Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*: Womanist Folk Tale and Capitalist Fairy Tale

Raphaël Lambert

Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) tells the story of Celie, a poor, downtrodden African American girl from rural Georgia who, in the early twentieth century, breaks free from her abusive husband and achieves material, spiritual, and emotional independence. This reflection argues that behind the provocative tone and reformist spirit foregrounded in *The Color Purple* lies the myth of the self-made (wo)man. Following in the steps both of old folk tales and feminist stories, *The Color Purple* forcefully restores the dignity of the female character. Many critics feel that it does so, however, to the detriment of male characters, which undermines Walker’s principles of gender tolerance and forgiveness. I would contend that *The Color Purple* bears a remarkable likeness to many traditional fairy tales, which appeared in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and corresponded to the written, bourgeoisified versions of earlier oral folk tales. Duplicating the new creed of free-market economy and adjoined Calvinist values that once informed fairy tales, the story of Celie becomes a capitalist fantasy very much at odds with Walker’s initial project. In fact, the exceptional destiny of Celie, this reflection concludes, may be seen as negative reflection on the African American community rather than as indicator of its conquering spirit.

**Womanism, Folk Tales, Feminist Tales, and Masculinity**

In her essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983), Alice Walker defined the term womanism, a concept whose principles already permeated *The Color Purple*. By her definition, womanism is a response to the predominantly white feminist movement, and intends to bear witness to the black experience in every domain. A womanist, Walker explains, is “a black feminist or a feminist of color.” It is also “a woman who loves other women sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s
culture, women’s emotional flexibility, and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men sexually and/or non-sexually […] Traditionally universalist […] traditionally capable […]” A womanist, Walker continues, “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirits. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself […]” Womanism, Walker concludes, “is to feminism as purple to lavender” (xii). Walker’s definition clearly extols animism, sapphism, and universalism, all of which are essential components of the novel. Indeed, the ending of The Color Purple features an ideal social state, a sort of blissful matriarchal phalanstery where reformed males are accepted, indeed welcome into the fold. It is only a Utopian vision but it fosters the hope of a better future for an ethnic minority. Through Celie’s wondrous transformation, African American women—past, present, and future—can envision a better world in which to live.

The ideal universe Walker creates in The Color Purple is reminiscent of the universe typifying oral folk tales of the past. As folklore scholar Jack Zipes explains in Breaking the Magic Spell (1979), folk tales were addressed to the community at large and played a crucial role in society: “Not only did the tales serve to unite the people of the community and help bridge a gap in their understanding of social problems in a language and narrative made familiar to the listeners’ experiences, but this aura illuminated the possible fulfillment of Utopian longings and wishes which did not preclude social integration” (4). In this sense, folk tales reflected the community and its psychology. They also provided the hope for self-transformation, and “they sought to celebrate humankind’s capacity to transform the mundane into the Utopian as part of a communal project” (Breaking xi). There is no doubt that The Color Purple shares with these folk tales a capacity to satisfy unconscious desires and fantasies. It is wish fulfillment—a chimerical inverted world where the poor become the powerful where the oppressors are punished and the oppressed find freedom.

In another study, Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion (1983), Zipes argues that folk tales stemmed from matriarchal societies and depicted men as brutes or beasts who needed to be domesticated—a point that enhances the correspondence between folk tales and Walker’s novel. Philosopher Heide Göttner-Abendroth comments on these tales of yore:

In the eyes of the matriarchal woman, who created a cultivated environment for herself, [man] has never developed beyond the condition of predatory animal that roams the woods. He is