alice Walker has Shug describe a sort of *satori*, when, “sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child,” she was visited by “a sudden enlightenment”:

that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all round the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it. It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh.

Shug! I say.

Oh, she say. God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like.

God don't think it dirty? I ast.

Naw, she say. God made 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.

This is all a revelation to Celie who is “adrift” in the conversation. “Trying to chase that old white man [God] out of my head,” she says, “I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn

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(how it do that ?) not the color purple (where it come from ?). Not the little wild-flowers. Nothing."

Celie's not noticing the color purple and all it stands for may be because she is perpetually crouched over, torn between glancing over her shoulder from fear she is about to be hit again and the fear of exposing her fancied "ugliness" to the world's eyes. At the age of eight, Alice Walker was wounded in the eye with a BB gun while playing with her brothers. Blind in that eye, self-conscious because of the scar tissue that grew over it, she thought she was ugly, would not look up (like Celie) until at fourteen, visiting a brother to help with the children, she was able to go to a doctor and have the unsightly scar tissue taken off. She then became popular in high school and more self-confident, though permanently blind in one eye. Celie and Alice share with that famous "plain" heroine, Jane Eyre, an ordinary woman's anxious preoccupation with the old "mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of us all ?"

The color purple comes, then, to be also a symbol of the beauty God put in the face of every woman, her beauty that Shug feels and is confident of, her beauty that Celie has to "truly notice" and believe in before she can be both free and happy.

Where did *The Color Purple*, the story, the book, come from? Alice Walker tells us:

I don't always know where the germ of a story comes from, but with *The Color Purple* I knew right away. I was hiking through the woods with my sister, Ruth, talking about a lovers' triangle of which we both knew. She said: "And you know, one day The Wife asked The Other Woman for a pair of her drawers." Instantly the missing piece of the story I was mentally writing—about two women who felt married to the same man—fell into place. And for months—through illnesses, divorce, several moves, travel abroad, all kinds of heartaches and revelations—I carried my sister's comment delicately balanced in the center of the novel's construction I was

building in my head.

I also knew *The Color Purple* would be a historical novel, and thinking of this made me chuckle. In an interview, discussing my work, a black male critic said he'd heard I might write a historical novel someday, and went on to say, in effect: Heaven protect us from it. The chuckle was because, womanlike (he would say), my "history" starts not with the taking of lands, or the births, battles, and deaths of Great Men, but with one woman asking another for her underwear.

The story that grew from this germ was peopled then by ghosts—the final line of the novel reads: "I thank everybody in this book for coming. A. W., author and medium." When the voices, the people that eventually filled the book first took shape and "visited" Alice Walker, they hated the tall buildings of New York, so she took them off to rural California where they felt more at home. There she "let them come and go," got to know them, and let them tell their story through her. It is intriguing, however, to look through *The Alice Walker Calendar: 1986* and find that Celie and Nettie are the names of Alice Walker's grandmothers—her stepgrandmother, Rachel ("Celie"), and her mother's mother, Nettie, "an obviously oppressed, long-suffering black, black woman, who gave birth to twelve children and who, from pictures and memories I have of her, apparently never smiled."

It is interesting to speculate on the fact that Celie is always Celie and Nettie, Nettie—after all Mister¹ is really Albert Johnson, and "Lillie Shug's real name. She just so sweet they call her "Shug" (Shug, short for Sugar). And Squeak, announces, in her own voice-finding scene, "My name is Mary Agnes." The use of names and voices in counterpoint raises the central questions of identity—when is a person truly him/herself—in this novel.

Not strictly autobiographical because they are fictional, the voices in the

1 Although this character is called Mr. _____ in the book, Walker herself refers to him as Mister in her writings, a concession to easy referral which I have followed in this essay.

novel nevertheless have such deep resonances that we ask where do they really come from? Looking back to "Everyday Use" from *In Love and Trouble*, Walker's first collection of short stories, we see the genesis of the voices and values of all the women in Walker's work in the fine stitches networking the quilts that linked the many scraps of a woman's history, family, daily life, memories. Making a real *Color Purple* quilt while writing the book, Alice Walker hints that the texture of her fiction is the texture of the quilt—scraps of the real linked by the creative and all made by woman's hands.

