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Chelsey Boutan
College of DuPage

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The Color Purple: Evaluation of the Film Adaptation

by Chelsey Boutan

(English 1154)

When Alice Walker saw the premiere of her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple* on the big screen, she didn't like the movie at all. But after receiving many letters and positive reactions, Walker realized that the film may not express her vision, but it does carry the right message. Walker said, "We may miss our favorite part... but what is there will be its own gift, and I hope people will be able to accept that in the spirit that it's given" ("The Color Purple: The Book and the Movie").

Since the film's premiere 25 years ago, Walker has been asked over and over again, "Did you like the movie?" Although her response sometimes varies, she most frequently answers, "Remember, the movie is not the book" ("The Color Purple: The Book and the Movie").

Walker is right, movies and books are two completely different mediums. That is why Director Steven Spielberg decided to differ slightly from the highly acclaimed novel. Yet, at the same time, he wanted to stay true to Walker's powerful message about overcoming adversity. In the screen translation of *The Color Purple*, Spielberg creates not only a faithful, but also a successful adaptation, by capturing the novel's central themes, characters, setting, plot, and symbols.

First, Spielberg develops a faithful adaptation by sticking to the novel's central themes. In *The Color Purple*, Walker uses the protagonist, Celie, to show how finding your voice and asserting yourself can help you resist oppression. Through Celie's letters to God and her sister Nettie, including her letters about her abusive husband (Albert), it becomes apparent to the reader that everyone possesses the strength to confront and overcome adversity. Similarly, the film embodies this theme, but instead of showing Celie writing letters, Spielberg turns powerful letters into powerful scenes. A memorable scene occurs at the dinner table when Albert finds out that Celie is leaving him to go with Shug to Memphis. Direct quotations from the book are used as Celie stands up at the table and calls Albert a "lowdown dog." In a letter from the novel Celie wrote, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here" (Walker 207). In contrast, during the movie Celie said this line directly to Albert's face. The film made this line a turning point for Celie, because it showed how she no longer is a passive, timid person. On screen, the audience sees Celie transform into a confident woman, who proves that by asserting yourself you can break free from your oppressors.

Another important theme in Walker's novel is the cyclical nature of sexism. Both the novel and the movie show the patriarchal dominance and abuse that black women endure. For example, Albert beats Celie, Albert and Celie tell Harpo (Albert's son) to beat his wife, Harpo beats his wife Sofia, and so forth. This abusive cycle is only broken when the women forcibly confront the men, and the men, in turn, reexamine their behavior ("The Color Purple"). Through both mediums, people realize that the sexual abuse Celie endures from her stepfather and husband represents how all women should break free from this cycle so that they can be seen as individuals and not sex objects.

In addition, Walker's belief that traditional gender roles do not exist is evident in her novel and the film. Sofia's strength and temper, Shug's aggressive behavior and sexual assertiveness, and Harpo's insecurities and sensitive nature are examples of disparity between a character's gender and the traits he or she displays ("The Color Purple"). The film reaffirms this belief through the appearance and actions of the characters. Sofia is a robust woman who is not subservient to Harpo; Shug wears flashy clothing and is dominant over Albert; and Harpo is a thin man who is insecure

about his masculinity. None of these characters meet the traditional male and female gender roles. Furthermore, the lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug underlines this theme with ambiguous sexuality. Alice Walker believes that the sexual relationship between the two women is not obvious in the movie, because "in the movie all the women kiss each other, making the kiss between Celie and Shug less significant" ("The Color Purple: The Book and the Movie"). Through the blurring of gender traits and sexual ambiguity, the novel and film defy the traditional ways in which society classifies as proper male and female behavior.

In the screen translation of *The Color Purple*, Spielberg achieves a successful adaptation by incorporating the same set of core characters from the novel into the film. Actress Whoopi Goldberg embodies Celie, but also brings new life to the character through her sly winks, hidden smiles, and muffled laughter. These subtle differences, not evident in the novel, help the audience to hear and see the transformation of Celie from a passive, invisible person into a strong, independent woman. Furthermore, the film closely portrays Shug as she is described in the novel. In both mediums, Shug serves as a catalyst for change in Celie's life. Through her friendship with Shug, Celie is able to break free from her restraints.

