

Overview: *The Color Purple*

Born in 1944, novelist and poet Alice Walker grew up in the rural South, which provides the setting for much of her fiction. Active as a student in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, she began publishing novels in the 1970s that explored themes of racial and sexual conflict and identity. Her third novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), continued in this vein, enjoying huge critical and commercial success and making Walker an influential if controversial figure on the contemporary literary scene.

Events in History at the Time the Novel Takes Place

I. Black Men and Women in the Rural South

The South in the early twentieth century remained largely rural and agricultural. Poverty was widespread, and sharecropping had replaced slavery as the central source of black labor, upon which Southern agriculture still relied. Beginning in 1915, many blacks broke away from sharecropping to seek a better life in the industrial cities of the North, participating in an ongoing exodus from the South called the Great Migration. Many more, however, stayed behind, struggling under the twin burdens of extreme poverty and entrenched discrimination.

For those who stayed, both men and women, life remained hard. The women faced not only racial discrimination but also sexual oppression, which made their existence there generally arduous, painful, and sometimes dangerous. Both sexes struggled to define their family roles within the only context available, that of white society. But "traditional" white family roles often proved inappropriate, or difficult to apply, in the situations in which blacks found themselves. For instance, white society demanded that men act as family authority figures. Yet black men found their self-respect challenged and undercut by racism every day in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Without a stable sense of self-respect, authority proved elusive and the result was sometimes behavior that verged on tyranny. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's father and husband both illustrate this psychological phenomenon. Her father (later revealed as her stepfather) mistreats her and her sister, raping Celie repeatedly and fathering her two children before selling her to her husband, who also abuses her mentally and physically. Such behavior, though by no means universal, was not an isolated phenomenon. The black woman fell victim to abuses by both white assailants and black ones.

The sexual assault of black women was so prevalent ... after slavery ended that outraged black women and men wrote articles ... pleading with the American public to take action against the white and black male offenders. (Hooks, p. 57)

Where it existed, this behavior had roots in a cultural attitude that devalued black women--an attitude shared not only by whites but also by many black men. "I believe that as a general thing we hold our girls too cheaply," observed black female activist Fannie Barrier Williams. "We have all too many colored men who hold the degrading opinions of ignorant white men, that all colored girls are alike--that is, in being of low worth and easy virtue" (Williams in Giddings, p. 114).

II. Jim Crow Society

By the 1920s the post-Civil War period of Reconstruction lay almost half a century in the past, along with the hard-won progress in civil rights it had brought to newly freed African Americans in the South as well as elsewhere. Aided by a reactionary Supreme Court, the Southern backlash against Reconstruction had solidified into the "Jim Crow" regime of enforced segregation between blacks and whites and white domination. Based on the principle of white supremacy, and named for an antebellum black minstrel character, Jim Crow laws created separate societies for blacks and whites. >From theaters to drinking fountains, and from schools to cemeteries, blacks were faced with signs that turned them away ("Whites only") or equated them with animals ("No colored or dogs"). Such restrictions constantly reminded blacks of their inferior status in white eyes.

Aside from creating separate societies for whites and blacks, Jim Crow laws ensured that when blacks and whites did mix, they would do so on terms that guaranteed white dominance. When women began to wear bobbed hairstyles that led them to patronize barber shops, for example, a popular workplace for Southern blacks, the city of Atlanta, Georgia, passed a law forbidding black barbers to practice their profession on women or on children younger than fourteen. The laws themselves were less important, however, than the attitudes they represented and supported. In fact, the laws were only one tool by which whites kept blacks "in their place." So effective were these tools that the white power structure usually did not even need to invoke the laws. In the novel, this situation is illustrated by the misadventures of Celie's friend Sofia, an independent and strong-willed black woman who runs afoul of the system. Celie admires Sofia for standing up to black men who try to bully her. When Sofia stands up to white bullying, however, she is arrested, severely beaten, and sentenced to twelve years in jail.

III. Miscegenation

Through the centuries of slavery and into the Jim Crow era, racial domination had a sexual aspect. It fostered in the minds of white slave-masters the idea that a female slave should be sexually accessible to her white master at any time. This situation was at least partly responsible for the social devaluation of black women. Even after slavery, white dominance in the South meant that in some situations black women still remained subject to the sexual whims of white men. Miscegenation--literally "mixed birth"--became common, though the sexual abuse behind it remained nonetheless horrifying for black women

through the generations. By the twentieth century most American blacks had at least some white blood, and conversely many whites had at least some black blood. The implications of having mixed blood were vastly different in Southern white society and black society. Within black society, the racial mixture often provided a framework for a social hierarchy based on hue, one in which light skin was seen as more desirable than dark.