Writing of/for the women who did not know how to tell the world about themselves except through their hands and their story-telling voices, Alice Walker's work asks the central question: what value do these women have in/to society? From what point of view does woman speak (in "Everyday Use," Dee, alias Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, though black, speaks from the point of view of the mayor's wife in *The Color Purple*). Who validates her? White male society? Black rebels against it? No, only she herself can validate herself. Herself and the women before her, the women around her. Shug, as a singer, obviously is a woman with a voice, a woman who uses her voice, and she is not a beaten-down, passive woman but an energizing role model. Celie can follow her model as she finds her own voice—and as she speaks with her own voice her language changes, this change shows the change from passivity to action, from standing in the slough of despond to movement and improvement as Celie saves herself by validating herself in her own voice.

In an essay, "Finding Celie's Voice," Walker tells of the attempts to ban *The Color Purple* in California because of several things, including the idea that it "degraded black people by its 'exposure' of their folk language." Walker's use of what she calls "my first language, black folk English,"—she does not like its being called "dialect"—using Celie's language for Celie's voice, makes the impact of Celie's story even greater. Awkwardly, haltingly at the beginning, more and more fluently as her voice finds its surer ground in her burgeoning self-confi-

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dence, Celie's voice pulls the reader into her world far better than pages of standard English description would have ever done. "Exposing" Celie's folk language does expose the reality of her life and there are those who are thankful and those who are fearful of this, but its necessity is indisputable.

In the attempt to ban the book, what was mostly objected to was its first five pages—and the question of how this can be translated in a comparable idiom is a challenging one. The folk language plus the "dirty" vocabulary shocked many, but Walker's question for Celie was how to talk about rape as the girl being raped perceives it. Rape is a major concern of Walker's in this book—rape, the taboo subject, the horrible reality for so many women, including Walker's eleven-year old great-great grandmother, raped by the white slave owner as Mister's grandmother may well have been. Barbara Christian reminds us of Alice Walker's interview in *California Living* in which she says that the Celie of *The Color Purple* is based on her great [sic] grandmother. Walker has Celie speak out about the rape, the seed from which the story grows, in her own voice, to validate her, since "society refused to listen to the Celies of the world long before I was born." And Walker becomes more emphatic, for when Celie comes through to us in this book, talking her own language, "when Celie comes in from the cold of repression, self-hatred, and denial, and only when Celie comes in from the cold—do I come in. And many of you as well. If we kill off the *sound* of our ancestors, the major portion of us, all that is past, is history, is human being, is lost and we become historically and spiritually thin, a mere shadow of who we were on the earth."

II

The epistolary novel is, of course, the oldest and most traditional novel form in English. *The Color Purple* is 92 letters—56 from Celie to God; 22 from Celie to her beloved younger sister Nettie; and 14 from Nettie to Celie. The nearly illiterate Celie would never have kept a diary or written a novel, but she could

write to God, and when her stepfather, the rapist, told her not to tell anybody but God about what happened, she could take the pen, as he had taken his penis, and create something enduring that would lead to meaning out of her pain. If we look closely at the process of these letters, we see that what Celie is doing is not telling *us* about what happened, she is not aware of any audience, but rather she is writing letters trying to get in touch with herself for consolation, and the self she is reaching out to merges, as the letters go on, with her double, Nettie. The concept of an audience for the letters is blurred, especially as we read the long passages debating who God really is, in a letter written to Nettie because Celie "don't write to God no more." Gradually the "audience" for the letters takes concrete shape as Nettie, and it becomes clear that Celie is talking to herself in her letters, and that it is in talking to herself that she is talking to Nettie.

In the film version of *The Color Purple*, it was shocking to see the opening contrast between the beautiful field of purple wildflowers and the two girls playing so happily there—then to realize one of the little girls was pregnant—the shocking language of the first five pages of the book is translated into the shock of seeing the apparently carefree and very young girl pregnant by incest/rape.

