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The Emancipation of Celie:
*The Color Purple* as a womanist Bildungsroman

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In Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, the protagonist Celie undergoes a remarkable personal change. She evolves from being joyless, submissive and abused by her Pa and her husband Mr._ to running her own business, owning her own house and feeling younger than ever. Celie’s most noticeable change is in the ways she relates to traditional gender roles throughout the novel. Initially, Celie believes that being a woman inescapably means that she has to serve and obey men and she is thus a victim of patriarchy. She is eventually introduced to another way of living by the strong female characters of Sofia and Shug who embrace her in a kind of sisterhood, which is a way for oppressed women to resist patriarchy (Tyson 101).

In *The Color Purple*, sisterhood is vital for Celie as she has nothing else to help her liberate herself from the patriarchal values that keep her down. Celie enters with ease into a lesbian relationship with Shug, which in itself is a “testament to the good things that Shug evokes in Celie” (Harris 10). Sofia and Shug help Celie make many new discoveries, from showing her that women can fight too, to helping her discover her sexuality, and introducing her to a new kind of religion. In addition, Sofia and Shug help her see that she is not bound to a fate of serving others without receiving any gratitude or appreciation and that only she, Celie, can control her own destiny.

Her personal progress is in many ways consistent with the Bildungsroman, a genre which is defined by Petra Rau in short as the “novel of development”, and more extensively by Suzanne Hader as follows: “A Bildungsroman is, most generally, the story of a single individual's growth and development within the context of a defined social order. The growth process, at its roots a quest story, has been described as both ‘an apprenticeship to life’ and a ‘search for meaningful existence within society’”. In the Bildungsroman “apprenticeship” is a key word, which is true in Celie’s development. Her apprenticeship mostly takes place under the supervision and guidance of Shug. Although the Bildungsroman
genre is “unmarked”, which means that it is not specifically used to categorize novels with protagonists of any particular sex, the genre does derive from novels with male protagonists, which can make it almost impossible to apply fully to novels with female protagonists: “Even the broadest definition of the Bildungsroman presuppose a range of social options available only to men” (Abel 7). Therefore, a relatively new branch of the genre has emerged: the female Bildungsroman. The female Bildungsroman differs from the traditional Bildungsroman in a number of ways. For example, it takes into account the very different starting points female protagonists have compared to male protagonists. Gender also determines the starting point of development regarding the age of the protagonist; the story and development of the traditional Bildungsroman protagonist usually commences when he is a young child whereas for female protagonists, the story may begin when the heroine is a small child but the story of her development usually begins later on in her life, “after conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood have been fulfilled and found insufficient” (Abel 7). In *The Color Purple*, the reader first meets Celie as a young teenager, but her development does not begin until many years have passed and she has given birth to children and is married.

*The Color Purple* is related both to the traditional and to the female Bildungsroman, but this essay will also argue that it can be seen as a new type of Bildungsroman: a womanist Bildungsroman. A womanist is a feminist of color, and the term was coined by Alice Walker herself because she does not feel that feminism in the traditional sense covers all the aspects which she considers important for women of color (“Definition”). By definition, a womanist possesses certain qualities: an eagerness to learn, an ability to act in an adult and responsible way, and a remarkable capacity for love. A womanist generally prefers the company of women over the company of men, but is also universalist and considers everybody to be equal to each other, regardless of gender or race (“Definition”).
As I will show, compared to a protagonist of a female Bildungsroman, a protagonist in a womanist Bildungsroman has an even less advantageous starting point due to her having to struggle against double oppression, being not only a woman but a woman of color. Women of color are excluded from the ideal of the Victorian “true” woman who is “submissive, fragile, and sexually pure” (Tyson 96). The idea of the “true” woman influences the way patriarchy thinks even today (Tyson 96). “A woman whose racial or economic situation forced her into hard labor and made her victim of sexual predators was defined as unwomanly and was therefore unworthy of protection from those who exploited her” (Tyson 96). Therefore, black women, including Celie, cannot count on support from white women or from black men, even though they share features with both groups and thus should be able to rely on white women as well as black men for help (Tyson 96).