In *The Color Purple*, Celie's friend Squeak visits her white uncle, the warden, to get Sofia transferred from jail to a lighter punishment. Two aspects of this complicated episode are especially revealing. First, Squeak uses reverse psychology to manipulate her uncle, lying to him that Sofia is happy where she is and that the lighter duties--serving as a white woman's maid--would be harder on her. Thus, Sofia's friends, who have concocted the plan, make no attempt to use the blood relationship. Instead, they plan on the warden ignoring Squeak's "request" and doing the opposite of what she supposedly wants. Second, the warden's behavior--he takes advantage of Squeak's visit to rape her--shows how little the blood relationship means to him. As a black woman, even his niece, she represents nothing more to him than a chance for a casual sexual encounter. Thus, for both black and white in the novel, mixed heritage does nothing to bring the races closer; rather it offers each an opportunity to exploit the other.

IV. Lynching

The violence implicit in much of miscegenation's history found more overt expression in lynching, which flourished in the South from the 1880s to the 1930s. Legally defined as mob murder by three or more persons, as used by whites against blacks, lynching usually amounted to assassination, usually by hanging, on the pretext of a perceived or manufactured "offense." Like Jim Crow laws, lynching arose as a white reaction against black freedom, a way for Southern whites to reassert control over the black population. It peaked in the 1890s, when close to 100 blacks were lynched each year in the south, with 160 being lynched in the peak year--1892. Lynching had a sexual aspect, for a common excuse was the alleged rape of a white woman by a black man. As black anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells pointed out, a rape charge could be provoked by consensual relations between a black man and a white woman, or by nothing more than eye contact that a white perceived as a threat. It could furthermore serve as a manufactured excuse for getting rid of a black man who was prospering financially, or one whose attitude was not submissive enough to please local whites.

Lynching also often had an economic aspect, for whites commonly used it against blacks who competed against them in business. The lynching in Memphis in 1892 of Ida B. Wells's friends Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart fell into this category, for they had opened a grocery store that took black customers away from a white-owned store across the street. It was this case that started Wells, a black woman journalist living in Memphis at the time, on the anti-lynching crusade that would make her famous. In the novel Celie's father is lynched under similar circumstances in the early 1900s, after he built a prosperous business that cut into the profits of nearby white-owned establishments.

V. Black Religion

African Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century were mostly Methodist or Baptist. These had been the only two sizable denominations in the South to come out against slavery, and blacks had begun forming their own Methodist and Baptist congregations as early as 1773. The first large black church was established in 1816, when a number of black religious leaders met in Philadelphia to found the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), which still plays a leading role in the black religious community.

The black religious experience in America (as elsewhere in the West) has been deeply influenced by elements carried over from African culture and religion. African religions tended to be heavily participatory, and their musical, incantatory style was transported over as slaves and free blacks took up Christianity. For example, black churches have featured singing, along with stirring sermons in which the preacher is answered and encouraged at key points by the congregation. In *The Color Purple*, Celie addresses many of the letters in the novel to God, though her conception of God evolves as the novel progresses. Her sister Nettie, who becomes a Christian missionary in Africa, contributes to this evolution by introducing African religious ideas.

There isn't any way, writes Celie to her sister, to read the Bible and not think that God is white. Some years later, in a letter that resumes their conversations about God, Nettie replies that God is different to her now after all her years in Africa--more spirit that ever before and more an inner than outer reality. Not being tied to what God looks like, she assures Celie, is liberating. It frees a person.

VI. Africa

By the 1920s European colonial rule was well established throughout the African continent. Colonial tensions between the European powers had contributed to the outbreak of World War I, and with the defeat of Germany in 1918, France and Britain divided its colonies among them. European political rule had the economic aim of exploiting Africa's vast natural resources; this material interest was buttressed by claims of bringing "civilization" to the "savage" Africans. Often "civilization" required killing large numbers of blacks who resisted it. Particularly resistant, for example, were the Igbo people of Nigeria, who rose up against the British again and again in the early 1900s. The British nevertheless persisted, deciding, for instance, who should be local governor instead of letting the Igbo villagers decide in their own customary way. As demonstrated by this example, once in place "civilization" worked to facilitate white political and economic domination. Walker illustrates this process in the novel through the life of Nettie, Celie's sister, who witnesses the exploitation of the villagers among whom she lives.