But in that scene of Celie and Nettie playing the clapping game, I see another image, a literary echo—that of the double. If the letters of the novel reveal that Celie/self/Nettie form a nexus of identity, in the film Celie and Nettie are shown facing each other, other, not side by side—Celie and Shug are often shown side by side, but the portrayal of the two sisters always facing each other, or through a window/mirror, harks to the figure of the double—Jekyll/Hyde; Frankenstein/monster; Dimmesdale minister and sinner; but most of all, Jane Eyre and Bertha Rochester—Celie and Nettie—two sides of the same woman. The difference, of course is that Celie and Nettie are united in the end whereas the Bertha figure is annihilated. Celie learns to accept her passions, her dark urges, but Jane, woman of her time, cannot, so Bertha must die. As we listen, we hear Celie and Nettie's language coming to be the same at the end—Nettie has

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mothered Celie's children, just as by being the blurred audience for the letters she has enabled Celie to mother herself. And Celie has been the ultimate Jane Eyre figure—that unique heroine in literature in English—both ugly *and* loved.

Talking about the teachers who had been so important to her, Alice Walker said in an interview, "My teachers lent me books: *Jane Eyre* was my friend for a long time." There are certainly many parallels between the poor white orphan in 19th century England and the poor black orphan in 20th century Georgia, indeed they "double" each other in the vast network of women's lives. There are for example, the houses, women's houses (that are not really theirs)—look how Celie and Jane leave the house that was their center to go out for adventure which was thought to be only a masculine prerogative. But they both leave only to return, and they leave after having discovered the secret of their lives is hidden deep *within* the house! Alice Walker once wrote, "it all comes back to houses": the feminine tradition so neglected in American literature of the outdoors, but regularly framing English literary portraits comes into its own here.

Nettie's letters are in a trunk—hidden in the innermost part of the house—how painful to bring them out to the light of day! Bertha discovered, then escaping from the attic is brutal; Celie releasing her secret life from the trunk also brutal in another way—it unleashes emotions she never knew she had—especially anger. If *Jane Eyre* can be read *Jane Ire*, we begin to see that for both Jane and Celie, the discovery of the dark secret of the house induces anger that breaks connections in order to later return and find them in the house again—through the anger engendered by discovery of having been lied to by the man who was supposed to be protector/lover, both Jane and Celie learn they must love and protect the self first and only then can they have the supreme reward of being truly loved, of being the center of a circle of loving relationships.

Bertha, the madwoman, the woman with passions unleashed and furious, is hidden in the attic and represents for Jane the deepest secret of her marriage to Rochester, for, until this wild passion is calmed, they cannot marry. For Celie,

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the most important thing in the world to her is Nettie's letters—and where are they? In the house, in a room of the house, in a trunk in a room in the house, at the bottom of the trunk in the room in the house—and when the secret emerges, Celie's dream comes true, she finds Nettie, finds herself. Her emotions are unleashed, emotions that break her shell of passivity, emotions of happiness followed by great anger. With the anger, Celie finds her voice through Nettie's voice, and takes action on her own for the first time. In taking action she gains confidence, confidence leads to the leap to freedom, and freedom brings her full circle back home to happiness in relationships with all those she loves, beginning with herself. It seems to be a "classic" female awakening pattern :

Anger → voice → action → freedom → relationship/happiness

Is this the traditional woman's path to enlightenment, so different from man's and until recently not seen as very valuable?

Thinking about Celie's awakening, I become tempted to try a new term in literary study, the "triple"—one woman made of three, in this case, Celie, Nettie and Shug. Shug, the woman as sexual being, blossoming in the joy of her female sexuality; Nettie the woman as wife, mother, nurturer, carer, giver; and Celie, woman as her individual, unique self—only when all three are united at the end is there happiness, relationship, wholeness.

