

The Color Purple

Writing a Rationale for a Controversial Common Reading Book: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

by Pepper Worthington

What causes controversy in a common reading book? If English teachers have to face censors in adult and adolescent readers, what is the procedure for writing rationales for common reading books?

These two questions are hot today because literature, perhaps more than ever, is no longer sugar and spice and everything nice. If literature is anything today, it must reflect life. Nevertheless, the search for the truth-of-experience potentially may bring forth some charges. A common-reading book may recreate an experience so vividly that some of us who wish to forget that such reality exists (rape, profanity, incest, homosexuality, alcoholism, adultery, war or violence) tend to use censorship as a weapon to fight what is controversial in writing. And the root of censorship is not a righteous search for the world of good taste and affirmation. Rather, the seedbed of censorship is a hidden, dreadful fear that the lurking unloveliness inside the human spirit may explode. The censor's motto becomes: better to deny than to face.

So how can a teacher fight back? Perhaps writing a rationale for using a common reading book is one of the most effective techniques of fighting censorship, because the rationale itself will give us a chance to clarify in our minds our genuine motives for selecting a controversial common-reading book and an opportunity to provide answers to controversial issues raised in the book. Such a rationale may help to illuminate the entire issue of censorship. And believe me, the English teacher who uses Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (Washington Square Press, 1983) will be on trial.

Confront Issues of Controversy

What causes controversy in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*? Never mind that her novel won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for Fiction. Never mind that literary criticism in the *New York Review of Books*, *Essence*, *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Nation* was laudatory. Some readers will wish to take her book out of libraries and off students' reading lists. What causes the controversy?

I can pinpoint four controversial issues which might lead to censorship.

1. The subject matter of *The Color Purple* includes incest, rape, wife-beating, adultery, hints of lesbianism, drugs, alcoholism, African tribal customs, and murder.

2. Specific words in *The Color Purple* are bold as the black experience, introducing indelicate language as a modern-day reality among the oppressed.
3. The grammar of the narrator, Celie, is substandard. Her incorrect subject-verb agreement, spelling, and phrasing may create an outrage among censors who wish students to read only correct grammar.
4. The epistolary form of the novel may be said to be out-of-date. Who wants to read letters as a story anyway? This is not the eighteenth-century market; this is the modern market.

Censorship of Subject Matter

The first page of *The Color Purple* might inflame censors, because the subject matter reflects rape. Young fourteen-year old Celie is left alone with her so-called Pa, Fonso. And what does he do to her while her mama is gone? Celie can only tell God here in her first letter:

She went to visit her sister doctor over Macon. Left me to see after the others. He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't First he put his thing up against my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold of my titties Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it.

Not only is rape written about but so is incest. Celie has two children by her so-called Pa, and both her girl and boy disappear from her. Not knowing where Fonso takes her children, Celie assumes he has murdered them:

He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can.

When Pa remarries after Celie's mama dies, Celie is a reminder to him of his sexual abuse. To get rid of her and his guilt, he marries Celie to Mr. _____. And Celie's black experience expands into more oppression as she talks to her sister Nettie about Mr. _____.

As Celie's life with Mr. _____ grows, so does his tendency to beat her. To get a black woman to mind, to keep her in her place, and to show her who is in charge, the husband uses his hands as a weapon.

Celie tells us her black experience through her letters, and her world is not only a world of labor and lovelessness but also a world of male abuse. Mr. _____ brings the "other woman" to his own home, and Celie watches Shug Avery and Mr. _____ in their love dance. Shug tells Celie that she has "a passion for him" (p. 78), and that if she was going to have a husband, "he'd a been it" (p. 78). Yet as Celie listens to Shug's love talk about Mr. _____, Celie finds herself feeling love for Shug. Celie admits to herself, "I love looking at Shug" (p. 74). And it is Shug's emotional support of Celie that awakens in Celie a feeling of love. In one scene Celie wants to go with the black men to hear Shug sing at Harpo's. If it were not for Shug's emotional support, Celie would have been dismissed again.

