

DISCOVERING THE COLOR PURPLE: A STUDY OF BLACK WOMEN'S  
SURIVIAL IN THE FICTION OF ALICE WALKER

by

RHONDA JOHNSON

A THESIS

Submitted to the Arts & Sciences Honors Program in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with Honors  
The University of Alabama

UNIVERSITY, ALABAMA

1983

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A number of people were most helpful to me as this thesis was being written. They include Professors Rose Gladney, Elizabeth Meese, and Clifford Hand, all of the University of Alabama; and Joe M. Johnson, Lucy Johnson, Richard Johnson, and Goose Tatum, who were extremely loving and supportive in various ways.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
The Tradition of Black Women's Creativity .....	3
Disloyalty to Civilization .....	10
The Dialectic Between the Internal and External World ..	14
Internal Power .....	23
Sisterhood .....	33
Spirituality .....	40
Walker's Revolutionary Philosophy .....	47
Internal Revolution .....	47
Extension of Walker's Philosophy .....	51
Conclusion .....	58

Out of the women's movement has come a body of women's literature that is different in several ways from that produced prior to it. First, there is simply more of it being written, published, and read. Second, it is becoming more honest. One of the most striking features of women's literature in the last twenty years is its directness and honesty in its attempts to dispell those male-perpetuated images of women. The process has been painful and gradual and, of course, did not start with the women's movement. But feminism has been behind the growing strength and truth in women's literary voices.

However, the voices are not uniform, as is becoming more evident in recent years. Black women, poor women, third-world women, and lesbians have experienced racism and discrimination within the mainstream of feminism, thus their literature has had to strive even harder to tell the truth of their lives, and have it heard. The women's movement has spawned a new and exciting body of women's literature, but it has yet to, in the words of Audre Lorde, "reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside . . . and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there."<sup>1</sup>

Minority women are developing strong voices in the collective surge of women's literature. Alice Walker is

one such writer. The body of her poetry and fiction has grown steadily since her first publication, a volume of poetry entitled Once, in 1968. In the course of her writing, which now includes three novels, three volumes of poetry, two volumes of short stories, a biography for children of the poet Langston Hughes, a Zora Neal Hurston reader, and numerous articles and essays, Alice Walker has spoken the truth of black women's lives with an increasing maturity and vision. Walker's writing is part of a rich tradition of black women's creativity, a tradition that has not only nurtured and inspired her, but has been nurtured and given new life by her. Walker's most recent novel, The Color Purple, published in 1982, represents a maturity in the tradition of black women's creativity, and in Walker's own fiction. The importance of The Color Purple as a pinnacle in Walker's work and women's literature is that it tells the truth about a tradition of creativity that has either been ignored, de-valued or distorted by the prevailing tradition of white male culture and often by mainstream feminism.

## The Tradition of Black Women's Creativity

Alice Walker was born in Eatonton, Georgia in 1944, the eighth child of share cropper parents. Walker was born and raised in Southern society's iron-clad tradition of white male supremacy. Yet she was nourished by another tradition that has given her the strength to become a truth-teller for her race and her gender. Lillian Smith writes that "Freud once said that woman is not well acculturated; she is, he stressed, retarded as a civilized person. I think what he mistook for her lack of civilization is woman's lack of loyalty to civilization."<sup>2</sup> The truths that Walker tells must be disloyal to civilization, because by the term "civilization" is meant that level of cultural and technological development reached by white males. Therefore, civilization often fails to recognize the cultural and social values of people who do not fit into this category. This results in a de-valuation of minority groups, such as blacks, Asian-Americans, Hispanics, women, and homosexuals. Because people in such groups often have differing values from the ones the white male civilization deems correct, they are often accused of being poorly acculturated, or retarded as civilized people. This puts such people at a disadvantage in society. Walker's writing

seeks to give value to cultural and social differences within civilization. Walker writes against the triple prejudices of racism, sexism, and heterosexism. As a black woman, she writes against the racist and sexist values of civilization that relegate her to a second-class status in society. Furthermore, because she refuses to valorize heterosexism in her fiction, she also enfranchises lesbian women. Thus her disloyalty to civilization takes on an even more complete nature than the "lack of loyalty" Smith refers to. Walker's fiction, especially The Color Purple, is written in the tradition of a triple disloyalty that has been expressed throughout black women's creativity, although the fruits of their creativity have long been ignored by civilization.

On the surface, it would seem that Walker came from a personal tradition that lacked creativity. No one else in her family ever became a poet or a writer. In an article in Ms. magazine, published at about the same time as The Color Purple, Walker comments, "Sometimes I thought I'd gotten into the family by mistake. I always seemed to need more peace and quiet than anybody else. That's very difficult when you're living with people in three or four rooms. So I found what privacy I could by walking in the fields."<sup>3</sup> Yet, it was Walker's mother who first reinforced her daughter's differences. Although her mother worked in other people's kitchens all day, she did not demand that her

daughter bear the burden of the household work as the only daughter remaining at home in a family of men. Alice Walker's mother allowed her daughter to do her duties out of love instead of the expectations of her sex, and she reinforced Walker's young talent with the assurance that her reading would not be interrupted. Throughout Walker's early life, her mother instilled in her feelings of independence, self-sufficiency, and confidence in her talent.

Walker was also influenced by the creativity she recognized in her mother's life, and countless women like her mother--women whose hopes and dreams and artistic yearnings have been smothered under the burden of their difficult lives. In an article entitled "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" Walker writes of the unknown black women who were "driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release."<sup>4</sup> And yet, for many women like Walker's own mother, this mutilated creative spirit would manifest itself in black women's lives in ways unrecognized by "civilization" as art. In another article containing a description of a visit to a sharecropper's shack 22 years after Walker had lived there with her family as a child, Walker describes the beautiful flowers her mother planted there that had multiplied, while the shack itself was rotted and unused. Her mother's flower gardens, planted and cultivated at every house her family inhabited, were her own artistic

attempts to order "the universe in the image of her personal conception of beauty."<sup>5</sup> For Walker, her own mother links her to a tradition of unknown foremothers who exercised their disloyalty to civilization in ways that were often regarded as crazy, or ignored altogether. The following passage and poem is Walker's own eloquent expression of this:

Her face, as she prepares to the Art  
that is her gift, is a legacy of respect  
she leaves to me, for all that illuminates  
and cherishes life. She had handed down respect  
for the possibilities--and the will to grasp them.

For her, so hindered and intruded  
upon in so many ways, being an artist  
has still been a daily part of her life.  
This ability to hold on, and in very simple  
ways, is work Black women have done for a  
very long time.

This poem is not enough, but it is  
something, for the women who literally covered  
the holes in our walls with sunflowers:

They were women then  
My mama's generation  
Husky of voice--stout of  
Step  
With fists as well as  
Hands  
How they battered down  
Doors  
And ironed  
Starched white  
Shirts  
How they led  
Armies  
Headragged Generals  
Across mined  
Field  
Booby-trapped  
Ditches

To discover books  
 Desks  
 A place for us  
 How they knew what we  
Must know  
 Without knowing a page  
 Of it  
 Themselves.

Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength--in search of my mother's garden, I found my own.<sup>6</sup>

The tradition of her foremothers that Walker pays tribute to teaches a kind of fortitude, emanating from within the individual, that allows the black woman to maintain strength, independence, and creativity of spirit in the face of oppressive forces. In an article on Alice Walker entitled "Her Mother's Gifts," Mary Helen Washington writes "that the long chain of presences that inhabit the literature of black women did not convey any sense of inferiority, submissive femininity, or intellectual powerlessness, that what these mothers passed on would take you, as Bessie Smith sang, anywhere in the world you wanted to go."<sup>7</sup>

In this passage, Washington refers to the lyrics of a traditional blues song sung by Bessie Smith, which say

I ain't good-lookin and I ain't got  
 waist-long hair  
 I say ain't good-lookin and I ain't got  
 waist-long hair  
 But my mama gave me something<sup>8</sup>  
 that'll take my anywhere.

The tradition of black women's disloyalty to civilization is perhaps most evident in their music. Unlike reading and writing, it was never illegal for black women to sing, nor was it inaccessible as an art form, like painting and sculpture. Specifically, the blues of Southern black women like "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith give voice to the silent lives of the unknown mothers Walker recognizes. Both Rainey and Smith sang of the lives of black women--their bad luck, poverty, and two-timing men. But throughout their music, they sing of the strength and endurance of these women. Walker often pays tribute to the tradition of black women's music in her work, directly in dedications like the one in her volume of short stories published in 1980, You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down, and indirectly in characters in her fiction such as the character of Shug Avery in The Color Purple.