There are three stages, or crucial events that characterize a traditional Bildungsroman. The protagonist must suffer loss and/or discontent early on in the novel, followed by constant conflicts between what the protagonist needs and wants and the norms of his/her society. Finally, the Bildungsroman ends with the protagonist having embraced society’s norms (Hader). While the first two stages can be found in The Color Purple, the third and final stage does not appear. Hader adds that the Bildungsroman should end with “an assessment by the protagonist of himself and his new place in society”, which The Color Purple does. Neil McEwan sums up Celie’s change in the following way: “She grows in the course of the story from the pitiful child of the opening pages to the sensible, happy woman of the last. Although always vulnerable, she is steadfast; although often abused, she is loving; when loved she is able to respond and to grow” (56). Talking about Sofia early in the novel, Celie says “Some womens can’t be beat” (66). In short, one could say that Celie’s transformation goes from not knowing about women who cannot be beat, to talking about these women, to becoming one of these women.
Celie experiences both loss and severe discontent when the novel commences, and she is taken from her home when her Pa marries her off to Mr._. The loss she experiences which has a great impact on her life is firstly when she is robbed of her innocence and childhood when her mother is ill. Celie is then forced to take on her mother’s role, both when it comes to doing housework and becoming her mother’s sexual substitute to her Pa which results in her giving birth to two of his babies. Because her childhood is taken from her, Celie at this stage displays traits of womanism but she is not yet aware of it. She acts grown up and responsible (“Definition”), but these qualities have not been chosen by her but for her. Celie’s character at this stage can also be viewed as womanist since being abused by her Pa has made her appreciate and prefer the company and culture of women over that of men (“Definition”), as illustrated by the following statement: “I look at women ... cause I’m not scared of them” (Walker 15). Even at this early stage of the novel, Celie seeks refuge from her oppressors (the men) in the company of another woman: her sister Nettie. When Celie is convinced that she has lost Nettie, the only person Celie believes has ever loved her, she suffers yet another tangible loss. Nettie’s importance to Celie is evident at the beginning of the novel, when Celie vows to protect Nettie from their Pa (although she never could fight like that to protect herself). Both the loss of childhood and the loss of Nettie and her much needed affection contribute to the identity Celie has in the first part of the novel. Celie finds comfort in her relationship with Nettie, and losing this comfort consequently causes Celie to lose the one part of her identity which she herself has chosen.

As Rau points out, the Bildungsroman often addresses the issue of identity, the way the self and society relate to one another, and in The Color Purple Celie’s self is dictated (or, more accurately, suppressed) by society before her development begins, the only exception being the encouragement she receives from Nettie. Celie’s observation, taken from the beginning of the novel, clearly illustrates what her role and identity in her family’s home
are: “By time I git back from the well, the water be warm. By time I git the tray ready the food be cold. By time I git all the children ready for school it be dinner time” (Walker 12). It also tells the reader about the lack of appreciation for the work she does. No matter what she does it will not be good enough. At the time the novel is set (early to mid-1900s), women were expected to do all the work around the house, and Celie initially lives up to that expectation. No man has ever bothered to inform her about there being any alternative in the matter, unless she wants to be seen as a “bad girl”. As Lois Tyson explains it, there are only two identities available to women in any patriarchal society: that of the good girl or that of the bad girl, the Madonna or the whore: “If she accepts her traditional gender role and obeys the patriarchal rules, she’s a ‘good girl’: if she doesn’t, she’s a ‘bad girl’” (Tyson 88). The power which the good girl/bad girl mentality gives men over women, especially over weak and submissive women, is made evident by Celie. As the patriarchy around her (to a large extent Pa and Mr._) treats her according to the belief that she is useless when it comes to performing anything but a woman’s duty, Celie works hard never to stray from her role as a good girl, afraid that doing so will subject her to even more abuse. Her life becomes a sort of vicious cycle of trying to do what patriarchy considers good but never receiving any recognition for it, and consequently trying even harder to do good for others in the hope that doing so will at least shield her from harm. Kevin Everod Quashie brings up Celie as an example in his Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un)Becoming the Subject: “Once marked as an outsider, she is subject to being controlled and policed and delimited” (43). Celie’s identity has been imposed upon her by other people, and on account of her initial failure to refuse this identity she has come to rely on it too much to know how she would break free from it.