The friendship between Celie and Shug builds. Shug gives to Celie that fighting support that Celie can't give to herself. As Celie nurses Shug back to physical health, Shug resolves to nurse Celie to emotional health.

Later Shug gets Celie to start a new life in Memphis, to develop a business in sewing pants, and to become a person in her own right. Behind Celie's personal growth is her love for Shug, a love unusual in its passion for a woman rather than for a man. However, it is Shug Avery who teaches Celie how to love. But love is not possessive to Shug, and as she leaves Celie for Germaine, "a boy of nineteen" (p. 219), Celie feels happiness leave too.

Obviously, a woman's affection for another might raise eyebrows, create controversy, or tempt censors. Yet Celie's black experience has been that men do not teach her the meaning nor the existence of love. It is only through women that Celie learns to love herself and to fight for her own integrity.

Other realities might alarm the censors. *The Color Purple* refers to the female initiation rites among the Olinkas in Africa, the reefer-smoking scenes, the intimation-talks of Annie Julia's murder by her boyfriend, and the drinking scenes at Harpo's club.

How can an English teacher justify a novel whose subject reflects a world we are trying to forget and struggling to rise above? What rationale can we devise for Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* for use with young adults?

Perhaps we might begin by taking a survey of what news makes news today. We could ask a class to list facts in the news for one week--all the facts and see what comes to light. If the class listed all the offensive items in the news, they might see that Walker's book contained few incidents that were new or strange. If the news reflects that the black experience is what Alice Walker is writing about, then what does she do that the news does not do? Can she actually go beyond the sordid subject matter and teach us some hope beyond hopelessness, some strength beyond oppression, some love beyond lovelessness?

And she does teach hope, strength, and love. Celie develops in the novel, moving from a nonfighter to a fighter-for-love. She develops her own business, and gains strength in her talent for sewing pants which represents her independence, her talent, her freedom to love.

By the end of the novel, Celie and Mr. _____ become friends, not lovers. Despite his abuse of Celie, his change begins to affect her. He learns to talk, to sew, to speak, and to wonder. One day as the two of them are sewing on the porch, Mr. B. _____ reflects:

I tried to do something bout my children after you left me. But by that time it was too late. Bub come with me for two weeks, stole all my money, laid up on the porch drunk. My girls so far off into mens and religion they can't hardly talk. Every time they open they mouth some kind of plea come out. Near bout to broke my sorry heart.

If you know your heart sorry, I say, that mean it not quite as spoilt as you think.

Anyhow, he say, you know how it is. You ast yourself one question, it lead to fifteen. I start to wonder why us need love. Why us suffer. Why us black. Why us men and women. Where do children really come from. It didn't take long to realize I didn't hardly know nothing. And that if you ast yourself why you black or a man or a woman or a bush it don't mean nothing if you don't ast why you here, period.

So what you think? I ast.

I think us here to wonder, myself. To wonder. To ast. And that in wondering bout the big things and asting bout the big things, you learn bout the little ones, almost by accident. But you never know nothing more bout the big thing than you start out with. The more I wonder, he say, the more I love.

And people start to love you back, I bet, I say. (p. 247)

Isn't part of the rationale for *The Color Purple* this very reality: hope, strength, and love can grow no matter what, no matter whom.

Censorship of Specific Words

Spoken or written words reflect the background, the education, and the spirit of a person. In the turmoil of the black experience in *The Color Purple*, the language reflects the level of background, education, and spirit of an oppressed woman, Celie, and of the people she writes about. The language is not middle-class white. The words spill out on the page just as they spit out of the speaking spirits.

Censors may turn to numerous words in the book to confirm their opinion of this book as bad literature. Yet all the words have been used on television, in hallways, in bathrooms, around corners, or in situations high school students know. These words may not be lovely to our ears, and they may not reflect what we wish were spoken, but the words exist and reflect a reality. Alice Walker isn't sprinkling Celie's letters with spiced-up profanity to sell books. Instead, she insists that the words come from the black experience at the moment-of-experiencing. If human beings have been mistreated, the language reflects it.