Perhaps the most influential link in the chain of presences in Walker's writing is the folklorist and writer Zora Neale Hurston. In the foreword to Robert E. Hemenway's biography of Hurston, Walker comments on Hurston's place in the tradition of black women's creativity:

In my mind, Zora Neale Hurston, Billie Holiday, and Bessie Smith form a sort of unholy trinity. Zora belongs in the tradition of black women singers, rather than among the "literati," at least to me. There were the extreme highs and lows of her life, her undaunted pursuit of adventure, her passionate emotional and sexual

experience, and her love of freedom. Like Billie and Bessie she followed her own road, believed in her own gods, pursued her own dreams, and refused to separate herself from "common" people. It would have been nice if the three of them had one another to turn to in time of need.<sup>9</sup>

It is evident throughout her work that Walker has relied on the spirit of these women in her attempts to write the truth of black women's lives. Her creativity is linked to the tradition of creativity upheld by black women. As a writer she has been committed to seeking out that tradition, and conveying the truth of its disloyalty.

## Disloyalty to Civilization

While Lillian Smith's observation about woman's lack of loyalty to civilization applies to all women, it takes on a different nature in the lives of minority women. The disloyalty that Smith refers to in a speech made at the University of Florida in 1962 is that of Southern white women, who must come to terms with the ideology of race and segregation in their culture, but are not excluded from civilization because of their race and their sex, as black women are. Walker, as a Southern black woman, writes under what she calls "the condition of twin 'afflictions'."<sup>10</sup> Not only is her gender considered culturally inferior, but her race renders her doubly inferior in the eyes of a white, male oriented culture. In her essay "One Child of One's Own," Walker discusses the dilemma of the black female artist in this culture, the demand that choice must be made between race and sex: one is either black or female. She writes:

Fortunately, she had not once believed that all white women who called themselves feminists were any the less racist, because work after ambitious work issued from the country's presses, and, with but a few shining examples white women feminists revealed themselves as incapable as white and black men of comprehending blackness and feminism in the same

body, not to mention within the same imagination. It is, apparently, inconvenient, if not downright mind straining, for white women scholars to think of black women as women, perhaps because "woman" (like "man" among white males) is a name they are claiming for themselves, and themselves alone. Racism decrees that if they are now women (years ago they were ladies, but fashions change) the black woman must, perforce, be something else. (While they were "ladies" black women could be "women," and so on.<sup>11</sup>

In a society that would rob her of her essential humanity for even one of her "afflictions," Walker finds pride and strength in both of them. She reminds us that "of course black people come in both sexes," while maintaining that "to the extent that black women disassociate themselves from the women's movement, they abandon their responsibilities to women throughout the world."<sup>12</sup> Walker holds that black women should not be forced to choose between loyalties to race or gender, but should seek to discover the unique truth of being black and female, and how the black woman survives in society with the integrity of that truth intact.

The central concern in Walker's fiction is that black women are unable to survive with the integrity of the truth of being black and female intact. Within white male civilization, black women are forced to live fragmented, unfulfilled lives. In a civilization that does not recognize their values and accomplishments, they are compelled

to acquire the values of society in order to be recognized as civilized people. This leads to a discrepancy between the internal and external lives of black women. In "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Walker sees this discrepancy as "contrary instincts" that divide the minds of black people.<sup>13</sup> This fragmentation leads to creativity for which there is no release, and the limitation of spirituality, talent, and ability--in short, all of those things which enable human beings to lead lives of value, unity, and self-respect. Walker writes of the consequences of the fragmentation that civilization inflicts on black women: "For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not 'saints,' but artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality--which is the basis of Art--that the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane."<sup>14</sup> Walker seeks to eliminate the waste of black women's talent and creativity that occurs because the civilization they live in de-values them. She would take them out from under the burden of their "contrary instincts" so that they could live by their natural instincts as black women. This would enable them to live unified lives. This central concern may be defined as a hope for wholeness.

In Walker's fiction, she is concerned with wholeness for the black community as well as for individual black women. Walker's characters inevitably face the problem of structuring and maintaining the integrity of the black community within a culture that has been structured to exclude it. The disloyalty in Walker's fiction is aimed at re-presenting the world so that individuals may live as whole human beings within a whole society. The Color Purple represents this idea in its maturity, thus it will be the focal point of this study. Walker's earlier novels, Meridian and The Third Life of Grange Copeland, and her two volumes of short stories, In Love and Trouble and You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down, will serve to reinforce themes in The Color Purple.

## The Dialectic Between the Internal and External World

Walker's fiction deals with disloyalty in the internal and the external worlds of the individual. For her black women characters struggling to survive and to live fulfilled lives, Walker structures an internal world that is disloyal to the oppressive external world, and in doing this, takes her characters beyond civilization. A strong, independent internal world is the first step towards wholeness for black women, but it is not the only dimension in Walker's disloyalty. She is also concerned about the external world; she is not content in her fiction to portray lone individuals spiritually rising above the cruelty and corruption of the society that oppresses them. Walker's knowledge of the truth about black women's lives and the civilization they must live in requires her to add another dimension to the message of her writing.

Alice Walker's writing constantly demonstrates the dialectic between the individual's internal and external lives, between the inner world of one's consciousness and one's role in the external world of society. For the black woman, who suffers in the external world because of her race and her sex, this dialectic is magnified. We see in Walker's fiction the black woman's struggle to maintain her

inner integrity in a civilization that denies the worth of her race and sex, and we see the disloyalty to that civilization that the black woman must feel in order to be loyal to herself. In an article written by Walker for Ms. magazine in which she makes a trip to author Flannery O'Connor's homw, which is minutes away from the sharecropper's shack Walker's family once lived in, Walker compares her old home with O'Connor's. Here the dialectic between the internal life and the external life is manifested in the contrast between the lives of Southern black and white people, which is revealed to Walker in the comparison of the two houses. Walker writes:

Whenever I visit antebellum homes in the South, with their spacious rooms, their grand staircases, their shaded back windows that, without the thickly planted trees would look out into the now vanished slave quarters in the back, this is invariably my thought. I stand in the backyard gazing up at the windows, then stand at the windows inside looking down into the backyard, and between the me that is on the ground and the me that is at the windows, History is caught.<sup>15</sup>

This metaphor aptly describes the black woman's place in society. She must stand within herself and view herself in the external world as society defines and limits her. Somehow she must survive this fragmentation. In The Color Purple Walker emphasizes the internal world as the fundamental basis of the individual's strength to survive in

the external world.

The Color Purple is the story of two sisters, Celie and Nettie. At the opening of the novel, Celie is one of the most pitiful, hopeless characters ever to exist in fiction. Celie is poor, illiterate, ugly, and seemingly weak of character. She is raped by her stepfather (whom she believes to be her father) and gives birth to two children by him, who are taken away from her by the stepfather. She is then forced to marry a man whom we know throughout most of the book as Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, who only wants her to look after his motherless children and keep his home. Celie's life is one of hopeless misery--Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is cruel to her and beats her, and he deprives her of contact with the only person who has ever really loved her, her sister Nettie. Nettie, Celie's younger sister, is an intelligent, promising young woman. Celie saves her from being raped by both the stepfather and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, and sends her to the minister's family that Celie has discovered has adopted the two children her stepfather has taken away from her. The minister, Samuel, and his wife Corrine, take Nettie into their home and educate her. When Samuel and Corrine go to Africa as missionaries, they take Nettie with them. Nettie has the opportunity to escape the oppressive life that imprisons Celie. She becomes an educated woman with an active participation in the external world.

The novel is presented in the form of letters written by the two sisters, the only introduction to this structure being one line occurring before the first letter Celie writes after her stepfather rapes her when she is fourteen years old: "you better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy."<sup>16</sup> In order to survive, Celie must have some outlet for the misery of her life. Alice Walker has said, "I have written to stay alive. I've written to survive."<sup>17</sup> In the same way, Celie writes her first struggling, painful letter to God. Just as Walker writes and Walker's mother planted elaborate, imaginative gardens, Celie must find some way to survive in a situation in which she is powerless and her rage and rebellion, if she had any, would be impotent. She is a black woman living in poverty and ignorance in a civilization tightly constructed to keep her that way.

