

## An Epistolary Novel Revisited: Alice Walker's *Womanist* Parody of Richardson's *Clarissa*

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### Abstract

*Samuel Richardson's Clarissa and Alice Walker's The Color Purple use the epistolary form to directly tap into the psychology of the characters without the intervention of society's restrictions on voicing taboo events, feelings or thoughts. Richardson's use of this 'bourgeois' novel portrayed the inhibited desires of lovers to each other or to their confidants. However, Walker's novel is a womanist parody of Clarissa; she uses letter-writing to give voice to the double oppression of the African-American female and her personal and emotion emancipation. The comparison will highlight how both novels allowed females to find a 'voice'. Although Richardson is a male author, his use of the genre allowed him to highlight women's issues. Walker, on the other hand, does not give her protagonist a 'voice' symbolize her isolation, oppression as a female and oppression as an African-American.*

**Key Words:** womanist, other, epistolary voice, oppression, écriture.

### 1. Introduction

The epistolary novel, or novel in letters, was virtually unknown as a literary genre before Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-8), which came later, but is considered the greatest and most extended novel in the epistolary form. Letter-writing, in its eighteenth century form, was used because it "enables the author to present multiple points of view on the same event" (Holman and Harmon, 1992, p. 175). Since there is correspondence between two or more people, a single event may be narrated by more than one of the characters thus presenting their opinions independent of the other characters. According to Natascha Wurzbach (1969), the action of the epistolary novel is immediate. The character does not know what is going to happen because in the time-span of the novel it hasn't happened yet (p.xv). Furthermore, the author is able to delve into the psychological aspects of the characters' personalities while distancing his own authorial personality. This allows the reader the option of being able to form an objective conclusion of the actions taking place.

The eighteenth century epistolary novel can be considered, for the most part, the female's novel since it focuses mainly on the emotional aspects of the female protagonist as well as on the cross-gender relationships which were then considered taboo. As maintained by Ruth Perry (1980), "letter writing was seen as an inevitable prelude to sexual relations because writing permitted private intercourse between unmarried men and women in an era which never allowed such unsupervised communication in polite society" (p.132). The genre gave females of the period a 'voice', when they normally would not be heard. It was a way for them to be heard without opposing society. The epistolary novel eventually died out only to be resurrected again by the modernist and postmodernist authors of the twentieth century. They have manipulated the traditional epistolary form to suit their individual needs and have adapted various literary techniques in accordance with the changes taking place in women's literature.

To gain a better understanding of the situation of the epistolary a comparison will be made between a novel of the eighteenth century, Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747-8), and a novel of the twentieth century, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). Their relationship will be established as one of parody from a feminist perspective. Margaret Rose (1993) says that parody "may be described as first imitating and then changing either, and sometimes both, the 'form' and 'content', or style and subject-matter, or syntax and meaning of another work, or, most simply, its vocabulary"(p.45).

Walker has given the African-American feminist a new coinage, calling herself a *womanist* because she "works for the survival and wholeness of her people, men and women both, and for the promotion of dialogue and community as well as for the valorization of women and of all the varieties of work women perform" (Tyson, 1999, p.97). According to these definitions, Walker's novel *The Color Purple* can be read as a *womanist* parody of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*; therefore, the aim of this research is to examine both texts and discover to what extent Walker was inspired by Richardson's technique and in what ways she departs from it to reflect the double oppression which her novel portrays. In order to understand Walker's *The Color Purple* in relation to Richardson's *Clarissa*, it is important to first establish the critique on Richardson's *Clarissa* to serve as a point of reference.

Richardson's *Clarissa* is "given in a series of letters written principally in a double yet separate correspondence between two young ladies of virtue and honour... and between two gentlemen of free lives one of them glorying in his talents for stratagem and invention" (Richardson, 1740, p.xiii). The title character is the beautiful, virtuous daughter of a wealthy family, who inherits her grandfather's estate and gains the jealousy of her brother and sister as well. Lovelace, who is her sister's possible suitor, falls in love with Clarissa and asks for her hand in marriage. Her family refuses and tries to force her into marrying Solmes, a man whom she does not desire. Following a series of events, Lovelace deceptively takes her with him and imprisons her in the brothel of Mrs. Sinclair. He makes several attempts to seduce Clarissa and she makes several attempts to escape, but all their attempts fail and Lovelace rapes her. She is disgraced to the point of physical deterioration and finally dies.

