

# “What She Got to Sing About?”: Comedy and “The Color Purple”

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[Laughter] is a froth with a saline base. Like froth it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty and the aftertaste bitter.

(Bergson 190)

THIS OBSERVATION, written in 1900 by Henri Bergson, in the conclusion to his essay “Laughter,” ironically anticipates the changes that occur in the comic mode of the succeeding century when laughter’s “froth” virtually disappears and its “bitter aftertaste” comes to predominate. After 1900, literature — comedy in particular — becomes more acrimonious and discordant, perhaps better to represent life in our century of “disorder and irrationalism” (Sypher 201). The comic novel ceases to ring with the “silvery laughter” that George Meredith applauds; rather it reverberates to the maniacal, paranoid laughter in which Thomas Pynchon revels. In short, comedy enters the realm of the absurd and begins to reflect the individual’s disorientation in a “senseless, chaotic” world.

Yet even within this context, it might seem anomalous to call Alice Walker’s 1982 work, *The Color Purple*, a comedy. The novel is arguably bleaker than many of the others that are included in the mode, since it deals with rape, incest, and social prejudice; yet the ideal “womanist” world in which it culminates (Walker, *Search* xi) is joyous and celebratory — a condition of the comic. Although its subject matter appears at times to counteract the levity expected of a comic novel and so to be at variance with the comic purpose, if we set aside our more traditional expectations

of the mode and look rather at the intent of the comic, we see that *The Color Purple* rather closely adheres to its theoretical tenets.

While it is not my intention here to offer an absolute definition of comedy, some idea of what the comic signifies is necessary to come to an understanding of its relevance to *The Color Purple*. My discussion is selective: the characteristics I discuss relate more specifically to what theorists of the comic call "high comedy," or the "comedy of ideas," since Walker's novel is obviously not of the kind of comedy which elicits hearty guffaws from its readers. But this does not disqualify it from the mode, for theorists of the comic often note that laughter is a very deceptive criterion by which to assess it (Martin 74, Sypher 203). More often than not, high comedy concerns itself less with being 'funny' than with dramatizing possibilities and exploring potentials. If it does provoke laughter, it is because it mocks certain social conventions. Yet, it mocks because it devotes itself to social improvement and often provides a critique of societal limitations. James K. Feibleman suggests that comedy pursues the ideal:

A constant reminder of the existence of the logical order as the perfect goal of actuality, comedy continually insists upon the limitations of all experience and of all actuality. The business of comedy is to dramatize and thus make more vivid and immediate the fact that contradictions in actuality must prove insupportable. It thus admonishes against the easy acceptance of interim limitations and calls for the persistent advance toward the logical order and the final elimination of limitations. (82)

Comedy seeks improvement in a "negative way," for it asserts that if it is only the limitations of actuality which prevent it from achieving perfection, then the limitations should be eliminated (96). Therefore, in a period of social change (like the twentieth century), comedy often assumes an increasing importance because it is more subversive in nature than tragedy (96) and seeks to improve society: "Better to stress the fact that however much value any actual situation may have, it is prevented from having more only by its limitations. Why, then, be satisfied?" (96). Because comedy continually exposes the limitations of the actual to highlight the ideal, many comic theorists emphasize its potentially

"dangerous" and even "revolutionary" nature. Indeed, Wylie Sypher goes so far as to suggest that the comedian

refuses to make . . . concessions to actuality and serves, instead, as chief tactician in a permanent resistance movement, or rebellion, within the frontiers of human experience. By temperament, the comedian is often a fifth columnist in social life. (247)

All these criteria are relevant to *The Color Purple*, but of more specific interest at this point is the means by which comedy frequently displays its "revolutionary" tendency. If comedy is a subversive mode, it often succeeds in demonstrating the limitations of the social order through the incorporation of an excluded or marginalized individual. Northrop Frye perceives this as comedy's adaptation of the "*pharmakos*" or the victimized character who is "opposed to or excluded from the fictional society" and has "the sympathy of the audience" (*Anatomy* 48). The "*pharmakos*" generally appears in comedy in one of two ways and can be regarded as a "fool or worse by the fictional society, and yet impresses the real audience as having something more valuable than his [or her] society has" (48); or the "*pharmakos*" may choose to repudiate the society, and in doing so become "a kind of *pharmakos* in reverse" (48). The idea of the "*pharmakos*" also foregrounds what has been called comedy's "paradoxical nature," since in it frequently that which is "seemingly absurd [is] actually well-founded" (Martin 86) and therefore, in "the best sort of comedy," the "incongruous is finally seen to be congruent to a larger pattern than that which was originally perceived" (87).

