

# ALICE WALKER'S MERIDIAN AND THE COLOR PURPLE: SOCIAL COMMENTARY AND INNER CONFLICT REVEALED

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**ABSTRACT:** Meridian, a novel by Alice Walker, offers a unique perspective on the civil rights movement and social issues through an in-depth examination of the sacrifices that are required to bring about change. It is an essential novel in comprehending how working for social justice can take its toll on a person. Meridian uses narrative structure manipulation and a depiction of the tension between the personal and the political to achieve its goals.

## AN OVERVIEW OF MERIDIAN

Meridian, Alice Walker's second novel, is an in-depth examination of the civil rights era and the sacrifices that were made to bring about social change in the United States. Walking through the Civil Rights Movement, Walker makes a salient observation about the multi-faceted and complex nature of America at the time.

Meridian Hill's path of self-discovery takes place on two levels at the same time. First and foremost, Meridian's journey of self - from the repression of infancy to the liberation of adulthood - makes for a compelling, character-driven work that is filled with many poignant passages. Meridian's voyage, second, allegorically represents the path of the United States of America as a nation as it transitions out of the civil rights period. Accordingly, amid the civil rights period, this storey delivers a clear, incisive view on the ephemeral essence of America. Meridian is primarily about Meridian Hill's journey, but it is also about the journeys of many men and women who were in Meridian's position at the time in America, as depicted in the novel.

Similarly to a patchwork quilt, Meridian's narrative structure stitches together many events from Meridian's life to form a narrative mosaic. Because it does not adhere to a chronological pattern, this layering or patching together of crucial moments defies literary traditions. Walking down this path of resistance echoes Meridian's resistance throughout the novel, and as a result, the structure of the novel expresses some of the work's primary themes, such as resistance and rejection of social standards. Although the narrative style of Meridian contributes significantly to the novel's literary success, there are a few issues with Walker's method that need to be addressed. Some reviewers have regarded the novel as confused as a result of the interrupted chronology, and it may be claimed that the work becomes a little disjointed and occasionally lacks cohesiveness as a result of the disruption.

A notable exception to this critique can be found in the chapter titled "Gold." The chapter is written in the form of a flashback, and it makes excellent use of the anecdotal style. Meridian's history and present are seamlessly intertwined throughout this chapter. Additionally, the flashback not only aids in the development of Meridian's character but also serves to emphasise the broader societal circumstances of the historical period in which the novel is situated. Walker is successful in capturing the problematic connection between Meridian and her mother while also depicting the differing viewpoints on civil rights that were prevalent at the time of the novel. Perhaps the 'gold' in the chapter is an analogy for civil rights activism, as some have argued. Meridian desires the gold, but she refuses to accept it since her mother is sceptical of its legitimacy. With this narrative, Meridian demonstrates for the first time how she chooses to suppress her wishes and needs to please her mother, a behaviour that is repeated throughout the work.

One of the novel's most notable strengths is its representation of Meridian's innermost feelings. Meridian's internal battle is revealed throughout the narrative, and this enables the reader to become emotionally invested in her. As the narrative progresses, Meridian is presented with a choice between what she wants to do and what she is compelled to do at every turn. Meridian suppresses her desires every time this situation is given to her.

Consequently, Meridian's rejection of a "conventional" way of life carries significant emotional weight because it is something for which she has struggled her entire life. The metaphorical dismantling and reassembling of Meridian's body, on the other hand, is the most literary and socially significant aspect of the novel. This is significant because it not only speaks to the sacrifices that Meridian had to make for the civil rights movement to progress, but it also speaks to the sacrifices that must be made on a larger social scale to effect social change in our society. Meridian Hill serves as a microcosm of the acts that society must take to achieve social justice in the world.