Walker's characterization of Celie is in some ways drawn from an earlier character created by Zora Neale Hurston in her novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God. In Hurston's novel, the heroine's grandmother, whom she calls Nanny, is much like Celie. Nanny, like Celie, has lived a life as a black woman in white civilization. Nanny, although a minor character in Hurston's book, has become a symbol in black women's literature for the "twin afflictions" of race and gender that black women experience. Nanny tells her granddaughter:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his women-folks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.<sup>18</sup>

Celie is a "mule uh de world." Furthermore, she is the most unlikely of characters to be disloyal to the civilization that makes her that way.

But unlike Nanny in Hurston's novel, Celie--the "mule uh de world"--is the major character in The Color purple. Celie's first nine letters to God portray a life of such misery and hopelessness that a less skilled writer than Walker would have lost her audience to despair by the end of the ninth letter, if not before. However, Walker refuses to let us consign Celie to the oblivion inhabited by women like Hurston's Nanny. She skillfully draws the reader so close to her character that although her life seems to be technically over after her marriage to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Celie cannot be abandoned. This is because Walker gives the reader access to the internal life of her character. It is the first step toward drawing the focus of the novel inward, so that Walker may explore the internal dimensions of disloyalty.

As Celie functions in the novel to emphasize the internal world, Nettie's function is to parallel Celie's

development in an external dimension. As a missionary to Africa, Nettie's life is devoted to external concerns. She goes to Africa in hopes of bringing Christianity and educational enlightenment to her African brothers and sisters. When she first arrives in the Olinka village where she and Samuel's family will live, their goal is "the uplift of black people everywhere."<sup>19</sup> They will be bringing "civilization" to the Africans. Nettie represents the tradition of black men and women who are educated for the purpose of uplifting and enlightening the black community. Having attended Spelman College in Atlanta, an institution with a long tradition of service to the black community, Alice Walker is herself a part of such a tradition. Thus, the the improvement of the condition of black people in a society is the basis of Walker's concern in the external world. As Nettie's attitudes about the African people evolve, and as she develops an understanding of differences in the external world, she will mirror Celie's development of strength in her internal world. In this way, Nettie plays an important part in the dialectic between the internal and external in The Color Purple.

However, the internal world is the focus of Walker's philosophy in The Color Purple, and the technical aspects of the novel reinforces this. The epistolary style also serves to eliminate literary devices that distance the reader from the story. There is no omniscient narrator

providing commentary on Celie's plight; there is not even the distance of the first person narrator relating past events in her life. Through Celie's letters to God, the reader inhabits Celie's thoughts. The style of the novel and its point of view merge, enabling us as readers to merge with Celie. We are inside her head. This is the bond that prevents our abandoning Celie in her misery. Mel Watkins observes that "what makes Miss Walker's exploration so indelibly affecting is the choice of a narrative style that, without the intrusion of the author, forces intimate identification with the heroine."<sup>20</sup> Walker's choice of language also directs the reader away from external judgements and into Celie's internal consciousness. Gloria Steinem expresses this in her article on Walker in Ms. magazine: "When these people talk, there are no self-conscious apostrophes and contractions to assure us that the writer, of course, really knows what the proper spelling and grammar should be. There are no quotation marks to keep us at our distance."<sup>21</sup> Walker structures The Color Purple to reinforce the emphasis on the internal world, which is the major thematic focus of the novel. The style of the novel, closely combined with the point of view, focuses on Celie's thoughts, on the world as Celie sees it. Written in "black folk English," the language of the book contributes to the internal direction with its clarity, directness, and honesty. In these ways, Walker sets the tone for the major

theme in The Color Purple, a theme that she has threaded throughout her fiction before making it the center of this novel.

Walker's disloyalty to civilization is at the heart of the major themes in The Color Purple. Her lack of loyalty to the dictates of white male culture is not of a reactionary or liberal nature, but a revolutionary one. Walker's disloyalty to civilization does not merely react to the injustices in civilization, or refuse to adhere to its orthodoxies and traditions; it seeks fundamental changes in what we call civilization. Society must be re-created and its structures re-defined before the black woman may live as a whole human being. To create whole and satisfying lives within society, black women must first live in a society that recognizes and affirms their humanity--the worth of their race and of their sex. In her writing, Walker takes Smith's concept of disloyalty and activates it. For, in the words of Audre Lorde, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Walker's work is about change. That is the form her disloyalty takes. Throughout her fiction she has advocated change on every level. Her work deals with change within the individual, personal relationships, and societal structures. But for Walker change must be disloyal; it must be revolutionary.

The fundamental values by which worth is measured and rewarded must be re-defined. Then civilization may be re-created into a whole place in which people can survive intact.

The themes of Walker's work are her answers to how to do this. Her attitudes toward revolution and her methods of disloyalty take shape in the themes of her fiction; they grow and change as the author herself grows. The Color Purple contains the literary maturity of the wisdom and experience of an author who has lived and written her disloyalty for the sake of her survival.

The Color Purple is perhaps the most rebelliously disloyal of Walker's works. Even more so than The Third Life of Grange Copeland, in which a poor Southern black man commits murder in his revolt against his oppression by white men, or Meridian, the story of an intelligent young black woman's part in the civil rights movement of the Sixties. Walker's attitudes toward rebellion and disloyalty progress in the course of her novels and short stories from an emphasis on the need to effect changes in the external world to the individual's need to effect changes within herself or himself. In The Color Purple, Walker emphasizes disloyalty towards the external world as it exists in the internal world of the individual, specifically Celie.

## I. Internal Power

In *Celie*, we have a character who is possessed of no power, freedom, or identity in the external world. The "twin afflictions" of her race and gender will seemingly keep her in her position, with no power over her life of poverty, no freedom from her slavish duties and Mr. \_\_\_\_'s abuse, and no identity in her role as Mr. \_\_\_\_'s wife and the stepmother of his children. Celie's refuge is her internal strength; her survival depends on the internal world of her letters. Powerless in civilization, she refuses to be powerless in her own mind. In *Celie*, Walker develops a character who must, in disloyalty to the civilization that oppresses her, develop internal power in order to survive. In a re-definition of power and its values, Walker creates a heroine whose power exists within, instead of in the external world of society where power traditionally lies. Not only is Celie possessed of internal power, but she is also able to use it to withstand oppressive factors in her life, thereby surviving in her world. Celie does not rebel against the circumstances of her life. Somehow she knows that it would not work, and that it will take all of her strength just to survive (at least in the beginning of her story). When Nettie who has run away from their stepfather, comes to stay with Celie at Mr. \_\_\_\_'s house, she tells her:

Don't let them run over you, Nettie say. You got to let them know who got the upper hand.

They got it, I say.

But she keep on. You got to fight. You got to fight.

But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive.<sup>23</sup>

And later, when Mr. \_\_\_\_ has made Nettie leave, Celie thinks her sister is dead because she has not written Celie as she promised. (Celie is unaware that Mr. \_\_\_\_ intercepts Nettie's letters.) With Nettie gone, Celie has been deprived of the only human being she loves, and her life is even more miserable and hopeless. Her only strength comes from within, from the fundamental basis of life itself.

Mr. \_\_\_\_'s sister tells Celie:

You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself.

I don't say nothing. I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive.<sup>24</sup>

So Celie survives the only way she can. As hopeless as her position in the external world is, she has the inner strength to affirm her own life, which is in itself a disloyal act in a society that does not value her life at all. In this way Walker places a high value on survival, so that women like Celie and Huston's Nanny in Their Eyes Were Watching God may be re-viewed as valuable people for their strength and fortitude in the face of their oppressive

circumstances.

From this fundamental basis of internal strength, Celie builds the internal power that enables her to survive and eventually change her life. Part of Celie's internal strength comes from her dreams and images of Shug Avery. Celie first hears Shug's name when she overhears Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ talking to her stepfather, whom Celie calls "He" in her letters. Celie is able to see a picture of Shug, which becomes an image she integrates into her internal world: "I ast her to give me the picture. An all night long I stare at it. An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery. She be dress to kill, whirling and laughing."<sup>25</sup> Later in the book *Shug Avery*, a blues singer who has been Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s lover, will be many things to Celie, but at this point she exists only as an image inside Celie's head. This image becomes a spark of hope for Celie. When Shug comes to their town to sing, Celie has an announcement with Shug's picture on it. She thinks:

Shug Avery standing upside a piano,  
elbow crook, hand on her hip. She wearing a  
hat like Indian Chiefs. Her mouth open  
showing all her teef and don't nothing seem  
to be troubling her mind. Come one, come all,  
it say. The Queen Honeybee is back in  
town.