While comedy seeks to improve society, often, particularly in its twentieth-century manifestations, it veers so close to tragedy that it is difficult to separate the comic from the tragic mode. But Frye suggests that this is because "tragedy is really implicit or uncompleted comedy [and] comedy contains a potential tragedy within itself" ("Argument" 455). If comedy completes itself, this completion is manifested in the new (or renewed) society which is evident in its conclusion. High comedy is not content to expose the limitations in a closed social order; once they have been exposed, it often offers what it perceives as the ideal, for in its aim for general improvement, it needs to provide an open society as an

alternative to the closed or limited one it has dramatized. Comedy's theme, therefore, is often "the integration of society" (*Anatomy* 43) and this social integration "may emphasize the birth of an ideal society" ("Argument" 454). As a result, "that which gets born at the end of comedy" may "not impress us as true, but as desirable," since unlikely "conversions, miraculous transformations, and providential assistance are inseparable from comedy" (*Anatomy* 170).

High comedy forces its dramatized order to "open in many directions" (Sypher 249). It becomes "an achievement of man as a social being" (Sypher 252) because it compels us to recognize our potential by mocking what is less than ideal in our practice. Hence, while it exposes the limitations of our society, it either eliminates these limitations and so renews its fictional order or it posits a new, ideal order in its conclusions. Like tragedy, therefore, comedy too offers a "road to wisdom" (Sypher 254), and the comic protagonist often learns through suffering (Sypher 254); but the comic differs from the tragic in that it never "despairs of man" (Sypher 254).

And Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, does not despair of "man" either, for it incorporates these elements of comedy: it makes the incongruous congruent to a larger pattern; it refuses to accept the limitations imposed on its fictional society; and it posits a new order which is presented in the novel as ideal. Even its tragic elements are not anomalous, since they are in accord with Frye's observation of "how frequently a comic dramatist tries to bring his action as close to a catastrophic overthrow of the hero as he can get it, and then reverses the action as quickly as possible" (*Anatomy* 178).

However, if we are to apply these prescriptions to *The Color Purple*, we must first perceive it as a "high comedy," since it is only this mode which theoretically subscribes to the criteria discussed earlier. But "high comedy" invariably includes, and, in fact, culminates in the comedy of manners, and to characterize *The Color Purple* as such appears to be problematic, especially in light of M. H. Abrams's explanation that this mode

deals with the relations and intrigues of men and women living in a polished and sophisticated society, relying for comic effect in

great part on the wit and sparkle of the dialogue — often in the form of *repartee*, a witty conversational give-and-take which constitutes a kind of verbal fencing match — and to a lesser degree, on the ridiculous violations of social conventions and decorum by stupid characters such as would-be wits, jealous husbands, and foppish dandies. (26)

The male and female characters of *The Color Purple* do not live in a polished and sophisticated society, nor do they engage in what is traditionally considered sparkling and witty repartee. And the violations of social norms and decorum that occur are not perpetrated by foolish, stupid, or dandified characters but by female characters with whom we are expected to sympathize. However, the conventions of the comedy of manners are so clearly inverted in *The Color Purple* that we cannot but suspect it to be deliberate. Therefore, I would suggest that *The Color Purple* is a parodic inversion of the comedy of manners,<sup>1</sup> and so undercuts the form at the same time that it ironically adheres to its intentions — to improve and to open the closed social order it dramatizes.

Linda Hutcheon defines parody as "imitation with critical difference" (36). She also notes that parody too is potentially "revolutionary":

The presupposition of both a law and its transgression bifurcates the impulses of parody: it can be normative and conservative, or it can be provocative and revolutionary. . . . [P]arody can, like the carnival, also challenge norms in order to renovate, to renew. (76)

In its parodic inversion of the comedy of manners, Walker's novel recalls the works of Jane Austen, who, as Sypher observes, "devastates our compromises and complacencies — especially male complacency" and "placidly undermines the bastions of middle-class propriety" (247). Austen too, of course, frequently parodies various literary modes, particularly "the popular romance fiction of her day" (Hutcheon 44), and through it "satirizes the traditional view of woman's role as the lover of men" (Hutcheon 44). But while she may call into question the social mores of her time, Austen presents, in the conclusions of her novels, a society in which women are integrated into the traditional order. Walker, on the other hand, recalls Austen's work with a "critical difference," since in

her novel no compromises are brooked. She goes further than her predecessor and rejects the society which imposes the limitations and at the same time points out the exclusivity of literature, since traditionally few novels that have achieved significant "recognition" have dealt with anything other than a white social order or anything other than a patriarchal society. (To this end she also reworks to some extent Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and the traditional endings of sexist fairy tales, specifically "The Frog Prince.")