Another important aspect of the story was the portrayal of relationships, particularly between Meridian and Truman, in it. Their relationship is highly intricate and difficult to understand throughout the narrative. Despite this, the relationship is only incidental. Perhaps this was because the novel's primary focus was on the civil rights struggle, rather than on romantic relationships. Although a foregrounded romantic narrative may have captivated a larger readership, the message about social justice may have been obscured as a result. Furthermore, it is possible that this has lessened the message of the work and has resulted in it having a less societal impact.

Meridian is a novel with several levels that have had a great deal of influence and importance. It is particularly relevant since it provides an eye-opening depiction of the lives of people who have worked to bring about societal change. It is unique in its approach to societal issues as well as its narrative framework, and Walker's writing oozes elegance and panache. With this work, Walker has created something that is grounded, relatable, and extremely socially conscious. Consequently, Meridian comes highly recommended by me because it is an illuminating novel that covers important problems.

### **A CRITICAL STUDY ON THE COLOR PURPLE**

"The Color Purple," written by Alice Walker in 1982, is the book that has elevated a writer who has published consistently superb literature over the preceding decade and a half to the level of something like an American literary icon." A number of her earlier works, such as her collection of short tales, *In Love and Trouble* (1973), and her poetry collection, *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* (1973), have been recognised with literary awards. There are a variety of additional novels, short stories, poems, and essays that have garnered critical acclaim. But, thanks to *The Color Purple*, which won both the American Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, Alice Walker has risen to the top of everyone's reading list, bringing the long-submerged voice of a black woman raised in the South and poverty into our collective consciousness with clarity and power for the first time. Although Celie, the novel's main narrator/character, begins by speaking from a thoroughly localised and isolated perspective, both she and the novel eventually acquire a vision that transcends the confines of time and geography. It is the subject of *The Color Purple*, a novel that analyses the process by which one realises one's inherent value and learns how to assert one's inheritance. A supernatural rescue of truth from a world that has been engulfed in deception is the subject of the novel.

A major moment in the story occurs when Shug Avery, the high-living, self-affirming spirit through whom the transformation of the main narrator/character occurs, reveals the secret: Shug Avery, the spirit of self-affirmation "God resides within you as well as within everyone else. You are welcomed into the world by God. However, only those who look for it within themselves will discover it. When you're not looking for it, or don't know what you're seeking, it will sometimes present itself on its own. Trouble, I believe, is what gets the better of most people. Lord, I am in great sorrow " (p. 177). Shug's speech was directed at Celie, who is intimately familiar with struggle and sadness in the quick of her flesh. An author writing in the realist or naturalist genre in the nineteenth century would have utilised a character like Celie to depict the world in all of its horrors. A novelist of this calibre may have elicited our empathy, perhaps even our shame, but he would not have been able to elevate Celie above the status of victim, or perhaps even victimizer in her own right. Celie grows up in an environment marked by illiteracy, poverty, and cruelty as she approaches adolescence. Celie is the oldest of a brood of children whose mother shows to be physically and emotionally inadequate for her responsibilities. She is left with not just the domestic chores, but also the responsibility of tending to her father's unsatisfied sexual hunger. As a result of being raped, battered, and rendered sterile after giving birth to two children who were spirited away from her when they were young, she is married off by the time she is seventeen to a man who doesn't want her, with the expectation that she will raise his children for him in exchange for her services. Celie's father persuades the reluctant suitor to accept her proposal by adding, "She may be unattractive, but she isn't afraid of a little hard work. She is also tidy. And God was able to restore her. You are free to do whatever you want with it, and she is not going to force you to feed or clothe it in any way " (p. 18).

Celie is saved in part because of the way the novel in which she is found was put together, and this has something to do with that. Despite the overwhelming effort to extinguish all traces of life in her, and despite her numbing experience of rape, beatings, and the arduous task of rearing the scruffy children of the man she knows only as "Mr. \_\_," Celie manages to avoid utter annihilation by turning to write. Not after the fact, but while she is doing it: letters to God from a person who has no one. Celie's level of engagement with us as a character is made clear by the act of writing as well as the interlocutor chosen for the piece. The letters written by Celie to God are not a form of a mask, as the autobiographical writings of numerous other heroes have been accused of being, but rather a picture of herself and her environment that is free of guile or any attempt to alter it. Having the ability to reflect on what is happening to her through her letters allows her to engage in exactly the search for self and God that Shug describes in the text above, although no one knows what is going on (p. 177).