Celie’s attempts at the early stages of the novel to remain with an identity which has been chosen for and not by her is also consistent with the second stage of the traditional Bildungsroman: “the process of maturity is long, arduous, and gradual, consisting of repeated
clashes between the protagonist’s needs and desires and the views and judgments enforced by an unbending social order” (Hader). In Celie’s case, however, her spiritual and emotional needs and desires are over-shadowed by her principal physical need of staying alive and what she needs is still suppressed by patriarchy. Consequently, Celie does not allow herself to experience any emotions that take energy away from simply making it through the day. As a result of her having accepted her destiny so completely, “Celie’s isolation is so extreme that she is almost psychically dead” (Quashie 43). Celie has surrendered to her life, at least in this world, being one of pleasing others but never herself, which is illustrated by this statement: ”This life soon be over ... Heaven last always” (Walker 47). In addition, Celie says to herself: “Celie, you a tree” (Walker 30) when Mr._ beats her, showing her tendency towards accepting a deadness of mind. This tendency of Celie’s shows the reader how her development comes dangerously close to an end, even before it has begun properly, as switching off one’s feeling can hardly be considered development in any terms.

For Celie, the prospects at the beginning of her development could be better. In the traditional Bildungsroman, a male protagonist inevitably has an advantage, as patriarchy rules in most societies, while a female protagonist in a female Bildungsroman will most likely be fighting an uphill battle, the reason simply being that she is a woman. The protagonist of a womanist Bildungsroman consequently has an even tougher starting point, as being a black woman makes her subject to even more disadvantages than a white woman. Thus, being a poor, black woman in the early 1900s is in fact the very opposite from a desirable starting point. From the very beginning, Celie is a victim of physical abuse as well as mental cruelty and begins her development against all odds, as “Development is a relative concept colored by many interrelated factors, including class, history and gender” (Abel 4). Mr._ tells her that “You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all” (Walker 187). And in the context of the novel’s setting, he is right. A woman with all these qualities is
not worth much, but Celie finds strength and hope in her friendship with Shug, above all else, displaying the womanist quality of valuing the strength of other women (“Definition”).

However, strength in women is something which Celie gradually learns to appreciate. Upon first meeting Sofia, Celie sees for the first time a woman who stands up to her husband, who does not simply do what she is told without questioning and who fights when fighting is required. Meeting a woman so different from herself disturbs Celie to the point that she advises Sofia’s husband Harpo to beat her if she does not obey him (Walker 43). Having been beaten herself for most of her life, she assumes that such treatment will make any woman mind, for at this stage she is still under the impression that women should be “good girls” and do what they are told. When Sofia confronts Celie about advising Harpo to use violence against his wife, Celie’s point of view on the matter changes, albeit not completely. She now realizes and appreciates that there are strong women in the world, but she still cannot imagine that she could ever be one of them, because even though Sofia can stand up to and in a way emasculate her husband, she does so in a masculine way: by fighting. As Trudier Harris puts it, “Celie survives by being a victim, by recognizing that fighting back causes one more problems than not” (7). Furthermore, “Women who rebel against the female role are perceived as unnatural and pay the price of unhappiness, if not madness or death” (Ferguson 229). After fighting the white mayor, Sofia is incarcerated for many years, so it is fair to say that the former statement applies to The Color Purple as well, although the main theme of the novel is resisting conforming to traditional gender roles and resisting the double oppression of being a black woman.