Lord, I wants to go so bad. Not to  
dance. Not to drink. Not to play card.  
Not even to hear Shug Avery sing. I just  
be thankful to lay eyes on her.<sup>26</sup>

Celie's fantasies about Shug desire no end other than to witness such a person's existence, an existence which is unlike Celie's.

The harshness of her life requires her to fortify herself against it, and she does so with her letters, her affirmations of the fact of being alive, and her images of Shug Avery. Celie begins to gain, out of necessity, the power to withstand Mr. \_\_\_\_'s cruelty. Celie writes in a letter to God:

He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, Celie begins to draw strength to withstand the external world by forming an identity within herself that identifies with things that do not belong within society's approved images, such as the trees in nature and "bad" women like Shug. Although Celie will eventually be led into more of an external life by her relationships with women--Sofia, who marries Mr. \_\_\_\_'s son Harpo; Squeak, who lives with Harpo after Sofia leaves him; and most important, Shug Avery--she will continue to rely on her inner fortitude to survive the oppression of her life, which is embodied in Mr. \_\_\_\_.

Nettie also experiences internal change in her involvement with the external world. Like Celie, writing letters gives Nettie internal strength. Nettie's involvement in the external world brings loneliness and uncertainty. She writes in a letter to Celie:

I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was. Well, now I know what you meant. And whether God will read letters or no, I know you will go on writing them; which is guidance enough for me. Anyway, when I don't write to you I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray, locked up inside myself and choking on my own heart. I am so lonely, Celie.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, in both Nettie and Celie we see the need for an internal outlet in order to have a catharsis for the pain and uncertainty that is part of the individual's dealings in her external world.

Nettie also experiences change in her attitudes toward the Africans. These are internal changes that enable her to deal with her external world. Nettie learns that differences must be tolerated, and as she lives with the Olinka people, she learns to respect their culture, instead of trying to impose her own idea of culture. For example, Nettie learns to respect their ceremonies and customs, even though she does not always agree with them. When Tashi, a village girl who is befriended by Olivia, (Samuel and Corrine's daughter) is forbidden by her parents to learn

what Nettie tries to teach her, Nettie does not outwardly revolt against the Olinka's beliefs that women should not be educated. Instead she will work within the limits of Olinka life to educate Tashi and Olivia.

Nettie begins to realize that, while people are different, people's intolerance of difference is a universal trait. For example, the Olinka men subjugate their women in much the same way American men do. She writes:

There is a way that the men speak to the women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don't even look at women when women are speaking. They look at the ground and bend their heads toward the ground. The women also do not "look in a man's face" as they say. To "look in a man's face" is a brazen thing to do. They look instead at his feet or his knees. And what can I say to this? Again, it is our own behavior around Pa.<sup>29</sup>

While Nettie is oriented toward the external world in a way that Celie is not, she is also involved in internal change. Mirroring Celie's development of internal strength, Nettie develops an internal understanding of the external world. Specifically, Nettie becomes aware of the differences of people within society, and comes to understand people's intolerance of the differences of others. This knowledge gives her the inner strength to survive, and understand her external world.

In *Celie*, Walker develops a character who survives oppression by being internally disloyal to it. Celie must possess this internal power before she can gain the strength to leave Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, which she eventually does. In Walker's two previous novels, The Third Life of Grange Copeland and Meridian, the characters do not gain this inner strength and power until after they have battled the external world, the white male civilization in which black women and men have no power. In The Third Life of Grange Copeland, the main character is a poor black man who flees the oppression of racism and poverty in the South to go to the North, leaving his family behind. Grange Copeland finds that the North is not much better for blacks than the South, and in his misery is driven to murder as the solution for his oppression. He walks away from a drowning white woman whose contempt for him represented the contempt and oppression from which he had suffered at the hands of the whites all of his life. Grange's revolt, unlike Celie's, occurs actively and violently within the society to which he is disloyal. This passage from the novel demonstrates Walker's early ideas about revolution:

The death of the woman was simple murder, he thought, and soul condemning; but in a strange way, a bizarre way, it liberated him. He felt in some way repaid for his own unfortunate life--and the denying of the life of her child--the taking of her life, not the taking of her money, that forced him to want to try to live again. He believed that,

against his will, he had stumbled on the necessary act that black men must commit to regain, or to manufacture their manhood, their self-respect. They must kill their oppressors.

He never ceased to believe this, adding only to this belief, in later years, that if one kills he must not shun death in his turn.<sup>30</sup>

Grange later finds inner peace through his relationship with his granddaughter, Ruth, but not until he has found an external solution to his oppression. At the end of the book he must kill again to protect Ruth from Brownfield, Grange's son. This time he is required to die for the life he has taken.

Meridian, Walker's second novel, also deals with the question of violent revolution against one's oppressors. Meridian grapples with this question throughout her work in the civil rights movement in Mississippi. Meridian's work in the movement is an active external attempt at revolution, but she is unable to accept murder as a part of her actions, as Grange does. Meridian must turn inward in order to find her place in the external revolution, and as she struggles to reconcile her inner integrity with her disloyalty to civilization, she grows physically ill. In the dialectic between the internal and the external that is constantly present in Walker's work, we see Meridian's physical condition mirror her spiritual condition. As she works and lives with her people in the rural South, Meridian begins to reconcile her questions and to

understand her place in revolution, and the place of revolution in society. She thinks:

I have been allowed to see how the new capacity to do anything, including kill, for our freedom--beyond sporadic acts of violence--is to emerge, and flower, but I am not yet at the point of being able to kill anyone myself, nor--except for the false urgings that come to me in periods of grief and rage--will I ever be. I am a failure then, as the kind of revolutionary Anne-Marion and her acquaintances were.

Perhaps it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries--those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black and therefore go right ahead--and when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without a soul. If I can only do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all.<sup>31</sup>

Meridian must turn inward in order to reconcile her place in the external world. As she gains spiritual health, she also becomes stronger physically, which exemplified the idea that the condition of the internal world is mirrored in the condition of the external world.

In these two novels we see Walker's progression toward her characterization of Celie. In The Third Life of Grange Copeland, the character finds a violent solution to the need for revolution, and although he later finds

inner strength, he continues to believe in violent action in the external world as the most effective form of disloyalty. In Meridian, the dialectic between the internal and the external is more balanced, with the final solution being the need for both. Meridian moves from activity in an external revolution to an internal reconciliation of her place in revolution. As human beings, Meridian ends up more more whole and balanced than Grange does, for Grange must (and does) lose his life in his solution. In The Color Purple, however, Walker establishes a strong inner life in her character from the beginning. In Celie we have human life at its most miserable; therefore, Celie must have fundamental inner strength before she may gain strength in the external world.

Throughout her fiction, Walker exhibits faith in the individual's capacity for inner strength. This is Walker at her most optimistic. Her fiction contains hope in individuals, and in their capacity to create strong inner lives that help them to withstand oppression from a hostile outer world. Many of her characters are people who have effected changes in their inner lives, which changes their roles in their outward lives. Much of Walker's writing is pessimistic about society as a whole, and it is full of the violence and pain that society inflicts on people, especially black men and women. In The Color Purple Walker's philosophy has evolved to an almost

total emphasis on the internal life of the individual, and therein lies her solution about disloyalty and revolution.

## II. Sisterhood

Walker has structured her novel to emphasize Celie's inner life, and it is the strength of this life that allows her to withstand her external world. As Celie struggles to keep Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s cruelty from totally destroying her, she is strengthened by her relationships with women. In The Color Purple, sisterhood is a step beyond the inner life of the individual, but it is to be interpreted as another facet of Walker's internal world. Sisterhood is a source of strength for Celie because it is disloyal to civilization. It is not a part of the external world, because it is a network of bonds and relationships that the patriarchal tradition--which extends to black males as well as whites--fails to understand or give significance. In the network of meaningful relationships in our society, sisterhood is regarded in the category of the "Other." Thus, Celie's relationships with women are of an internal nature in that they are in opposition to relationships given importance by the patriarchy.