Celie, on the other hand, does not write with such grandiose goals in mind. God is not a source of contention for her, nor is she on the lookout for self-discovery. She begins by only requesting a sign "informing me of what is happening to me" (p. 11). No one in her everyday life, no one in her professional life, no one who has the authority to pass judgement on her, but her letters have the effect of transforming her from an object into a subject. This collection of photographs captures not just the events of her life, but also the process through which she comes to understand her inherent worth as a being capable of loving and being loved. The epistolary format that Alice Walker has chosen permits, Celie, to be transformed in a way that no other structure could, and in turn, Celie can modify her world as she becomes herself. As silent as the God to whom Celie writes, Alice Walker creates the space in which her character can evolve on her terms, much like the God to whom Celie writes.

Likewise, as Celie matures and enables herself to open windows and doors to a life that is increasingly complete and rich, so does the God to whom she addresses her writings. When Celie learns that God is not a large white-bearded man with blue eyes up in the sky, she realises that God is not a man at all and that God is not apart from her at all. She is also not a poor, beaten black lady who is buried deeper than the earth, but rather she is a part of God and of everything that exists. Celie spiritualizes for God during her years of writing, and God manifests Himself in the form of Celie's writing. The amalgamation of spirit and matter that the novel achieves through Celie extends beyond the confines of the work to capture the author, who is either absent or present at the time of the novel's publication. The author has addressed the book in her turn to "the Spirit, without whose support neither this book nor I would have been written," although she is outside of Celie's consciousness. Similarly to Celie, Alice Walker serves as both author and character, serving as both the writer through whom Spirit manifests itself and the being in whom Spirit is present. Only in this work does the process of interpenetration by which the author and the character establish themselves in one another become so clear as it does in this work.

Not all of Celie's letters are delivered to God. When Shug discovers a collection of unread letters sent to Celie from her sister Nettie in Mr. 's trunk about halfway through the novel, he believes the letters have been intercepted to punish Nettie for refusing Mr. 's advances. Following the discovery of the letters, Celie writes a letter to Nettie in which she expresses her gratitude. The next pages of the storey are devoted to a collection of letters written by Nettie, who has been living with missionaries among the Olinkas in Africa for many years, to Celie, as well as to the letters written by Celie in response to Nettie's letters. Although the addressee is no longer God, the act of faith that each sister undertakes in continuing the writing is no less significant. Both of them write to a loving other who has no way of knowing whether or not what they have sent will be received. Nettie writes the following in one of her first letters.

For Celie and Nettie, writing is a means of survival. The writer and imagined love recipient are both supported by each other even though neither appears to respond to each other's messages. For example, Celie and Nettie's faith-building via writing is a central theme in "The Color Purple," which tells the narrative of how they pieced together a new and beautiful life out of the fragments of their wrecked lives.

Similarly, the content shows Spirit's workings if the novel's structure reveals it as a work permeated, inspired, and informed by Spirit. In the novel, the spirit communicates with the reader through a variety of means, including visions, images, and the written and spoken word. For example, Spirit is a problem for both Celie and Mr. . In Celie's case, the problem stems from Celie's unkind treatment of her stepdaughter-in-law, Sofia. When she wrote, "I've been unable to sleep for more than a month now... I get a few hours of sleep from time to time. Then, just as things appear to be looking up, I suddenly wake up... What's the matter with this? I stubbed my toe. There's something you've done wrong, a small voice says. Someone you have sinned against... It struck me

in the middle of the night one night. Sofia. Infringing on Sofia's spirit, I do so " (p. 45). Celie and Sofia become friends when Celie admits to being a naive fool and envious.