In writing a rationale for *The Color Purple*, I recommend a direct confrontation with specific words so that the use of language can be understood not as a cover-up of reality but as a manifestation of reality, not as a shelter from the world but as an exposure to the world, not as a concealment of truth but as a revelation of truth.

Censorship of Grammar

Censors of *The Color Purple* will notice the poor grammar of Celie in her letters to God, and they may ask, how can we expect students to learn correct grammar if teachers let them read books containing bad grammar? Certainly, we learn the best by reading the best. To answer this point, we must look at the language in question. Here are a few of the most blatant errors in Walker's novel: "chilren" (p. 11) for *children*; "kine word" (p. 11) for *kind* word; "git" (p. 11) for

get; "He set there" (p. 12) for he *sat* there; "ast" (p. 10) for *ask*; "yourn" (p. 14) for *yours*; "nuff" (p. 2,3) for *enough*; "Clam up in the wagon" (p. 21) for *climb up*; "em" (p. 34) for *them*; "other mens I know" (p. 175) for other *men* I know; and "Us fight" (p. 179) for *We* fight. Considering these apparent errors in spelling, verb tenses, and phrasing, how can we justify assigning such a book in English class? Correct grammar is essential in writing, isn't it? Show by doing, right?

What makes Alice Walker's novel gripping is Celie's mind, and the near-illiteracy of the narrator enhances the magnitude of this same woman's victory. She grows despite her grammar. She communicates clearly and vividly scenes which cannot be dismissed no matter what her grammar. And it is Celie's language that jerks us out of our comfortable, complacent minds and pushes us closer and closer into her troubled but strong, resilient mind. Alice Walker forces us to become a member of an oppressed race as we struggle to hear the rhythm and sway of Celie's mind moving. And in her demand from her readers, Walker makes the novel grow on us as people who are spiritually powerful grow on us. From the first page we are there with Celie, but by the middle of the novel, we are cheering for her, marveling at her, and wondering where she draws the strength to go on and on and on.

Early in the novel we meet Celie's mind. And it is in her disclosure of thought that we are forced to see the world as she sees it. Celie admits her difficulty in learning:

I feel bad sometime Nettie done pass me in learnin. But look like nothing she say can git in my brain and stay. She try to tell me something bout the ground not being flat. I just say, Yeah, like I know it. I never tell her how flat it look to me.
(p. 20)

In another letter to God, Celie reveals her hardship, her work in the cotton-field, and her own sense of suffering as she sees it in Harpo's face:

Me and him out in the field all day. Us sweat, chopping and plowing. I'm roasted coffee bean color now. He black as the inside of a chimney. His eyes be sad and thoughtful. His face begin to look like a woman face. (p. 35)

As Celie's narration moves, so does her mind. We slowly shift with her, feeling her fighting spirit evolve, watching her mind click and cheering her victories perhaps more emphatically because her grammar needs cleaning up. Celie's own understanding of the spirit of language itself rings loud and clear. We hear the spirit of words from the mind rhythms of another person. Though settled in our own prejudices, Celie unsettles us. Though judgmental in our own rules of correctness, Celie dismisses judgment. Notice how Celie herself answers the censors' clangy charges of grammatical illiteracy:

Darlene trying to teach me how to talk. . . You say US where most folks say WE, she say, and peoples think you dumb. Colored peoples think you a hick and white folks be amused.

What I care? I ast. I'm happy.

But she say I feel mor happier talking like she talk. Can't nothing make me happier than seeing you again, I think, but I don't say nothing. Every time I say

something the way I say it, she correct me until I say it some other way. Pretty soon it feel like I can't think. My mind run up on a thought, git confuse, run back and sort of lay down.

You sure this worth it? I ast.

She say Yeah. Bring me a bunch of books. White folks all over them, talking bout apples and dogs.