The sisterhood that is born of women's relationships becomes an important part of black women's survival. It allows them to achieve a wholeness that individuals, regardless of the richness of their inner lives, cannot

achieve alone, and that a traditional civilization refuses to allow. Celie has an inner world which enables her to survive the hostility of her outer world, but it is through her relationships with women that she is able to create a world apart from the civilization that oppresses her. The person whom Celie loves first in her life, when she can feel no other emotion, is her sister Nettie. Their relationship is a literal sisterhood. The bond of blood ties them together, along with the bond of mutual love and concern for the other's welfare. Celie sacrifices herself to her stepfather, and then in her marriage to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ so that Nettie may have a better chance in life. Celie's relationships with women begin with physical sisterhood, which is within the realm of relationships recognized by the patriarchal definitions of relationships altogether.

In her relationship with Sofia, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s son Harpo's wife, Celie shows true concern for someone other than Nettie. Sofia is strong of mind as well as body; she is the first person Celie has seen stand up to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Sofia's strength reminds Celie of her own weakness, and in her jealousy she betrays Sofia:

I like Sofia, but she don't act like me at all. If she talking when Harpo and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ come in the room, she keep right on. If they ast her where something at, she say she don't know. Keep talking.

I think bout this when Harpo ast me what he ought to do to her to make her mind.

I don't mention how happy he is now. How  
three years pass and he still whistle and  
sing. I think bout how every time I jump  
when Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ call me, she look surprise.  
And like she pity me.

Beat her. I say.<sup>32</sup>

This incident teaches Celie the mistake of betraying another woman to patriarchal authority. It is not only a betrayal of Sofia, but a betrayal of herself. The betrayal disorders Celie's internal world. She begins to have insomnia, a physical manifestation of her troubled spirit. In Walker's fiction, physical illnesses almost always symbolize a sickness of the spirit. It is not until Sofia confronts Celie with what she has done that Celie is able to reconcile the wrong within herself. Celie confesses that she was jealous of Sofia's ability to fight and Sofia tells Celie she reminds her of her own mother who suffered in much the same way Celie does at the hands of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Their honesty allows them to form a caring relationship in spite of their differing natures. Celie learns not to let a patriarchal tradition use her to oppress women who may not be like her, but who suffer the same oppression. In her talk with Sofia, Celie is able to laugh for the first time.

This initial bonding together against civilization enables Celie to grow in her relationships with women. In Celie's relationship with Shug Avery, sisterhood becomes complete, and allows the image of Celie's dreams to become

a real part of her life. Through Shug, Celie is able to give and receive love, and find outlets for her creativity and abilities. When Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ brings Shug to their home to recuperate from an illness, Celie feels no threat or jealousy. Because Shug is considered a "bad" woman in the community, nursing Shug back to health is Celie's first external act of disloyalty. She fights for the first time in her life. Not only does Celie make Shug physically well, but her healing also makes Shug Spiritually well. When Shug first arrives, Celie says she is evil, and that her evil keeps her alive. As she gets well, she becomes more good than evil. Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ stand up for Shug against Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s family and the rest of the community, and at this moment Celie feels she has a place in the external world. The following passage, beginning with a comment from Shug to Tobias, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s brother, reinforces this:

All womens not alike, Tobias, she say.  
Belive it or not.

Oh, I believe it, he say. Just can't  
prove it to the world.

First time I think about the world.

What the world got to do with anything,  
I think. Then I see myself sitting there  
quilting between Shug Avery and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_.  
Us three set together against Tobias and his  
fly speck box of chocolate. For the first  
time in my life, I feels just right.<sup>33</sup>

Soon, Shug begins to fight for Celie. She does not leave when she finds out that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ beats Celie when Shug is

not there, and it is Shug who tells Celie about her own body and about sex.

Shug and Celie develop a relationship that is more complete and healthy than any other relationship in the novel. They love both spiritually and physically, with honesty and respect. This is love as it should be; in Walker's hope for wholeness, it is an example of wholeness in relationships. Celie and Shug are the only people who combine honesty, caring, and respect in their relationship. Walker's description of a love scene between them is one of the most beautiful ever written:

My mama die, I tell Shug. My sister Nettie run away. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ come git me to take care his rotten children. He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me, I say.

She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she have off and kiss me on the mouth.

Um, she say, like she surprise. I kiss her back, say um, too. Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other.

I don't know nothing bout it, I say to Shug.

I don't know much, she say.

Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth.

Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too.<sup>34</sup>

Celie and Shug's relationship is in itself disloyal to patriarchal civilization. They create a relationship outside the sphere of civilization's approved relationships, and in

it they experience the tenderness, respect, and love that they have not found in "accepted" relationships. Celie has never experienced a satisfying physical or emotional relationship with a man. Shug has had fulfilling physical relationships, but they lack the spiritual dimension of her relationship with Celie. Therefore, their relationship represents that completeness and unity that defines wholeness for Walker, and since it is a relationship between women, it represents her disloyalty to patriarchal rules of human interaction.

Celie is able to become a whole person through her own inner world and the network of sisterhood she inhabits. Walker does not bring her characters to health in this way in order to escape confrontation with the external world. Nor is the internal world of the individual and of women's relationships meant to be a substitute for the external world. Instead, it is a recreation of the world, shunning the restrictive definitions and roles of society. In this way Walker re-defines the traditional value system. Celie refuses to need the values of the external world. Celie has been stripped of what civilization defines as civilized, and so when she refuses its values she has nothing more to lose. Walker's disloyalty to civilization demands revolution, which evolves as her philosophy matures from violent social revolution to spiritual revolution.

Celie and Shug's relationship is a claim for different power and different values, and enables Celie to survive within a hostile society. Their relationship demonstrates the wholeness to be found in sisterhood.

Likewise, the wholeness of The Color Purple as a novel seems to find its strength in the sisterhood Walker finds in the tradition of black women's creativity. It is as if the spirits of women like Zora Neale Hurston, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holliday haunt the novel to lend Walker the added strength of their own disloyalty. Their images appear in the character of Shug Avery. Shug's sensuous vitality and creativity is drawn from these women and their art. The picture of Shug that Celie obtains at the first of the book describes her dressed in furs with her foot up on a motorcar. The description resembles a photograph of Hurston given to Walker by Hurston's brother, in which she is dressed in pants, boots, and broadbrim hat, with her foot up on the runningboard of a bright red car. Shug also loves to wear pants, which Celie makes for her. Shug starts Celie making pants when Celie is paralyzed by her murderous rage against Albert (after she discovers he has been hiding Nettie's letters). The pants-making starts out as an outlet for her violent urges, becomes an outlet for both those urges and creative ones, and is finally a talent that is offered up to Shug in Celie's love for her. Walker has said that she writes as an outlet for her violent

rage against a society that oppresses her. It is as if Alice Walker has written The Color Purple as an offering to the creative tradition Hurston inspires in her, so that she may come to terms with her disloyalty through art instead of violence.

### III. Spirituality

In The Color Purple, the wholeness and survival made possible by sisterhood enables Celie to commit the ultimate act of disloyalty. She denies the spirituality forced upon her by the external world and re-creates her spirituality within her internal world. Specifically, she frees herself from the white man's God, and comes to see her own spirituality as valuable. Walker struggles with this theme throughout her work before she comes to a complete affirmation of it in The Color Purple. In her book of short stories, In Love and Trouble, the story "The Welcome Table" is about an old black woman who is thrown out of a white church. This story works as a symbol for the place of blacks in Christianity. In her article in The Black Scholar entitled "The Contrary Women of Alice Walker," Barbara Christian writes that "according to white Southern thought, Christianity is the system upon which its culture and definition of man and woman is based. At the center of that system is the image of a white Jesus."<sup>35</sup> Black spirituality has been molded to exist within a white

religion. Yet, it creates confusion and discomfort for whites when they are confronted with black spirituality. In this story, the old black woman internalizes the image of the white people's Jesus and makes it an image that enriches her own spirituality. Christian supports this idea: "Ironically Jesus' picture, which she has stolen from a white woman she worked for, is the old black woman's source of solace. But Walker does not present the old woman's white Jesus as an affront to her blackness; rather through the dynamics of her imagination and her culture, the old woman transforms this image into her own."<sup>36</sup>

Another story, "The Diary of an African Nun," demonstrates the paradox between black spirituality and white civilization more obviously. We see this immediately in the title in the words "African Nun," which is a clear juxtaposition of terms. The black woman in the story, a Catholic Nun, must reconcile the sterility and life-denial of white civilization's religion, Christianity, with the fecund life-force of her native religion, which as a nun she must consider heathen. In the story, Christ is a pale lover with whom she has entered into a sterile marriage, and she must reconcile this with her heritage, which Christianity would have her deny. Her prayers contain the essence of this contradiction:

What have I or my mountains to do with  
a childless marriage, or with eyes that can  
see only the snow; or with you or friends of

yours who do not believe that you are  
really dead--pious faithful who do not yet  
realize that barrenness is death?