By transposing the comedy of manners, Walker foregrounds the limitations she finds in it and so undercuts those social norms which it has incorporated and to which it ultimately contributes. Indeed, J. A. Cuddon suggests that the comedy of manners has "for its main subjects and themes the behaviour and deportment of men and women living under specific social codes" (139). This definition takes on new significance in relation to a novel like *The Color Purple* because it subverts the form by parodically inverting its conventional notions of expected social codes.

Walker writes from the point of view of an outsider who is rebuffed by a closed social order; yet in her novel she transcends these social restrictions and envisions a world in which they cease to exist. *The Color Purple* is an intellectual comedy in that it is a comedy of ideas: it dramatizes possibilities and completes itself in a vision of an ideal world<sup>2</sup> — a world which is matriarchal, a parody of the boy-gets-girl endings of most comedies and fairy tales. This world is also an ideal one which is in direct opposition to the rigidly closed society that is in evidence in the opening pages of *The Color Purple*. However, the tragic elements so apparent here are necessary to Walker's idea, since she must work through the limitations of the closed order to give credence to the utopian possibilities of her open, womanist world.

Walker dramatizes the crippling strictures of this old order through her heroine, who is a social pariah. Celie is not just a woman, she is a black woman; but she is not just a black woman, she is — as she later learns — a lesbian, and is, therefore, thrice removed from the white male heterosexual norm. By writing from the point of view of this seemingly socially aberrant individual, Walker exposes the limitations that society imposes on anything

outside the norm and the narrow, restrictive lifestyle that it upholds. The society in evidence at the beginning of the novel is a totally closed society, which would not open to include Celie even if she wished it, since she cannot change the colour of her skin or her sex. Yet this social outcast is shown to be far wiser than the white patriarchy which excludes her. She is able to manifest at the conclusion of the work a society that "opens in many directions" (Sypher 249). And in doing so, she points up the limitations of life lived under the patriarchal norm by transcending them.

But before the ideal situation is reached, virtually every bastion of society is assaulted and little is left unscathed. Walker exposes the limitations in most social values and institutions and attacks the autonomy of the white male heterosexual norm which has generated them. It is difficult to pinpoint the prescriptions of this norm, primarily because they operate as the basis of our society and so seem self-evident to us. As Feibleman writes:

It is a notorious historical observation that customs and institutions rarely enjoy more than a comparatively brief life; and yet while they are the accepted fashion they come to be regarded as brute givens, as irreducible facts, which may be depended upon with perfect security. (81)

However, by extrapolating from the text, we can reconstruct those social mores that Walker questions.

The prescriptions are formulated in the nuclear family, which perpetuates the notion of male and female roles. The male role dictates that man perform "manly" work, such as field work and carpentry (*Purple* 22, 27), and that he act as the head of his household and the maker of its laws (36, 37). The female role demands that woman be domestic; she must clean her house, cook, tend to the children (20), and obey her husband (37). It is not thought proper for men and women to trade these positions, and, if they do, they are subject to criticism and mockery (36). Marriage, which begins on this restrictive basis, merely perpetuates the stereotyped roles that its members are expected to play and again does not allow for deviation from them. Both the family and marriage are shown to operate on the assumption of feminine inferiority. Religion, in support of this order, preaches platitudes and casts narrow moral judgements upon those who are different or who

refuse to conform to the conventions of family life (46). The laws effected by the patriarchy in the name of "equality" and "justice for all" merely function as a support to the existing order by keeping those outside that order "in their place" through the use of force (90, 91). While the theory behind the institution of the patriarchal order may have been altruistic and idealistic, Walker's novel shows how far from the ideal it has strayed in its practice. She therefore dramatizes these social values and institutions as they function in actuality and then redramatizes them in terms of the possible and the desirable.

The novel begins by portraying the family as a social unit which subjects girl children to a life of rape and terror: "First he put his thing up against my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold 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" (1-2). The first three letters suggest that Celie's "father" kills her mother through abuse, at which point he ominously begins to eye her favourite sister, Nettie. Clearly, "a girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (42) and no woman in the household is inviolable. Nor is marriage a safe haven for Celie; it merely becomes an extension of her unhappy home life. Ironically, she is offered to Mr. ——— like a slave on an auction block, and Mr. ——— is more interested in her dowry than in her: "Mr. ——— say, That cow still coming? He say, Her cow" (12). In turn, Celie's wedding day is equally desolate, "I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy. He twelve" (13). Marital sex is brutal and animalistic, and Celie later equates it with defecation, since it is hardly an act based on mutual fulfilment: "He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep" (81).