Women in Japan have said they had not been to see the film because it was presented as a film of racial discrimination and domestic violence—until they heard the explanation above they had not wanted to go and be depressed. When they heard book and film were about the growth of love, of self-confidence, woman finding her voice and creating her own life, they felt differently. This is a major theme—people redeem themselves and grow—over much time, not overnight, no epiphanies here—little by little, for the novel spans 35 years. Walker tells us that director Steven Spielberg concentrated more on Mister than she would have, Mister, a man so cruel that Celie could not write his name (or perhaps she did not feel she even had a right to use his name!), but who sews

and talks companionably with her on the porch many years later, fondly called Albert. Growth, change for the better happens not only to Celie, but to Albert, and this growth is symbolized in the film by the babies given away at the beginning who return at the end as big, grown-up children from Africa (the dark continent, linked perhaps to Freud's calling women's sexuality "the dark continent"?).

This ending, the clasping of the last links in the feminine circle of relationship, show clearly that *The Color Purple* is not meant to be read only from a racial discrimination or domestic violence point of view—these are accidental circumstances surrounding a woman's finding of her own voice, her own self. They are more dreadful than the usual white woman's novel shows the restricting and oppressive packing around women's lives to be, but the result is still the striking similarity. *The Color Purple*, as the French advertisement for the movie says, is about love, about life, about all of us.

To look a bit further afield, and speculate on some of the themes that can be pursued in Alice Walker's work, the first that imposes itself is the theme of the lost children. Certainly from what has been called the first novel in America, *Charlotte Temple*, with its theme of the lost daughters, this "prodigal/lost daughter" theme seen from the mother's viewpoint has not had the attention it should from students of women's novels. Nor has the theme of the witch/voodoo/root-working come in for its full share of research and explication.

Another theme is that of beauty in distress—but not the dazzlingly beautiful heroine rescued from her distress by a shining knight figure, no, that male fantasy is replaced in *The Color Purple* by a veil of flowers, the veil of flowers, perhaps, planted around every house where Alice Walker's mother lived, so that when Walker remembers her poverty-stricken childhood it is through this veil of flowers, of quilts, of beauty wrought by "the color purple," as well as by the untriring hands of women. The criticized "romanticism" of the film may come from this relentless rendering of the touches of beauty; after all this is enter-

tainment, not a documentary—it is not *The Grapes of Wrath*; there is joy in it, beauty in it, and Alice Walker has said that she felt a lot of people who needed the book would never read it, starting with blacks in her hometown of Eatonton, Georgia, but she knew they would see the film, and she wanted it to be seen in rural Georgia, in Africa. I feel she wanted to show poverty, misery through that veil of flowers that was her feminine viewpoint.

Walker does say, however, that “If I had directed it I would have placed much more emphasis on what happened between Shug and Celie after they went to Memphis together, whereas in this movie there is no Memphis. A woman director would have been much more interested in showing the development of Celie under Shug’s loving attention in Memphis, and would also have had fun showing this humungous house with the statues and all the ‘women’s culture.’ But Steven, I think, was much more interested in showing the transformation of Mister to Albert, as well as Celie’s changes—I think you really understood Albert better in the movie than in the book.”

Whoopi Goldberg (Celie) says, “this is not a movie about race. What happens to Celie is happening to women all over the world, of all races and backgrounds, that is the fact. This is a story about the trials of the human spirit.”

These words can be read as clues from the visions of the women who created what the viewing public knows as *The Color Purple* to help us readers read a book that speaks to most of us of a life and tradition that is totally new.

There is certainly a lot of symbolism in the movie—the poses, the “stills,” the images that stay in our mind and connect us into the deeper reaches of the story. A white director of the movie also shows how the work can speak to whites, especially white men who are beginning to understand black rage, and to see that the world is larger and different than they had thought.