Celie’s meeting Shug becomes the next crucial event in her development. Upon seeing the kind of power Shug has over Mr._, which she maintains by using both her masculinity and her femininity, Celie is allowed to witness the true power of one of her own sex: the ability to use different manners according to the circumstances and as a result of this
emerging victorious from most battles. In spite of Shug’s being described by the preacher as “a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other women mens. Talk bout slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner” (Walker 49), which basically means she is a “bad girl”, Shug can avoid being controlled by men and claim the control for herself because she has the ability to act in what, in the novel, is considered to be both masculine and feminine ways. Because she has such a strong personality, Shug Avery helps Celie develop in a number of ways. Therefore, it seems appropriate to label their friendship a kind of apprentice/mistress relationship, as can be found in novels of all branches of the Bildungsroman genre. In the traditional Bildungsroman, the apprenticeship usually takes the form of a formal education which “provides a context in which social rules and values can be acquired, internalized, and evaluated” (Abel 7). In the female Bildungsroman the protagonist “learn[s] instead to consolidate their female nurturing roles rather than to take a more active part in the shaping of society” (Abel 7). In The Color Purple, Celie is denied formal education by her Pa after he has impregnated her (Walker 19). Furthermore, Celie does not learn to have a nurturing role. From the very beginning of the novel, it is included in the identity patriarchy has given her. Shug’s teaching Celie can simply be labelled as spiritual and emotional guidance, which derives from their mutual feelings of respect towards each other. The two women eventually come to love each other, both nonsexually as valuable friends and sexually as lovers. Shug helps Celie discover her sexuality, and re-discover her ability to love, which Celie thought disappeared along with her sister Nettie. The way Celie and Shug love each other, both sexually and nonsexually, is a natural womanist development (“Definition”).

A womanist “Loves music” (“Definition”). Thus, Shug’s being a blues singer in the novel is significant. Jerry Wasserman asserts that “Shug shows Celie how to emancipate herself by undoing the internalized oppression that has dehumanized her ... In so doing, Shug invokes the fundamentals of blues power.” After Shug dedicates and names a song after
Celie, Celie can, for the first time, carry her head a little bit higher. Learning from Shug has opened up Celie’s mind so that she can fully appreciate what it means to have her own song. As Wasserman puts it: “Shug reinforces these lessons by composing and singing publicly a blues song about Celie, one of a series of mirrors, metaphorical and literal, which reflect and gradually build in Celie a firm sense of her own interiority.” The night Shug first sings the song at Harpo’s, Celie feels out of place at first, not dressed right and not belonging, but when Shug tells the audience that the song she is about to sing is called “Miss Celie’s song”, Celie feels happy because it is the “First time somebody made something and name it after me” (Walker 75). Having her own song becomes an affirmation to Celie that she exists, and her existence has value.

Shug also introduces Celie to a pantheistic view on religion, which once again affirms their womanist mistress/apprentice relationship. As already mentioned, Celie feels dominated by most men in her life: her Pa, her husband, but perhaps most importantly she also feels dominated by God, whom she thinks of as a white man. She also refers to her Pa as “Him” with a capital H, which puts her Pa on par with God. The way she refers to her husband as Mr._ and to the reverend as the Rev. Mr._ shows exactly how for Celie “all men are nondifferentiated forces that exercise power over her” (Tucker 84). In the Bible, where many people find hope and consolation, Celie finds further orders on how to feel and act. She does not allow herself to be angry with her Pa even though he has repeatedly raped and in additional ways mistreated her, because “Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what” (Walker 47). As a result of never feeling like she has permission to express or experience emotions, especially not aggressive and hostile ones, Celie soon “start[s] to feel nothing at all” (Walker 47). Finally, upon learning that nearly everything she knows to be true actually is not true, Celie is ready to give up all the faith in God she has ever had: “he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won’t ever see again.
... The God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful and lowdown” (Walker 175). For this reason (Celie’s feeling oppressed by God and feeling that all men are God), Shug’s introducing her to a pantheistic view on religion is very important for Celie’s development. When Shug tells her that “God is inside you and everybody else” (Walker 177), Celie feels for the first time that there is something powerful within her, something which makes her strong, even if it does take a long time to chase the image of the white man out of her head when she prays. Neil McEwan states that “A change in spiritual life accompanies Celie’s emancipation”, but he also claims that “These elements are pervasive, but not central” (68). I would agree instead with Stacie Lynn Hankinson that “it is only as Celie rids herself of her oppressive man-God figure and emerges into a distinctly non-Christian discovery of God that she finally attains liberation” (324), making religion very central to Celie’s development. Because of Celie’s realization that God is within her, “her sense of fear and of being judged dissolves. Celie learns that she should focus on the creation, not the person of God” (Hankinson 324). From a womanist point of view, the move from a monotheistic view to a pantheistic view is of great consequence, as a womanist “loves the Spirit” (“Definition”). Finding this Spirit within her, as well as outside her, opens Celie up to the next crucial stage of her development.