Celie's life is more a death-in-life, a life without hope, joy, or any indication of improvement. Nettie comments on this before she leaves: "I sure hate to leave you here with these rotten children, she say, Not to mention with Mr. ———. It's like seeing you buried, she say. It's worse than that, I think. If I was buried, I wouldn't have to work" (18). But Celie does not despair, and her



faith sustains her: "I just say, Never mine, never mine, long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along" (18).

While Celie may find a vent for her anguish in writing to God, religion itself is undercut when Shug Avery comes to town. Shug, who refuses to accept the limitations that society imposes on a woman's life, becomes the target for attack:

Even the preacher got his mouth on Shug Avery, now she down. He take her condition for his text. . . . He talk about a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other women mens. Talk bout slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner. (46)

Not surprisingly, however, Celie does not hold with the virtues preached from the pulpit and repudiates conventional social behaviour as prescribed by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s father. Independently, she rejects the "virtues" which society applauds, and takes the ill Shug in to nurse. Astutely noticing his refusal to acknowledge her as a person, Celie discounts Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s father's words: "Celie, he say, you have my sympathy. Not many women let they husband whore lay up in they house. But he not saying to me, he saying it to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_" (57). Celie chooses instead to champion Shug and responds: "Next time he come I put a little Shug Avery pee in his glass. See how he like that" (57).

Celie identifies with the rebellious Shug from the seventh page of the novel, when she finds her picture and begins to idolize the blues singer. Shug provides an ideal for Celie, since, unlike the other women in Celie's life, she is not broken through years of abuse. Pretty and different, she offers an alternative lifestyle:

Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. . . . I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail. She grinning with her foot up on somebody motocar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some. . . . An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery. She be dress to kill, whirling and laughing. (7)

Celie is also attracted to her stepdaughter-in-law, Sofia, an Amazon who refuses to be dominated by her husband, Harpo. But an independent woman has a more difficult time than one who meekly accepts her meagre lot in life. Ironically, Harpo wants Sofia to act like the submissive Celie: "I want her to do what I

say, like you do for Pa. . . . But not Sofia. She do what she want, don't pay me no mind at all. I try to beat her, she black my eyes. Oh, boo-hoo, he cry" (66). Even though he loves Sofia, Harpo's marriage is troubled because society has taught him that this is not the way a woman should behave. Celie tries to reason with him, but to no avail; social conventions are too deeply ingrained in his mind:

Sofia *love* you. You *love* Sofia. . . . Mr. ——— marry me to take care of his children. I marry him cause my daddy made me. I don't love Mr. ——— and he don't love me. But you his wife, he say, just like Sofia mine. The wife spose to mind. (66)

Sofia becomes a victim of social injustice when she refuses to respect authority in the person of the white mayor's wife, who wants Sofia to work as her maid. When Sofia responds with a "hell no" (90), a brawl ensues and the police are called. The dangers of fighting back are clear since Sofia's punishment is hardly "just" or merited by her crime:

When I see Sofia I don't know why she still alive. They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her teef like a piece of rubber. She can't talk. And she just about the color of eggplant. (92)

Society's justice is again satirized when the astute women realize that the only way to get Sofia released from the prison that is killing her is to plead that "justice ought to be done" (99) and to assert that Sofia will only be sufficiently punished when she becomes "some white lady maid" (99). After raping Squeak, the sheriff promptly takes action to ensure that Sofia will be "properly punished," and she is released into the mayor's custody. We realize how correct the women's assessment of society's "compassion" is when the mayor's (white) wife wishes to be "kind" to her maid and drives her to visit the family she has not seen in five years, only to make her leave in fifteen minutes (110-11). She later berates Sofia for her ingratitude.

The novel is often criticized for its melodramatic disposition, but I would suggest that this is a result of Walker's parodic inversion of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. Certainly the epistolary style of

*The Color Purple* reminds us of Richardson's work, which, itself, is often melodramatic.<sup>3</sup> *The Color Purple* deliberately recalls *Pamela*, but ironically transposes it, for Pamela becomes reconciled to the world of men, and if she is accorded any stature within it, that stature is bestowed when Mr. B. learns to appreciate her, makes her his wife, and thus allows her entry into his world. Like Pamela, Celie too suffers at the hands of men, with the "critical difference" that she is never incorporated into their society. Rather, she overturns this order and instigates a new one, into which *she* allows Mr. ——— to enter when he rehabilitates himself.