But back to the center of the book—Celie’s awakening to herself and to happiness through knowing herself. This awakening, as others in literature from Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* through *Fear of Flying*, comes through women’s sexuali-

ty which leads to creativeness. Carol Gilligan, who published *In a Different Voice* the same year as *The Color Purple* came out, points out that women's sexuality kept them passive—conception and childbirth and the violence to themselves that sex represented could only be avoided by denying pleasure, withholding sex—which meant that women's own needs were either denied or sacrificed. In 1908 Freud tied the “undoubted intellectual inferiority of so many women” to “the inhibition of thought necessitated by sexual suppression.” It is clear that the withholding, denial and suffering that sex meant for women kept them from a creative blossoming, especially an intellectual blossoming, and that when female sexuality came into its own in the twentieth century so did female intellectual creativity become something more than a rarity. Celie's release of her sexual self is followed by the release of her inner self with the discovery of Nettie's letters not long after the discovery of “the little button,” and with these discoveries comes the change in her attitude, her language and her self-image. This sexual awakening of women, followed by awakening to self is frightening to many, as the fact that both *The Awakening* and *The Color Purple* came in for some very heavy criticism. Something there is that doesn't love a woman who loves herself?

III

Looking at the images of men in *The Color Purple* and finding them the images of men as brutes and enemies of women has proven a popular pastime since the book came out. But read to the end of the story—the “brute” Mister is now Celie's friend, Albert Johnson, a man she can sew and talk with. Women can lead men to an awakening to human relationships through their own awakenings; the message that those awakenings are to lead towards, not away from, mutually happy and loving relationships with men is the strongest message of Mister/Albert's metamorphosis. No, women don't need to concern themselves so much with men's awakening, or liberation. If women change, men will follow.

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How can we get men to change? Don't worry about it. Take care of yourself, like Celie did, and the men will be right there.

Is Mister a representative of awful men? No more than Rochester is the representative of the Harlequin romance Byronic hero. When we see society through a woman's eyes we see it larger than life. Wasn't it Virginia Woolf who said (in "A Room of One's Own") that woman is expected to reflect man at twice his actual size? The perspective from both Jane Eyre's eyes and Celie's eyes is that Rochester and Mister are BIG men—and in the films of each story this is certainly true—there are many camera shots of both shot from below. This trick makes one of the "stills," the "poses" that punctuate the film of *The Color Purple* stand out; it is the one when Squeak, Shug and Celie walk out of the house—shot from below the women are larger than life at last, as the men have been all along. We look up to them, and they are looking up, as if to encourage us.

It is common knowledge by now that black male critics have been hard on Alice Walker, and one explanation is that they want everything white men have, including dominance over women, or fear that the truth from black women will be misused in white society, or their discomfort with the fact that Alice was married for ten years to a white civil rights activist by whom she had a daughter, or their fear that revealing the mixed blood detracts from "true blackness." But in a recent essay (in the form of a letter to an African-American friend!) on Mister which appears to be in response to this criticism, Alice Walker reveals further depths of this novel, especially to those of us who would never have dreamed of them:

Dear Mpinga,

You asked if I was shocked at the hostile reaction of some people, especially some black men, to the character of Mister in the book and more particularly in the movie "The Color Purple." [sic] I believe I replied only half-joking that no, I was beyond shock. I was saddened by the response, disappointed, certainly, but I have felt better as I've tried to put myself in

the place of the men (and some women) and tried to understand the source of what appears to be in many a genuine confusion, yes (as you say), but also a genuine pain.

An early disappointment to me in some black men's response to my work ... is their apparent inability to empathize with black women's suffering under sexism; their refusal even to acknowledge our struggles; indeed, there are many black men who appear unaware that sexism exists (or even of what it is), or that women are oppressed in virtually all cultures, and if they do recognize there is abuse, their tendency is to minimize it or to deflect attention from it to themselves. This is what happened, to a large extent, with the movie. A book and a movie that urged us to look at the oppression of women and children by men (and to a lesser degree, women) became the opportunity by which many black men drew attention to themselves—not in an effort to rid themselves of the desire or tendency to oppress women and children, but instead to claim that inasmuch as a “negative” picture of them was presented to the world, they were, in fact, the ones *being* oppressed.