For what is my faith in the spring and the  
eternal melting of snows (you will ask) but  
your belief in the Resurrection? Could I  
convince one so wise that my belief bears  
more fruit?

How to teach a barren world to dance?  
It is a contradiction that divides the world.<sup>37</sup>

Celie's spiritual questioning, which is paralleled by her  
sister Nettie's, involves the same essential dilemma.

Christianity exists for the benefit of the white world, al-  
though it would impose its doctrines on other peoples.

Black people are expected to embrace the white religion as  
the only form of spirituality, but old black women are not  
welcome in white churches. There is no place for any color  
but white in Christianity's image of God. Walker is con-  
cerned with religion which is used by civilization to deny  
and de-value the spirituality of black women.

Celie is a very spiritual person, and at the be-  
ginning of the book accommodates that spirituality to the  
limitations of Christianity. Her letters are addressed to  
God. Although her letters help her to survive and struc-  
ture her internal world, God works as a patriarchal figure  
used to silence her. Celie will not gain true strength un-  
til she is able to dislodge the white, patriarchal image  
of God from her mind. Celie's image of God is "big and old  
and tall and graybearded and white," with eyes that are

"sort of bluish-gray. Cool. Big though. White lashes."<sup>38</sup>

In her growing strength and sense of herself, Celie is forced to revolt against the white man's God. The crisis comes after she discovers that Nettie's letters have been kept from her. She writes to Nettie instead of to God. The depth of her pain and anger when she realizes the betrayal of her faith is evident in this passage:

The God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful and low-donw.

All my life I never care what people thought bout nothing I did, I say. But deep in my heart I care about God. What he going to think. And come to find out, he don't think. Just sit up there glorying in being deef, I reckon. But it ain't easy, trying to do without God. Even if you know he ain't here, trying to do without him is a strain.<sup>39</sup>

Celie's denial of the white man's God is the ultimate disloyalty against civilization. God will no longer be used to keep her silent or give false comfort to the misery of her life.

It is through sisterhood that Celie is able to deny civilization's image of God, and retain her own vital spirituality. Shug shows her a different God, one that does not exist in churches and white people's Bibles, but in trees and birds and the insides of people. Shug's God has no race or gender; it is assigned no concrete image or specific place in which to exist. He is everywhere and everything.

Shug's idea of God is related to Walker's concept of wholeness. Whereas the white man's image of God is fragmented and exclusionary, Shug explains that God is "that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all."<sup>40</sup> The God that Shug brings Celie to affirm is one who values difference, in people as well as nature. This is beautifully expressed in images of color--as the colorless white images of spirituality are rejected, black women discover the value of spirituality that is vivid and alive. Shug says, "It pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it."<sup>41</sup> This is the pivotal image of the book. In discovering the God who made "the color purple," and in discovering the value of "the color purple," Celie discovers wholeness in her internal world, that is, white civilization's imposed images of God will no longer fragment her spirituality. In embracing her own natural spirituality, and the value of it, Celie adds the final missing piece to her wholeness as a human being. Celie will now be able to live in an internal world that has been re-created. Discovering "the color purple" is the revolution against a civilization that degrades the color black.

Nettie, living in Africa as a missionary, makes the same discovery. In many ways Nettie's development parallels Celie's. Nettie's letters function in the structure of the novel to add to Celie's experience to create, between the

two of them, a whole picture of black womanhood. Structurally as well as thematically, Walker aims toward balance and wholeness. Celie is the ignorant, poor black woman in oppressive society; Nettie is an educated, socially respected black woman (at least as respected as a black woman may be in society) who must also deal with oppression. Nettie's letters serve to give the black woman's disloyalty a broader social scope, and to show that the most advantaged as well as the most miserable of black women suffer within society. Nettie's changing attitudes toward religion work as a parallel to Celie's; they give external, intellectual verification to Celie's emotional, internal development. While Celie comes to reject the white man's God as a result of personal events and feelings, Nettie reaches the same conclusion through her observations of, and participation in, the external world. Through her worldly experience and knowledge, Nettie comes to realize that "it is the pictures in the Bible that fool you. The pictures that illustrate the words. All of the people are white and so you just think all the people from the bible were white too. But really white white people lived somewhere else during those times. That's why the bible says that Jesus Christ had hair like lamb's wool. Lamb's wool is not straight, Celie. It isn't every curly."<sup>42</sup> Nettie arrives at this intellectually and through her broad range of experience in Africa, while Celie arrives at it

emotionally with the help of Shug. Nettie directly expresses what Celie feels, and how Walker has reconciled her spiritual struggle in The Color Purple: "God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone--a roofleaf or Christ--but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us."<sup>43</sup> Realizing their natural spirituality marks internal wholeness for the women in the book. For Celie, realizing a spirituality which celebrates "the color purple" means rejecting the oppression of white people's religion. It completes the maturation of her internal world, and she may live as a fulfilled person. Celie later writes to Nettie, "I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time."<sup>44</sup> Internal wholeness has equipped her with strength and the capacity to survive in the external world.

## Walker's Revolutionary Philosophy

### I. Internal Revolution

Not only does Celie survive, she flourishes. She moves to Memphis with Shug and starts a pants-making business. Even when Shug begins an affair with a much younger man, Celie is able to survive on her own. Before she begins her new life, however, she reconciles her past.

Celie learns from Nettie's letters that the man she know as her Pa was not her real father. This prompts her to visit her stepfather and find out about her real father. Celie is compelled to search out her parents' graves, much like Alice Walker searched out Zora Neale Hurston's grave. Celie's search for the truth of her past frees her to live her new life.

Although Celie lives within society, she is not of it. Within civilization, she lives for herself. This is part of the revolution that takes place in The Color Purple. Through her internal world, sisterhood, and spirituality, she has re-created her world. She does not live by its values and definitions. Thus her race and sex cease to be weapons with which society may hurt her. She does not need what white male society offers, so she is not disadvantaged when that society withholds its rewards. She does

not need Mr. \_\_\_\_ emotionally, physically, or financially. An example of Walker's re-definition of values is when Mr. \_\_\_\_'s oppression evolves to the point where he is the victim. It is the scene when Celie tells Mr. \_\_\_\_ she is going to Memphis with Shug:

He laugh. Who you think you is? He say. You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all.

Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees.

Whoever heard of such a thing, say Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. I probably didn't whup your ass enough.

Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice, I say. Then I say, you better stop talking because all I'm telling you ain't coming just from me. Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words.<sup>45</sup>

In Walker's code of ethics, the internal world is vital and inescapable. In the same way that Celie must obtain strength in her inner world before she may survive in the external world, Mr. \_\_\_\_'s actions in the external world affect his inner life. We see this same theme in Walker's short story, "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff," in which a white woman dies as a result of her internal corruption. And in Meridian, as has already been mentioned, Meridian's physical condition deteriorates as she experiences spiritual disorder. This is not revolution of the type in The Third Life of Grange Copeland, where murder is the answer, or in Meridian, where

murder and change of societal structures are explored as revolutionary methods. The Color Purple involves internal revolution within individuals and personal relationships.