Despite the almost overwhelming oppressiveness of Celie's life, she endures and finally begins to accept herself: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here" (214). Yet, this self-acceptance is dearly bought, and Celie suffers extreme anguish when she learns that Mr. ——— has been hiding the letters which her sister, Nettie, has written. She is so angry that she nearly kills her husband and is saved only by Shug's replacing the destructive razor in her hand with a constructive needle — a symbolic act. However, Nettie's letters provide a further source of anguish for Celie, when, through them, she learns of her true parentage. At this point, her anger turns to despair, and she rejects God:

Yeah, I say, and 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. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown. (199)

But a woman — Shug — teaches Celie to love and to trust again, and when she offers to take Celie to Memphis, Celie's world is rejuvenated. In the pivotal dinner scene, when Celie and Squeak announce that they have decided to forge new identities by leaving their husbands, they refuse to conform to the old patriarchal order. Celie stabs Mr. ——— when he tries to slap her (271) and Squeak demands that she be called by her proper name: "Listen Squeak, say Harpo. You can't go to Memphis. That's all there is to it. Mary Agnes, say Squeak. Squeak, Mary Agnes, what difference do it make? It makes a lot, say Squeak. When I was Mary Agnes I could sing in public" (210).<sup>4</sup> The final pages of the novel are

spent in dramatizing the positive aspects of society, by incorporating and revitalizing the social values and institutions in light of the new order.

The family itself becomes a positive force when Sofia changes it into an entity that succours and helps its members. She extends the nuclear family when she welcomes Squeak's children into her home and heals the breach that had existed between the two women, both rivals for Harpo's affections: "Go on sing, say Sofia, I'll look after this one till you come back" (211). Family is, therefore, no longer based on blood but on mutual love and respect. Shug and Celie form a new family unit when Celie learns the truth of her parentage, and Shug's tenderness helps her to overcome her despair: "Shug say, Us each other's peoples now, and kiss me" (189). Further, Shug's relationship with Celie takes on the sanctity that Celie's marriage with Mr. ——— lacked and offers a positive view of "non-marriage" as a union which proffers acceptance and concern: "Besides, she say. You not my maid. I didn't bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet" (218).

Even religion is revitalized when it extends to encompass the segregated, and God loses "Its" colour and gender: "God ain't a he or a she, but a It. . . . It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself" (202). When religion loses the limitations imposed on it by a white, male hierarchy, faith "opens in many directions" (Sypher 249), and Celie's perception of God becomes all inclusive and whole. She comes to accept Shug's belief in a God who is "everything" (202) and begins to understand "It" need not be restricted to a church:

God love everything you love — and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God love admiration.

You say God vain? I ast.

Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. (203)

Society itself can become more enlightened when its members are able to repudiate the dictates of societal norms. Indeed, there is an attempt on the part of the daughters to overcome the sins of

the fathers when Eleanor Jane tries to make reparation for her parents' treatment of Sofia by working for her: "Do her peoples know? I ast. They know, say Sofia. They carrying on just like you know they would. Whoever heard of a white woman working for niggers, they rave. She tell them, Whoever heard of somebody like Sofia working for trash" (288). The new society is not a closed order; it is open to all; even Mr. ——— can be included when he realizes the errors of his ways, rejects his old, narrow outlook, and learns the meaning of love:

. . . he say something that really surprise me cause it so thoughtful and common sense. When it come to what folks do together with they bodies, he say, anybody's guess is as good as mine. But when you talk bout love I don't have to guess. I have love and I have been love. And I thank God he let me gain understanding enough to know love can't be halted just cause some peoples moan and groan. It don't surprise me you love Shug Avery, he say, I have love Shug Avery all my life. (277)

The novel's major narrative symbol is associated with the act of sewing: Celie literally sews her life back together when she begins to design pants, and Mr. ———'s salvation is symbolized when he begins to make shirts to match them. Indeed, Mr. ——— asks Celie to marry him again, "this time in the spirit as well as in the flesh" (290), but she refuses him because, as she states, "I still don't like frogs" (290). Celie's reference to frogs recalls the fairy tale, "The Frog Prince," which the novel parodically inverts. In this story, Mr. ——— may kiss the "princess," but he undergoes no miraculous transformation into a handsome prince; he remains a "frog." Celie, on the other hand, is still able to "live happily ever after" without him, which, as mentioned earlier, undercuts the traditional boy-gets-girl endings of most fairy tales and comedies. However, Celie does forgive Mr. ——— when she allows him to join in her creative process, and her forgiveness constitutes the basis for the new society, for men and even white women like Eleanor Jane, although viewed sceptically, are allowed a chance to atone.