When Shug takes Celie to Memphis, away from Mr._, Celie displays more courage than she has done before in the novel. Strengthened by the love and support from Shug and motivated by the exasperation she feels after learning that Mr._ has stolen all the letters Nettie has written to Celie over the years and kept them secret from her, Celie comes close to cutting his throat for lying to her about it. She eventually leaves him after having put up with his abuse for many years, the last straw being that he did not tell her about Nettie’s letters: “You took my sister Nettie away from me, I say. And she was the only person love me in the world” (Walker 181). Upon learning about Shug and Celie’s plans, Mr._ informs Celie
that her leaving would only happen over his dead body and goes on to ask her what is so wrong that she feels the need to leave. She has the strength to answer: “You a lowdown dog is what’s wrong ... It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need” (Walker 181). With the guidance and love of Shug, Celie has become strong enough to leave her abusive husband and to realize her own worth. To convince Celie to stay he uses insults which have always worked in the past:

Shug got talent. She can sing. She got spunk, he say, She can talk to anybody. Shug got looks, he say. She can stand up and be notice. But what you got? You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people. All you fit to do in Memphis is be Shug’s maid … What you gon do? Hire yourself out to farm? He laugh. Maybe somebody let you work on the railroad. (Walker 186)

Mr._ makes the point with this statement that in order for a woman to make it in the world, she has to be special in some way. Shug has talent and appearance to recommend her, and he does not believe that Celie has a single quality that will help her succeed, and that she will have to continue to rely on other people to get by. However, he is over-looking her most important qualities: her endurance, willpower and her newly discovered strength. Finally, when it is time to leave, Celie says: “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 187). Celie is hopeful and she has realized the worth of her existence.

Being in Memphis without a negative male influence causes Celie to really start blossoming into a strong woman. Discovering her talent for sewing trousers gives her a new identity which she can take pride in. Naming the business “Folkspants, Unlimited ” (Walker
192) emphasizes that they are trousers that can be worn by anyone, regardless of sex, which in turn symbolizes Celie’s realization that women (including herself) can do anything men can do, from wearing trousers to owning a house to running a business. Her choice of name for the business coupled with her traveling to Memphis also represents the universalism connected with womanism (“Definition”). Womanism’s universalism implies that no distinction should be made between male or female, light or dark skin; that everybody should be equal, once again revealing the significance of the name “Folkspants Unlimited”. Celie’s ability to be universal in this sense makes a dramatic difference between Celie at the end of the novel and Celie at the beginning of it, where she was under the impression that men had a right to treat women as subservient beings. Exchanging one environment for another with the purpose of exploring is a trait usually found in the traditional Bildungsroman (Abel 7), and not in the female Bildungsroman. Nevertheless, Celie’s traveling should not be viewed as male or female, it should be viewed as what it is: a vital part of Celie’s development, as her development cannot be accomplished without her breaking free from the notions of what is male and what is female.