Therefore, when Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ begins to change, Celie has affected a revolution. In her emphasis on the internal world of the individual, Walker is concerned with the capacity of people to change, and the capacity of others to forgive when change has taken place. As Celie's immediate oppressor, we see such a change in Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, whom Celie begins to call Albert near the end of the book. The change in what she calls him is significant. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ loses the facelessness of the oppressor and becomes Albert, a human being with respect and concern for others. When Celie is able to take herself out of the role of victim, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has no one on whom to inflict his cruelty and violence. Therefore, just as Celie promised him, the fruits of his cruelty turn inward and he does indeed suffer as he had made her suffer. But he does change, and wondrous as it may seem, it is even more wondrous that Celie forgives him and enters into a genuine friendship with him. Celie does not have to do this--she does not need him in any way--but she does. Celie herself explains her forgiveness:

After all the evil he done I know you wonder why I don't hate him. I don't hate him for two reasons. One, he love Shug. And two, Shug use to love him. Plus, look like he trying to make something out himself. I don't mean just that he work and

he clean up after himself and he appreciate some of the things God was playful enough to make. I mean when you talk to him now he really listen, and one time, out of nowhere in the conversation us was having, he said Celie, I'm satisfied this the first time I ever lived on earth as a natural man. I feel like a new experience.<sup>46</sup>

Albert has discovered his own version of "the color purple." While it may seem incongruous in the novel to have Celie forgive Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ so readily, it fits with the ethical and social philosophy Walker has developed in The Color Purple. In re-defining social values for the survival of black women, forgiveness has been altered from the meaning that is usually associated with it. Celie's forgiveness of Albert is not a Christ-like, self-sacrificing act. In the re-definition of forgiveness, nothing is compromised or lost in the forgiving. Her need for him is no more after she accepts him as a friend than before, but in forgiving him and accepting his friendship, Celie insures that he will never again be in the oppressor's role. Through Celie's forgiveness of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Walker shows that unless black women have this capacity to forgive (and black men have this capacity to change) the black community will remain fragmented, and thus weak within white civilization.

Black women, the entire black community, will never attain wholeness within a patriarchal white civilization. The survival and ultimate fulfillment of black people will never come about as a result of equality within

society because Walker sees that society as it exists is inherently unequal and oppressive to black people. Black people must not strive to become the same as white people; rather they must strive to re-create civilization. In order to survive, black women must deny neither their race nor their sex, but must discover a world in which their blackness and femaleness are not afflictions. Celie discovers this world within herself, and in doing so has the strength to re-define and re-create her immediate societal environment. Walker uses color as a metaphor for this. The black people in the novel do not attain whiteness in their attempts to become whole. Purple is the vivid color of wholeness, not the lifelessness of white. To discover wholeness then is to discover "the color purple." This applies not only to her character's lives, but the life of Walker's novel as it represents the larger life of her philosophy.

## II. Extension of Walker's Philosophy

As the story of an individual woman's growth and triumph over oppression, Walker has written a code of survival and wholeness for black women. It is disloyal to civilization and suggests a revolutionary solution in that Walker would have black women live in a re-created civilization. On a level that concerns one person, an individual black woman, Walker's solution works. It satisfies concerns

for credibility and viability. Walker's solution for the individual can be extended from a solution for the individual to a solution for black women as a group, and even for the black community. It is reasonable to assume that The Color Purple has such thematic scope. Walker has been concerned with these issues throughout her fiction, and her philosophy reaches its maturation in The Color Purple. However, the code Walker develops in The Color Purple loses credibility in the extension. As in any philosophical solution, there are problems in Walker's solution when it is applied to black women as a group, or the black community as a whole, that do not exist when it is applied to Celie's life.

We see Walker struggle with her disloyalty to civilization in her first two novels and short stories, always considering the viability of revolutionary solutions for the vitality of her people. Walker sees the problem in this violent, external kind of revolution: one must be willing to lose one's own life if one takes the life of another, even if it is the life of an oppressor. In Meridian, the heroine struggles with two methods of revolution--violent external revolution and revolution within the individual. Meridian herself could never commit murder, but she does consider it a necessary solution to overcome oppression. In The Color Purple, Celie contemplates murdering Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, but Walker has already built up a strong internal world in

her character, given her the support of sisterhood in Shug, and instilled in her a rich spiritual life. There is never any rational contemplation of violence, only an instinctive, blind reaction on Celie's part that is just as instinctively checked by her internal support systems. Consequently, Walker's philosophy of revolution has matured to a full rejection of violence because violence against society does internal damage to the perpetrator of violence. Thus, in The Color Purple, revolution takes place internally and only indirectly affects change in the external world. This puts revolution under the control of individuals, rather than external social structures, which can cause problems in extending the code Walker has developed beyond one woman's life.

For example, a crucial point in Celie's survival is that she take herself out of the societal network in which she is oppressed, i.e., her relationship with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Walker tells us that black women must re-define and re-create the civilization that oppresses them. In order to do this, Celie re-defines the values that bind her. She does not need relationships with men; she does not need society's religion in order to be spiritual. She develops an internal identity and a relationship with a woman, and thus is able to create her own definitions and values. This would seem to be a remarkable growth from the poor miserable woman Celie was at the beginning of the novel.

But, by creating such a character, Walker is creating a person who has nothing to lose by shunning civilization. Furthermore, she is the only character who is able to do this. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is transformed, but if anything, he needs and cares even more about the world outside of himself. Shug is able to be a re-creator to a certain extent in her relationships with Celie and her spirituality, but her sexual relationships with men keep her within the external value system. The character of Celie becomes problematic when her solutions are applied to the survival of black women, because not all black women would be able to engage in a total rejection of external values. However, Walker seems to say that black women have no other choice in a civilization in which every black woman is, at the heart of the matter, reduced to the status Celie occupies at the first of the book.

The extension of Walker's theme to encompass the integrity of the black community within an oppressive white society poses even more problems. Walker never takes up the issue of the integrity of the black community directly, as she does in her first and second books, yet we must assume it is there in The Color Purple. Since Celie has already been discussed in a quasi-Everywoman role for black women, an extension of this role to all black people is viable. Perhaps the lack of direct confrontation of this issue indicates that in her re-creation of the world, whites have no value

or power. Yet this is unlikely, because it would make Walker's philosophy sound dangerously utopian. Besides, she does deal with an oppressor in the character of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. It is Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s almost miraculous change that causes problems in extending Walker's solution to the black community as a whole. His transformation occurs internally, and without any direct action on Celie's part. Celie does what she has to do for herself; she is not directly involved in Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s change. Is Walker saying that if the black community were to rise to an existence that no longer recognized the values of the civilization created by the white race, whites would experience the same change Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ does? Initially, this would seem naive on Walker's part. However, to understand the extension of Walker's solution, one must delve even deeper into the nature of the internal world in Walker's philosophy. Walker's philosophy has developed to the realization that physical harm and violence is meaningless in that true destruction occurs only when the deepest inner life is harmed. This is why she is concerned first with establishing a strong internal core in Celie, in black women, and in the black community. Ruth Sullivan, editor of Fine Lines: The Best of Ms. Fiction, reinforces this when she observes that "Walker explains that her preoccupation as a writer is 'the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people.'"<sup>47</sup> The key is the word spiritual. It is in the internal life of the spirit that

the survival of black people and the destruction of white civilization lies. Walker's essential disloyalty to civilization is that she sees its cruelty and oppression as rooted in an internal corruption that will ultimately come home to its source. Therefore, civilization will eventually change or be destroyed in the face of its internal disease.

Nettie's experiences in Africa reinforce this idea. Nettie's development is important because, as has already been discussed, it involves an acceptance of diversity in the external world. Through her involvement in social concern for the welfare of black people, Nettie has come to understand why black people are oppressed in society. The key is difference, and how human beings are intolerant of difference. The Olinka legend of Adam shows this. In the legend, Adam was not the first man, but the first white man that the black people--who existed on earth before white people, and killed any babies that were born with white skin--did not kill. This white man was driven out of the village, and grew to hate his black ancestors who banished him. This hatred caused white people to hate and kill black people once they attained a position of power. In relating Nettie's story to Albert, Celie says, "what they did, these Olinka peoples, was throw out they own children, just cause they was a little different."<sup>48</sup> So through Nettie's experience we see intolerance of differences at the root of oppression and hostility in the external world.

This is what Walker sees as leading to the fragmentation and stultification of black people in society.

The condition of African society mirrors what Walker sees as the fate of white civilization. The Africans have had to pay for their intolerance of people who are different. Selling their own people into slavery was the internal corruption that has brought about the decay of their civilization. Nettie writes:

Although Africans once had a better civilization than the Europeans (though of course even the English do not say this: I get this from reading a man named J.A. Rogers) for several centuries they have fallen on hard times. "Hard times" is a phrase the English love to use, when speaking of Africa. And it is easy to forget that Africa's "hard times" were made harder by them. Millions and millions of Africans were captured and sold into slavery--you and me, Celie! And whole cities were destroyed by slave catching wars. Today the people of Africa--having murdered or sold into slavery their strongest folks--are riddled by disease and sunk in spiritual and physical confusion.<sup>49</sup>

This reinforces Walker's idea that the internal world rules the external world. Nettie has come to much the same conclusions about life that Celie has, but her development is based on conditions in the external world. Thus, Nettie serves to complete the picture of oppression that Celie experiences on an individual level. Nettie's experience brings Walker's philosophy to encompass both the inner and the outer world.