Since the novel attacks those bastions of society — family, religion, and marriage — but also offers a rejuvenation of them in its final pages, it evidently suggests that society itself is not what

Walker questions and rejects but rather the limitations that are imposed upon it and make it closed and restrictive. The womanist utopia of the conclusion signifies a renewal of the initial social order because it is more accessible and more humane. Walker's utopia is "humanist" as well as womanist in the sense that it offers a revivification of humanity as a whole. This concept is epitomized in Celie's sewing.<sup>5</sup> Her first pair of pants are made out of army fabric — hard, stiff to the touch — which she later rejects in favour of soft, pliable material: "Shug finger the pieces of cloth I got hanging on everything. It all soft, flowing, rich and catch the light. This a far cry from the stiff army shit us started with, she say" (219). The clothes that Celie designs out of the new fabric enhance the people who wear them; she creates pants that are comfortable and designed with their wearer in mind:

these pants are soft, hardly wrinkle at all, and the little figures in the cloth always look perky and bright. And they full round the ankle so if she want to sing in 'em and wear 'em sort of like a long dress, she can. (219)

Mr. ———'s shirts are also devised to be extensions of their wearer; they support life rather than stifle it: "Got to have pockets, he say. Got to have loose sleeves. And definitely you not spose to wear it with no tie. Folks wearing ties look like they being lynch" (290).

The clothes that Celie and Mr. ——— design celebrate rather than restrict people; they become a symbol of the humanist/womanist utopia manifested at the end of the novel. Indeed, this utopia becomes an Edenic paradise, as Thadious M. Davis suggests, for the arrival of Celie's son, *Adam* Omatangu, and the rest of her family from Africa

signals the continuity of generations, the return (ironically perhaps) to the 'old, unalterable roots.' Their return is cause for a larger hope for the race, and for celebration within the family and community, because they have survived 'whole,' literally since they miraculously survive a shipwreck and symbolically since they have acquired definite life-affirming attitudes. (52)

This is precisely the note on which the novel ends, since the new order, the order that opens to the once segregated, is celebratory:

"White people busy celebrating they independence from England July 4th, say Harpo, so most black folks don't have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other" (294). To paraphrase Martin, in Walker's comedy, the female/black incongruous is seen to be more congruous than the white patriarchy, which made them incongruous in the first place by denying them entry into its closed society.

Therefore, while it may seem "incongruous" to classify *The Color Purple* as a comedy, it cannot truly be called anything else, for it seeks to improve society by eliminating the limitations prescribed by the societal norms. Meredith stresses that where "the veil is over women's faces, you cannot have society, without which the senses are barbarous and the Comic Spirit is driven to the gutters to slake its thirst" (31). In *The Color Purple*, the "veil," of which Meredith speaks, is lifted, the barriers between the sexes are razed, and a new world is erected on the ruins, in which the sexes meet on an equal footing and celebrate each other, life, and humankind.

## NOTES

- 1 I am indebted to Linda Hutcheon for showing me the significance of this aspect of the novel.
- 2 Romance too offers a utopia in its conclusion. However, romance offers idealized characters and incorporates other-worldly elements (Frye, *Anatomy* 186-95). To suggest that *The Color Purple* belongs to this genre, I think, would be to stretch a point. However, Frye does suggest that comedy will often overlap with romance in its conclusion (177) which seems to me to be the case here.
- 3 The similarity of the two male protagonists' names (Mr. ——— and Mr. B.) further supports the idea that the novel plays on Richardson's text.
- 4 Names are very important in this novel. Walker dramatizes the idea that when we name we possess, and as a result, the women reject the names accorded them by the patriarchy. On the other hand, Mr. ——— is also transformed into Albert when he sees the "errors of his ways" and convinces Celie of his sincere repentance. He, therefore, must be renamed to signify his renewal and his incorporation into the new order. It is also interesting to note that he loses the title — Mr. — which is used, to some extent, to subjugate Celie.
- 5 It is also symbolized in Celie's dialectal language which is proffered as natural and supportive of life. When she is given a chance to "improve" her speech, she says, "only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind" (223).

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