Thus, at the end of the novel Celie has liberated herself from the traditional gender roles dictated by society. So the final stages of the traditional Bildungsroman, “the spirit and values of the social order become manifest in the protagonist, who is then accommodated into society” (Hader) is not found in this novel. On the contrary, Celie has moved from having conformed completely to the reigning social order (the patriarchal rules) to living according to her own rules, hence her major development. The whole point of Celie’s change is her move away from rules dictated by society, which brings The Color Purple outside the traditional definition of the Bildungsroman. However, in this genre “The novel ends with an assessment by the protagonist of himself and his new place in that society” (Hader). Celie’s final statement in the novel assesses the states of mind of her and everybody
around her: “I don’t think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this is the youngest us ever felt” (Walker 251), making Walker’s novel consistent with this characteristic of the Bildungsroman.

Additionally, in the end Celie is full of love and happiness after being reunited with her sister Nettie. Re-discovering the only love she can remember from her childhood can be seen as a symbolic representation of the full circle Celie has completed: she is back at the place where her family’s old house used to be, only it has been torn down and replaced by a new house. Celie owns that house and is no longer merely a servant in it. At last, she is grown in every way, as opposed to being forced to assume all responsibility. And instead of being surrounded by people who keep her down, she is around people she loves and who love her. Being able and willing to be filled with love is another characteristic for a womanist who, according to the definition, “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless” (“Definition”). Celie’s final letter in the novel begins “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God” (Walker 249), illustrating her womanist attitude and her love and happiness.

To sum up, Celie initially acts (or is forced to act) in the adult way which would characterize a womanist had Celie chosen it herself. In her family’s home, at a much too young age, she is forced to take on her mother’s role around the house as well as in her Pa’s bedroom. In accordance with the Bildungsroman, she experiences both loss and discontent early on in the novel. The loss of childhood combined with the loss of her beloved sister break Celie down to the point where she cannot fight for herself. All she can do is try to stay alive while struggling against double oppression. At the early stages of the novel, she does not yet have any strong women in her life to show her that there is an alternative to living the way that she does: conforming to the rules of patriarchal society and never receiving appreciation.
for it. Her needs and desires (especially her need for love and affection) are suppressed (illustrating the clashes between what the protagonist wants and what society expects which characterize the Bildungsroman), and she comes dangerously close to not being able to feel at all. Feeling love is crucial in a person’s womanist development. Therefore, meeting Sofia and Shug and forming a sort of sisterhood with them marks the beginning of Celie’s womanist development. Shug and Celie form a sort of apprentice/mistress relationship, a relationship which can be found in most Bildungsromans. The love which she feels for them signifies that the novel is taking a womanist turn, in the sense that at that stage, Celie has developed enough to let other women (apart from her sister) love her and to be able to love them back. After losing Nettie, Celie is sure that no kind of love will ever enter her life again, but when the opportunity for love comes she is able to seize it. The move to Memphis and the discovery of her talent for sewing trousers help her to truly develop into a confident and strong woman. At the end of the novel, Celie is older than she was at the beginning of it, but she (and everyone around her) feels younger than ever, which we learn as she assesses herself and her new place in society: the final characteristic of the Bildungsroman. Celie has finally grown up. She is not just made to act grown up anymore. She has developed from a weak and submissive girl into a strong woman who controls her own life. Celie’s ability to develop in spite of being subject to the double oppression of being a black woman in a white man’s world is what makes The Color Purple a womanist Bildungsroman. She has overcome terrible losses and has suffered gross mistreatment, which in the end has made her stronger. Her feeling young coincides with her having really become an adult and she is given an opportunity to make up for the years she lost when becoming a woman usually happens naturally and without force. At the end of the novel, Celie has become not only a woman, she has developed so much that she displays signs of all the criteria for having achieved a womanist development: she is grown up (not just acting as though she is), she is in charge of a business, a house and, in short, her life. She is
serious, she has a universalist perspective, and most importantly, she loves. She loves Shug, she loves the world, she loves her sister and, ultimately, she loves herself.
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