## Conclusion

The key to Walker's philosophy as it has matured to its pinnacle in The Color Purple is the concept of the internal world. This internal world exists in individuals, and also on a social scale. Any group that is the "Other" must create a strong internal world that is independent of, and essentially disloyal to, civilization. Black women must do so in order to survive the "twin affliction" of race and gender; the black community must do so in order to survive in a hostile society.

Alice Walker's work is a rich tapestry of tradition. She draws support from a tradition of black women that is creative and strong, although it has been regarded by civilization as worthless. She dedicates The Color Purple in part to this tradition when she writes: "To the Spirit: Without shose assistance/Neither this book/Nor I/Would have been/Written."<sup>50</sup> This spiritual legacy is important in The Color Purple, because it compells Walker's disloyalty toward revolution. The "lack of loyalty" to civilization that Smith recognized indicated no such revolutionary compulsion. This is the difference in the white woman's disloyalty and the black woman's, and it is this difference that makes Walker's work striking when compared to women's

literature as a whole. Walker is concerned with individuals, yet her individuals must always be considered in terms of their race, their sex, and how this affects their existence within civilization.

Walker has seen the tradition of black women's creativity struggle to survive against the odds of civilization. In Zora Neale Hurston, she has seen civilization relegate that tradition to obscurity, and she has fought to revive the life of her sister's works. In her own mother's life, and the lives of countless unknown foremothers, she has seen creativity stifled and choked under the weight of poverty, ignorance, and prejudice, only to surface in the lives of these women in creative modes unrecognized as such by civilization. She knows that above all, black women have used this de-valued creativity to survive.

In The Color Purple, Celie is black womanhood struggling to survive and create lives of wholeness and value. Walker knows that nothing short of revolution will insure their survival, and allow black women the fulfillment civilization denies them. Above all, "the spiritual survival and the survival whole" of her people is Walker's wish for black women, and for the black community. Consequently, Walker's philosophy of revolution has become internalized in her aims for wholeness. Violence in society as a means of revolution has been rejected because of the damage to

the internal world that it entails. One's actions in the external world both mirror one's internal condition and turn back into it. This is why in The Color Purple Walker builds and structures Celie's internal world. The need to effect changes in the external structure of civilization is diminished in this internalized philosophy because the external world--civilization--is destroying itself. As with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, the external hostility of the oppressor will turn inward; the internal disease will be its destruction.

Walker sees the way to "the spiritual survival and the survival whole" of her people through a re-valuation of all values that must have its basis in the internal world. The values and definitions of civilization devalue black women and men. More specifically, civilization fails to define black women's creativity as art; it fails to see black spirituality as religious; it does not consider black men in its definitions of manhood or black women in its definitions of womanhood. Civilization refuses to accord black men and women the level of humanity, of civilization, and of acculturation that it does white men and women. Therefore, black people must define for themselves what is human, what is civilized, and what is culture. This is the re-creation that takes place in The Color Purple as Walker brings Celie to wholeness.

In internal re-valuation for the sake of wholeness, Walker has developed an all-inclusive political and philosophical statement for the integrity of the black community. If this philosophy were to be given a name, it would be called the philosophy of "the color purple." The philosophy of white civilization holds no answers for black people. They must discover a new world that is internal, with new values that allow them to survive and become whole. They must discover "the color purple."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, ed. Gloria Anzldúa and Cherrie Moraga (Massachusetts: Persephone Press, Inc., 1981), p. 101.

<sup>2</sup>Lillian Smith, "On Women's Autobiography," Southern Exposure; Generations: Women in the South, IV, No. 4 (1977), p. 49.

<sup>3</sup>Gloria Steinem, "Do You Know this Woman? She Knows Your: A Profile of Alice Walker," Ms., June 1982, p. 90.

<sup>4</sup>Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Southern Exposure; Generations: Women in the South, IV, No. 4 (1977), p. 60.

<sup>5</sup>Walker, "Mothers' Gardens," p. 64.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Mary Helen Washington, "Her Mother's Gifts," Ms., June 1982, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup>Washington, p. 37.

<sup>9</sup>Alice Walker, Foreword, Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography, by Robert E. Hemenway (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978), pp. XVII-XVIII.

<sup>10</sup>Alice Walker, "One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression Within the Work(s)," in The Writer on Her Work, ed. Janet Steinberg (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1980), p. 139.

<sup>11</sup>Walker, "One Child," pp. 132-134.

<sup>12</sup>Op. cit., pp. 132 and 138.

<sup>13</sup>Walker, "Mothers' Gardens," p. 62.

<sup>14</sup>Walker, "Mothers' Gardens," p. 62.

<sup>15</sup>Alice Walker, "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor," Ms., December 1975, pp. 79 and 102.

<sup>16</sup>Alice Walker, The Color Purple (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup>Krista Brewer, "Writing to Survive: An Interview with Alice Walker," Southern Exposure; Festival: Celebrating Southern Literature, IX, No. 2 (1981), p. 13.

<sup>18</sup>Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 29.

<sup>19</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 115.

<sup>20</sup>Mel Watkins, "Some Letters to God," rev. of The Color Purple, by Alice Walker, The New York Times Book Review, 25 July 1982, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup>Steinem, p. 89.

<sup>22</sup>Lorde, p. 99.

<sup>23</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 17.

<sup>24</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 21.

<sup>25</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 22.

<sup>28</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 110.

<sup>29</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 137.

<sup>30</sup>Alice Walker, The Third Life of Grange Copeland (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), p. 153.

<sup>31</sup>Alice Walker, Meridian (New York: Washington Square Press, 1976), pp. 200-201.

<sup>32</sup>Walker, Purple, pp. 34-35.

<sup>33</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 52.

<sup>34</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 97.

<sup>35</sup>Barbara Christian, "The Contrary Women of Alice Walker," The Black Scholar, 12 (March-April 1981), p. 70.

- <sup>36</sup>Christian, p. 70.
- <sup>37</sup>Alice Walker, In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women (New York: Harcourt Brace Hovanovich, 1967), pp. 117-118.
- <sup>38</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 165.
- <sup>39</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 164.
- <sup>40</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 167.
- <sup>41</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 117.
- <sup>42</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 113.
- <sup>43</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 218.
- <sup>44</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 183.
- <sup>45</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 176.
- <sup>46</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 221.
- <sup>47</sup>Ruth Sullivan, ed., Fine Lines: The Best of Ms. Fiction (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1982), p. 86.
- <sup>48</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 232.
- <sup>49</sup>Walker, Purple, p. 117.
- <sup>50</sup>Walker, Purple, dedication page.

## Bibliography

- Brewer, Krista. "Writing to Survive: An interview with Alice Walker." Southern Exposure; Festival: Celebrating Southern Literature, XI, No. 2 (1981), pp. 12-15.
- Christian, Barbara. "The Contrary Women of Alyce Walker." The Black Scholar, 12 (March-April, 1981), pp. 21-30 and 70-71.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. Their Eyes Were Watching God. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979.
- Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color. Ed. Gloria Anzuldúa and Cherie Moraga. Massachusetts: Persephone Press, Inc., 1981.
- Smith, Lillian. "On Women's Autobiography." Southern Exposure; Generations: Women in the South, IV, No. 4 (1977), pp. 48-49.
- Steinem, Gloria. "Do You Know This Woman? She Knows You: A Profile of Alice Walker." Ms. June 1982, pp. 35-37 and 89-94.
- Sullivan, Ruth, ed. Fine Lines: The Best of Ms. Fiction. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1982.
- Walker, Alice. "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor." Ms. December 1975, pp. 77-79.
- . In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women. New York: Harcourt Brace Hovanovich, 1967.
- . "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Southern Exposure; Generations: Women in the South, IV, No. 4 (1977), pp. 60-64.
- . Meridian. New York: Washington Square Press, 1976.

----- . "One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s)." In The Writer On Her Work. Ed. Janet Steinberg. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1980, pp. 1210140.

----- . The Color Purple. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.

----- . The Third Life of Grange Copeland. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970.

----- . Foreword. Zora Neal Hurston: A Literary Biography. By Robert E. Hemenway. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978.

Washington, Mary Helen. "Her Mother's Gifts." Ms. June 1982, p. 37.

Watkins, Mel. "Some Letters Went to God." Rev. of The Color Purple, by Alice Walker. The New York Times Book Review, 25 July 1982, p. 7.