One flaw in the screen translation is the scenes depicting Shug as vulnerable. The film creates a conflict between Shug and her father (a preacher) who doesn't approve of her promiscuous lifestyle. Shug is shown struggling as she tries to impress and reconcile with her father. In the novel, Shug is a rebel who is free from oppression by men and is quite unrepentant. This new image of Shug undercuts the novel's "strong stand against patriarchy" ("The Color Purple: The Book and the Movie"). Furthermore, the film's portrayal of Albert is slightly different than Walker's interpretation. At first, the film accurately portrays Albert as a domineering, mean, cold man who marries Celie out of convenience rather than love. Later, the film differs slightly from the novel because there is no turning point for Albert and no friendship between Albert and Celie ever develops. Towards the end of the film, Albert is portrayed as an alcoholic whose suffering should be pitied, which is far different from the content, changed man he becomes in Walker's novel ("The Color Purple: The Book and the Movie").

While keeping with the same set of characters from the novel, Spielberg's film adheres to the novel's setting; rural Georgia during the 20th century ("The Color Purple Setting"). Both the film and novel have Celie's story set amongst poor blacks in rural areas of the South. As a poor, black woman from this region Celie has little education and knowledge of the outside world.

Overall, Spielberg's interpretation of *The Color Purple* closely follows the novel's plot. Both the film and novel go through Celie's journey from a sexually abused child married off to an abusive man and separated from her sister Nettie, to an independent, liberated woman who is reunited with Nettie and her children. One substantial difference in the film is that when Shug arrives there is no violence towards Celie, whereas in the book there is. While Celie is the main focus throughout the entire novel, this is not the case in Spielberg's interpretation. The plot shifts from the focal point being Celie to Albert towards the end of the film. After Celie leaves Albert, her life as a free woman is not described in the film like it is in the novel ("The Color Purple: The Book and the Movie"). For example, Celie's shop is only shown in one scene. Instead, the audience becomes more interested in Albert whose dirty house and addiction to alcohol tempt the audience to pity his suffering. Walker expressed her fears saying, "He was in almost every scene, in almost every shot, and sometimes I would worry that it was going to become his story, Mister's [Albert's] story, not Celie's" ("The Color Purple: The Book and the Movie").

In addition, the film's ending also differs slightly from Walker's novel. In the novel, Albert undergoes change and develops a friendship with Celie who said, "And now it do begin to look like he got a lot of feeling behind his face" (Walker 280). Celie's forgiveness and "Albert's awakening" are not shown in the film ("The Color Purple: The Book and the Movie"). The novel's ending has Shug and Albert present while Celie is reunited with Nettie and her children. In contrast, the movie

has Albert standing in a nearby field accompanied by his horse while Celie embraces her family. Walker said, "To end with him on his horse seems too John Wayne-ish and makes it seem like he's more responsible and in control of the happiness he's observing than he is. The feeling of the people is circle, not hierarchy" ("The Color Purple: The Book and the Movie").

Still, the screen translation of *The Color Purple* utilizes the central symbols present in Walker's novel. One important symbol present in both the film and novel is the color purple. This color represents all the good things that are in the world. At the beginning of the book and film, Celie has no sense of the color purple. She said, "I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?). Not the little wildflowers. Nothing" (197). Shug opens Celie's eyes to the beauty and pleasure of God's creation by saying, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (196). While the novel uses dialogue, the film uses imagery to symbolize the color purple. During the film, fallen purple flower petals are shown when Celie is separated from Nettie. Once the sisters are reunited they are surrounded in a field of purple wildflowers. This imagery helps to reinstate the color purple's symbolic meaning; people can't live only to survive, they have to find those few good things in their life, even during terrible times.

Another important symbol from the novel is Celie's pants. Both the film and the novel use this symbol to show how women who live in a patriarchal or sexist society can become liberated through economic independence and nonviolence. The novel makes this symbol apparent through Celie's letters to Nettie about her new business, while the film shows Celie's pant store in one scene.

All in all, the screen translation of *The Color Purple* does a commendable job of relaying the novel's central themes, characters, setting, plot and symbols through a faithful adaptation. Both film and novel may be mistaken as depressing tales of "abused women amidst racial bigotry and male dominance," but they are so much more than that (Litton). The film and novel dig into each of its characters, exposing their inner thoughts, while revealing the emotional courage they didn't think they had (Litton).

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