In a later chapter, Celie sees Spirit as a source of strength. Celie is finally able to stand up to Mr. thanks to Shug's affection and the knowledge that she and Nettie are not the children of the man they believed they were. To prevent Celie from accompanying Shug to Memphis, he resorts to a barrage of threats and insults. Then she says to him: "Until you do what's right in front of me, all your efforts will be in nothing. I deliver it to him as it has come to me, no alterations made.

I'd rather pay the price twice. Then I warn him, "You better stop talking, because all I'm saying you ain't coming just from me. Looks like the air rushes in and shapes words as I open my mouth " (p. 187).

When she predicted that Mr. would be cleansed by the Spirit, she was right. He was cleansed and returned to life, love, and kindness. When Celie goes home for a visit, she is stunned by the transformation. Sofia describes this: "He was unable to fall asleep. The sound of bats outside the door sounded like a scream at night. There are also other noises coming from up the chimney. Having to listen to his own heart was the most difficult aspect. Things were fine during the day, but as soon as darkness fell, it turned insane. Shockingly loud beats could be heard from across the room. The sounds remind me of drums... What was it that gave him the strength to get through it? I stubbed my toe. Harpo [Sofia's husband] forced him to send you the rest of your sister's letters, she claims. After that, he started to get well. She claims that you should know that meanness is deadly " (pp. 201-01).

To help those in need and punish those who harm others, the Holy Spirit uses a variety of means, including our imaginations. Shug Avery, Mr. 's adored and the subject of local gossip, is the individual who most captures Celie's mind. From the moment she first sees Shug, Celie is instantly taken to her. preserves a picture of herself before her marriage to Mr. "Fur-clad she appears to be. Her cheeks were very red. Her hair was curly and looked like it had a tail. When she put her foot on a motorcycle, she was beaming. Her eyes, on the other hand, seemed a little more serious than they were. Some people are just depressing. To my surprise, she agreed to share the photo. I've been staring at it nonstop since then. As a result, Shug Avery is always in my thoughts at night. When she gets dressed, she'll be spinning and laughing like a crazy person " (p. 16).

Beauty, love, power, attractiveness, and freedom are all things that Shug Avery represents. Celie cares for Mr. \_\_, who is unwell and the object of the town's disapproval, propelled by the force of her image of Shug and indifferent to Shug's own early cruelty. Celie begins the process of freeing herself from the notion of what life is that the world has imposed on her by being in Shug's presence. Tobias, the brother of Mr. \_\_, visits Shug, and Shug says: "Believe it or not, women aren't all the same. He says, "Oh, I believe it." Despite my best efforts, I am unable to prove it to anyone. The first time I think about the entire universe. I don't know what the rest of the world has to do with it. Shug Avery and Mr. and I are all set to take on Tobias in a quilting bee! I've never felt this good in my entire life till now " (pp. 60-61 ).

This vision of the three of them foreshadows the novel's conclusion, when Celie and Mr. \_\_, freed from Tobias's world by Spirit and redeemed by their love for Shug and her love for them, learn to appreciate each other's presence.

In naming, the spirit is also present. When he stops being Celie's oppressor and starts becoming her friend, Mr. becomes "Albert." Harpo's new wife, Squeak, takes on a new name once Sofia leaves him. Celie asks her one day, "What do you think?" "... What is your whole name? Mary Agnes, that's what she says. Using your real name is the only way to get Harpo to call you. If this is the case, he may still notice you despite his difficulties " (p. 85 ). Once they're in Memphis with Shug and Celie, she confirms her name: "Harpo tells Squeak to listen. Memphis is off limits to you. That is the total of the matter. Squeak, Mary Agnes. Mary Agnes, what difference does it make if you squeak a little? Squeak gushes about how much of a difference it makes. When I was Mary Agnes, I could sing in front of people " (p. 183).