When Richardson wrote *Clarissa* he intended the novel to be an educational novel for the society by writing Clarissa's character as a lesson in moral values. In *Clarissa*, Richardson "set out quite deliberately to write...a 'Religious Novel' designed to investigate the highest and most important doctrines not only of morality, but of Christianity..."(Richetti, 2005, p. 99).

The image of the chaste, moral female is what Richardson opted for in order to "convey a moral education" (Probyn, 1987, p. 55). His presentation of Clarissa as a prescribed icon for morality opposes general feminist ideology of the individuality of women. He makes Clarissa's character adhere to the restrictions that society places on women in terms of love, marriage and sexuality. When she is unable to, she deteriorates and eventually dies reiterating the role of the male as an individual and that of the female as the victim of society.

Another important point in *Clarissa* is that there is communication between the characters through the written correspondences. Clarissa is able to confide in her friend Miss Howe. She is her confidant and provides her with emotional release. Richardson allowed the characters in *Clarissa* to send and receive letters in order to have both parties present in the novel. In the Preface to *Clarissa*, Richardson (1740) said:

All the letters are written while the hearts of the writers must be supposed to be wholly engaged in their subjects (the events at the time generally dubious) so that they abound not only with critical situations, but with what may be called instantaneous descriptions and reflections.(p. xiv)

The letters capture their emotions and reflections on the events taking place. These "streams of consciousness" cause the focal point to be on the reflections themselves and hence on the lessons which can be learned from them.

The postmodernist form of the epistolary novel can be seen in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). Patricia Waugh (1992) maintained that "the actual structure of the novel parodies the forms of early eighteenth-century European bourgeois novel"(p.62). Walker is an African-American author who is an important figure in feminine literature, and she also addresses issues of race and class as well. Her novel deals with issues of female oppression, sexuality, and identity through the epistolary form. According to Elaine Showalter, "If the epistolary novel is not exclusively a woman's form, it conforms (if such a word can be used in relation to a style of writing which is against conformation) to l'écriture feminine, which undermines the linguistic, syntactical, and metaphysical conventions of Western narrative" (qtd. in Campbell, 1995, p. 334). Campbell (1995) identifies écriture feminine as -writing in the feminine--that is, writing themselves in a way which reflects their experience as the "other" in a culture in which they have been traditionally voiceless and thus powerless" (p. 332).

Unlike Richardson's traditional epistolary novel, *The Color Purple* can be considered to fall under the category of écriture feminine. Walker takes the traditional form of the epistolary and manipulates it to rewrite the life of the protagonist Celie who finds her identity and self-worth in an oppressive family. The novel opens with Celie who is an African-American as she is writing her first letter to God. She writes to Him about her father, who is later revealed to be her stepfather, raping her and threatening her into silence.

Throughout the novel, she continues to be sexually, physically and verbally abused by him. He impregnates her twice and sells her babies. He finally marries her off to Mr. \_\_\_ who also sexually, physically and verbally abuses her. She remains in this state of oppression until Shug Avery helps reunite her with her sister, Nettie, and helps her find her sexuality and independence. It is at the crucial point in the novel when Celie begins to find her identity that she discovers that Nettie is alive and begins to address her letters to her instead of to God. She goes on to start her own pants company, finds her children with the help of her sister and is finally liberated from the restraints of the male members of her family.

The goal of many contemporary women's novels is for women to find their freedom and themselves in the act of writing. Walker's approach to the epistolary novel is reflective of Celie's oppression rather than the psychology of the characters. Her novel does not mainly focus on the stream of consciousness because it is possible that it distracts the reader from the events of the text (Qatami, 1998, p. 64). Richardson mainly focused on the psychology of his characters. Since his goal was to write his characters as models of morality, it was important for him to focus on the reasoning behind their actions in order to provide a lesson for the reading public. Walker's novel, on the other hand, does not; it focuses on the events themselves. The epistolary technique in *The Color Purple* "manifests itself as a liberal representation of a protagonist creating herself by finding this voice 'in the act of writing' (Gates, 1988, p. 131). The technique is used to reflect action and plot rather than streams of consciousness. This allows Walker to present Celie's personal growth throughout her lifetime instead of her reflections on one incident and/or time period.