What I care bout dogs? I think.

Darlene keep trying. Think how much better Shug feel with you educated, she say. She won't be shame to take you anywhere.

Shug not shame no how, I say. But she don't believe this the truth. Sugar, she say one day when Shug home, don't you think it be nice if Celie could talk proper?

Shug say, she can talk in sign language for all I care. She make herself a nice cup of herb tea and start talking bout hot oiling her hair.

But I let Darlene worry on. Sometimes I think bout the apples and the dogs, sometimes I don't look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind. But she sweet and she sew good and us need something to haggle over while us work.

I'm busy making pants for Sofia now. One leg be purple, one leg be red. I dream Sofia wearing these pants, one day she was jumping over the moon. (p. 194)

By the end of the novel Celie not only accepts her grammar but also accepts her physical limitations, and she learns to accept herself. In her own fresh awakening to the beauty of being, Celie's words become a medium for her spirit. Alice Walker knows the power of language for the reader, and her last page states, "I thank everybody in this book for coming. A.W., author and medium" (p. 253). Celie came to Alice Walker as she comes to us--the spirit embodied in the language. And as Celie's heart learns to be young and fresh again, so do we.

Censorship of the Epistolary Form

Some censors of *The Color Purple* may react against the epistolary form of the novel. The very idea of letters telling a story may seem old-fashioned and an eighteenth-century phenomenon. Who reads Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* or *Clarissa* today?

Are the letters an effective way to tell Celie's story? How can we write a rationale which justifies the epistolary form Alice Walker uses? Will students read letters when fictional assignments usually have been more orthodox?

Test your students. Try them out with Alice Walker's first line-- "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (p. 11). Would anybody want to read on? What kind of experience is so dreadful that only God should hear the story? Does the letter to God create in us a sense of special entrance into the mind and experience of a black woman who has never told her story to any other human being? Do we feel a secret privilege to read Celie's letters? Do we sense a certain private revelation that unfolds truth rather than artfully conceals it? Aren't the

letters themselves the most powerful way Alice Walker could create her narrator, Celie, and unfold her shocking story?

What does Celie tell us in her letters? How well does she tell us her story? Do we find we cannot put her letters down once we begin to hear the rhythm of her struggling mind?

Perhaps Celie and Nettie tell us best. Alice Walker has three series of letters--(a) Celie's letters to God; (b) Nettie's letters to Celie; and Celie's letters to Nettie. Nettie notes in a letter she writes to Celie that both may have the same motive for writing their letters:

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 in myself and choking on my own heart. I am so *lonely*, Celie. (p. 122)

There it is--the motive for the letters. Celie needs to write about her experience, because she is too ashamed to talk about it with anyone. Nettie needs to describe her feeling in Africa among the Olinkas, her feelings about the missionaries, Samuel and Corrine, and her observations about tribal customs, her hut home, and the two children, Olivia and Adam, whom Nettie knows belong to Celie. Both become closer to themselves and to each other through the medium of letters. In a sense the letters are their prayers.

The epistolary form is far from out-of-date in *The Color Purple*. Why? Perhaps the first line of the novel tells us-- "You better not never tell nobody but God, It'd kill your mammy" (p. 11). How else then would such a story be told if not through letters to God? Perhaps the letter genre came to Alice Walker in a moment of revelation, for she dedicates her book as follows:

To the Spirit:
Without whose assistance
Neither this book
Nor I
Would have been
Written.
(p. 5)

Should censorship still be a hot issue on the common-reading book, *The Color Purple*, there are two alternatives to include in your written rationale for your common reading choice. First, have an out for yourself--allow any reader the opportunity to select another book. Certain people may not be ready for Walker's book.

Second, set up a private conference for offended readers. Discover what is offensive to them and take the opportunity to talk about the conflicts within reality and the words on the printed page which shock. The only way to overcome an inability to face reality is to face reality.

After all the issues of controversy have been addressed and the alternative choices listed, now is the time to write your own letter to God.

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