The book's numerous examples show that naming and imagining are not the only things that make a big difference. They are the deciding factor. Whenever Celie and Nettie write, they are simultaneously reviving and reimagining their stories. By replacing bogus photos with actual ones, they can expose an entirely different picture beneath them.

For Celie, the challenge is to let go of her preconceived notions of God as a human being and instead cultivate an awareness of God's presence in all things.

In this "once upon a time" couple, a wealthy, loving one, their offspring and property have been taken over, raped, and exploited by impostors. However, the mansion they once called home still exudes a sense of majesty and majesty, as Celie and Shug discovered when they visited "Pa" during Easter. True parents' place is a place of resurrection, a place of abundance in a world of cold, dreary, and silence...

Celie and Nettie's parents' enchanted site seems to retain even "Pa" in his youth. Celie adds, " "Shug and I were both taken aback by how young he appeared. He appeared... immature for a man with a large family and a large number of grandchildren " (pp. 165-66). She remarks after they had left "They sing the same tunes as they do when we arrive and when we depart. Then, as soon as we return to the main road, they appear to have stopped. It was gloomy by the time we arrived at the cemetery " (p. 167). There can be no other explanation for this natural beauty except that it is a symbol of God's Garden and his loving parents who banished the original occupants because of their greed and jealousy. We can see that the novel is not a history after all. It doesn't follow the lives of the protagonists throughout 30 years, from the age of 14 to the age of 54 or thereabouts. For the most part, it is a storey of loss and recovery of origin, a storey of separation and confusion of identity and final reunion, a storey in which love and God's action overcomes the corrosive influence of time and physical strength.

Nettie, who has written to Celie about the Olinka tribe's understanding of history, reiterates the idea on a worldwide scale. Celie relays this information to Albert, who nods in agreement.

This was something Nettie had also realised. She concluded her final letter by writing, "Having spent so much time in Africa, we've come to see God in a new light, one that is more spiritual and inward. A roof leak or Christ could be the most common comparison, but that's not what we mean. Having no preconceptions about what God looks like frees us to be ourselves " (p. 227).

They learned through "Pa's" wife that he had died and that the land was truly theirs because their parents had bequeathed it to Celie and Nettie in their wills. Nettie and Samuel and Celie's children, Adam and Olivia, return from Africa toward the end of the novel. They had been proclaimed dead by the Department of Defense, but Celie refused to accept it and continued to write. The Fourth of July, which will be here soon, is quickly approaching. Celie and Shug and Albert are sitting on the porch, stitching and chatting. The ones they've loved for so long come tumbling out when they see a car stop by the house. When it comes to romance, everything that was broken apart has been reunited, and those who were redeemed by love have been restored to their proper place as the true heirs of the Garden.

Of course, the past doesn't stop. There is a passage of time. Outside, the storms of World War II and the 4th of July celebrations. quoting Harpo "Because white people will be celebrating their freedom from England on July 4, most black people will not be required to work. We can have a day to celebrate each other's accomplishments " (p. 250). Celie concludes by pointing out the distinction between the external and inward self "It appears to me that they [her children] think we're all getting on in years, especially Nettie, Shug, and Albert. However, I doubt that any of us are feeling our age. Then we were ecstatic. I believe this is the youngest we've ever felt, in fact " (p. 251 ). Those who love each other can overcome the powers of darkness and the corrosion of time in the Garden that is their true father and mother's home. There is only room for happiness and celebration in this world.

Celie's final letter, which concludes the novel, is addressed to: "Dear God, I beg of You. Lovely Stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples... Everything, I love you. In the name of Jesus, I pray. " Celie has made it to spiritual enlightenment after battling her way through the gloom of outer consciousness. In the end, history was conquered and the planet was redeemed. Thank you to Alice Walker for re-establishing the novel's romance roots, and we acknowledge the Spirit's ability to communicate with us via Celie and the author.

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