Furthermore, Walker does not use the traditional form of correspondence as Richardson does. Almost the first half of the novel consists of letters which Celie writes to God; she does not write to another human being until almost the middle of the novel. According to Waugh (1992), "Celie's letters (written initially to herself, but there being no available concept of self to ground the process of introspection, actually addressed to God as an impersonal and Authoritative being) [sic] offer such an alternative 'universe of discourse'. (p.61)"

The need for Celie to write 'to herself' stems from the case that she has no one in which she can confide; she is essentially voiceless. "Celie's writing is not in itself an act of liberation or even self-expression, but rather an escape valve when all else fails....writing to God does not count as an act of self-empowerment" (Lauret. 2000, p. 101-102). God will not answer her letters so the result is a narration that is almost diary-like in form. Celie letters to God are a medium to in order to vent her feelings about the difficulties she is facing but more importantly to depict her weakness as that of the 'other'. She is a woman bound by the limitations of being female and African American in a society that is male-dominant and oppresses minorities. It is not until towards the middle of the novel when she begins to gain autonomy that she starts addressing her sister, Nettie and finally finding her 'voice'.

With her marriage to Mr. \_\_\_ and her sister Nettie growing up, Celie's letters go from being simple letters of reported speech to more complicated and, in part, direct speech. The direct speech used in the novel isn't said directly by the character himself but through Celie as she narrates it. The first half of the novel is in this form, so Walker bypasses the other reader within the novel, hence making her 'letters' at this point seem like entries in a diary.

In the second half of the novel Celie addresses her letters to her sister Nettie. This can be understood with a double goal. The first is the physical presence of Nettie in the novel. Mr. \_\_\_ had been hiding her previous letters and Celie thought she was dead. With the help of Shug, Celie finds the letters and realizes that her sister is not dead but that Mr. \_\_\_ had been hiding them. According to a second definition of Walker's *womanism*, colored women must stand together against the oppressor in order to maintain women's strength. (Lauret, 2000, p. 19). The oppressors in the novel are the male characters; the female characters have united to form a stronger force. The second goal in the change in addressee is the second narrator Nettie. Celie is beginning to find her independence and her own 'voice'. She even attempts to kill Mr. \_\_\_, saying "I watch him so close, I begin to feel a lightening in my head. Fore I know anything I'm standing hind his chair with his razor open" (Walker, 1982, p. 102). At this point, she begins corresponding with Nettie marking her transformation into the act of liberation.

When Celie was writing to God she didn't sign her name almost as if subconsciously she knew she had no identity. According to Lauret (2000), this form of communication can be understood on two levels, "Celie's progress through her 'finding a voice' is thus, in my construction, to be taken literally as referring to a speaking voice" (p.102-103). When she found her independence, she was able also to write to another human being.

From this point in the novel on, Celie is actually 'telling' her story. "'Telling' is thus confined to spoken, human communication, whereas writing to God does not count as an act of self-empowerment" (Lauret, .2000, p. 103). Walker's novel *The Color Purple* resists racial oppression by using the African-American vernacular. Celie does not speak in the Standard English used in *Clarissa* to mark the upper white class. This is considered an assertion of her ethnicity, while Nettie uses Standard English and according to Linda Abbandonato (1991), the expressive flexibility of the Afro-American vernacular, a supposedly inferior speech, is measured against the repressed and rigid linguistic codes to which Nettie has conformed; the position of standard (white) English is challenged, and Celie's vitality is privileged over Nettie's dreary correctness. Nettie has been imaginatively stunted, her language bleached white and her ethnicity virtually erased (p. 1108).

Walker seems to be contrasting the past with the present. Nettie's letters in standard English allude to the past; a past symbolic of 'white' oppressors. Celie's letters, however, are the present, a present which asserts the 'black' vernacular and as such a form of ethnic empowerment. The points which have been discussed are to no extent conclusive of the points of comparison and contrast between the two novels, but only serve to demonstrate the influence of Richardson's epistolary technique on Walker's novel, as well as the double oppression which African-Americans, in general and women in particular, face. Although Walker employs a structure that was originated by a male, her postmodernist approach makes her novel in accordance with the form of *écriture féminine*. She allows Celie to rewrite her life as 'other,' while breaking free from the constraints of the male dominance within the novel, as well as, the male dominance outside the novel.

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