Walker goes on to remind us that blacks have a “deep, painful refusal to accept the fact that [they] are not only the descendants of slaves, [they] are also the descendants of slave *owners*.” The unspoken, largely unconscious desire flowing from this fact is the desire to “be mistress or ‘master.’” Mister's background is ignored by critics who see in him a one-dimensional negative image of black men. But, Walker reminds us, Mister is part white; his grandfather (like Walker's great-great grandfather) was a white man and a slave owner. And not only do women hand down their legacy, men do, too. “Mister learned how to treat women and children from his father, Old Mister. Who did Old Mister learn from? Well, from Old Master, his slave-owning father, who treated Old Mister's mother and Old Mister (growing up) as slaves, *which they were*.”

So we see that in this “woman's novel,” the layers of identity that Mister must

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plow through to himself are no less complex, if different, than those Celie must plow through. His father, "Old Mister, is so riddled with self-hatred, particularly of his black 'part,' the 'slave' part ... that he spends his life repudiating, degrading, and attempting to dominate anyone blacker than himself, as is, unfortunately, his son." And Old Mister's contempt for the "black as tar," "nappy headed" Shug reflects this, too. But his son, "Albert's, ability to genuinely love Shug, and find her irresistibly beautiful—black as she is—is a major sign of mother love, the possibility of health; and since she in her blackness reflects him, an indication that he is at least capable of loving himself. No small feat."

In conclusion, then, what we learn from the voices I have tried to let you hear in this essay is what Alice Walker leads us to in her recent review of her own work, "the peaceful coming together of the psyche." For Walker, this meant acceptance of herself as she opened the "heart of [her] soul and there, with the Africans, are the Indian great-great grandmother and the old white child molester and rapist." Alice Walker's words in response to that can well be the message that is so often lost in looking at *The Color Purple* only as a saga of racial discrimination and domestic violence and the oppression of black men, and this message is that

We are the African and the trader. We are the Indian and the settler. We are the slaver and the enslaved. We are oppressor and oppressed. We are the woman and we are the men. We are the children.

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This essay evolved from a lecture on "*The Color Purple* : The Novel, The Movie, The Vision," given to the alumnae and students of Kobe College on November 28, 1986.

〈要 約〉

アリス・ウォーカーの『カラー・パープル』を読む

Catherine Broderick

アリス・ウォーカーが語る声の真実性、確実性は、本人のアメリカ南部のごくいなかの貧困な生活の経験と、そのような生活をのり越えようとした彼女の母親の勇気と、アリスに対するいろいろな形の努力とが基盤になってアリスを力づけた。『カラー・パープル』は第一にそのテーマであるシーリーが、貧困の中に生き、しかもあまり美しくない女性にも拘らず、他の人を幸せにし、自らも幸せになるという話。第二に黒人の話し方の形式で書かれていること。第三にいわゆる小説のスタイルではなく、ごく普通の女性の日常生活の中の事柄の積み重ねであること。以上三つの要素は、二つの女流文学の影響から生み出されたものと言える。

つまりその一つは英文学からの影響としての『ジェーン・エアー』であり、他は黒人女流作家のゾラニール・ハーストンの「フォークロアの研究」である。

『カラー・パープル』という小説はひとりの女性が自分の声を見出して、それを捕え、その一つ一つの経験をまた手仕事のパッチワークキルトを作るように、芸術作品を創造して行ったのである。小説のテーマは、一人の女性が自らの声で自己を確立していったということにある。

二人の姉妹は主人公の表裏一体を表すもので、一人の主人公の両面性を示す“文学的共鳴”であり、これはジェーン・エアーと、ベルタ・ロチェスターとの“文学的共鳴”を再現すると言える。二つの小説を比較すると多くの相似点が見出される。たとえば、「クラシック」な女性のめざめ方のパターンである。つまり、怒り一声一行動一自由一人間関係一そして幸せ、という型を示す。

『カラー・パール』は主題として特に一般的な人種差別、暴力の話ではなく、家庭内に於ける女性の生活の中で自分を見つけ、様々な経験を通してみがかれ自立していく過程での種々の人間関係を描いていく。その著者自身の言葉のように「サイキ」つまり精神の平和的和合を示していると言える。