



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Breaking the Silence

The Search for a Voice in Alice Walker's The Color Purple

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í Ensku

Sigrún Tinna Sveinsdóttir

Maí 2012

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Abstract

Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* is the story of Celie, a woman oppressed and silenced by the men in her life and the society she lives in. She is raped by the man she knows as her father and twice impregnated by him. Her children are taken away from her and her hand in marriage is given to a physically and mentally abusive man. This essay look at how Celie, and other women in the book, are exposed to silence, who the silencing forces are and how they overcome the difficulties this silence poses. Furthermore the argument is made that in order for everyone in the community to have an equal voice the gender-roles must fade away and women must be allowed to take on male characteristic and men must be allowed to take on female characteristics.

The first part of the essay depicts how different women in the novel are exposed to oppression and how they are silenced. It discusses the different kinds of silence they must endure and how they cope with it and try to break free. The second part of the essay scrutinizes the agents of silence in the novel, the men, society and God. The importance of education and the a understanding of God are put forth as important aspects towards women's claim for independence and personal freedom. The third, and last, part of the essay focuses mainly on how Celie is able to break away from the silence she has been subjected to throughout her life and how her revolt changes her life and in turn the life of the people around her.

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Introduction:

Ever since Ovid told the story of Philomela, a young girl, raped and silenced by having her tongue cut out in his *Metamorphoses*, (181-186) the theme of silencing women has been the focus of many an author. In 1983, Alice Walker received both the American Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for her novel, *The Color Purple*, which deals with this same issue. Celie, the protagonist, is raped at a young age and forbidden to tell of her trials to anyone but God after which she chooses to do so through a series of letters. The novel deals with issues of relationships between the sexes, the struggle for power and the search for a voice by previously silenced characters. The story is not only Celie's but tells of other women in her community who have also been silenced in one way or another by men. The novel was critically acclaimed and has been adapted to the screen, under the direction of Steven Spielberg (1985), and dramatized for stage (2005) and radio (2008). In her article "Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker's Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple*" Martha J. Cutter argues that the novel is "Walker's rewriting of the story of Philomela" and how the text "gives Philomela a voice that successfully resists the violent patriarchal inscription of male will onto the silent female body (163). Her argument centers around the claim that Celie, the protagonist of Walker's novel, finds a way to break away from the silence imposed on her. Other critics such as King-Kok Cheung, in her essay " 'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*" claims that the novel is about "breaking silence" and in turn violating the "paternal warning against speech" (162) which has been forced upon them. Both of these articles are fundamental texts on the silence in Walker's novel. The name of this paper pays tribute to African-American literary critic Henry Louis Gates Jr., whose reading of this novel deals to a great extent "with finding a voice, which he sees as the defining feature of Afro-American literature" (Hite 258). Celie, (as well as other women in the novel), ventures upon the battle of breaking the silence imposed upon her and, as Gates argues, searches for a voice of her own. *The Color Purple* can be seen as two stories; the first part of the book is the story of Celie as a silenced woman in search of her voice and the second part is the story of Celie as a strong independent woman, a mediator of experience for the reader. The story is a woman's successful search for a voice and how her life transforms after she finds it. Enforced silence in *The Color Purple* is a theme that has been widely researched and one which many literary critics have written about and this ongoing argument will be developed further in this essay. Additionally I will make the argument that

in the broken community displayed in the novel it is the fusion of gender-roles that forces repairs and leads to the wholeness of the group of people portrayed in the story.

Silenced Women:

Although the experiences of the women in the novel are different there is one thing which ties them together; all of the women in the novel are, to some extent, silenced. Celie has been directly forbidden to speak by Pa and the other women silence are of various kind. Furthermore, what adds fuel to the fire is the women's fear of not being listened to – not being heard. They know that even if they were to speak no one would hear, in part because “when women speak of being silenced they don't mean that they are incapable of adequately speaking a language; rather they are referring to social and cultural pressures which undermine their confidence and make them hesitant about speaking” (Eagleton 16). Silence is not simply the act of “not speaking” but the social pressure applied by men who do not hear them even if they try to speak. Walker's novel centers around women and their experiences in a society dominated by men. African-American literary scholar, Barbara Christian has argued that Walker's work is “Black woman-centered” (457) but she maintains that:

Walker does not choose Southern Black women to be her major protagonists only because she is one, but also, I believe, because she has discovered in the tradition and history they collectively experience and understanding of oppression which has elicited from them a willingness to reject convention and to hold to what is difficult. (465)

Walker's novel is about African-American women in the south and Christian makes the point that black women understand oppression and enforced silence better because they have a history of physical abuse and oppression, an echo from the time of slavery, in addition to oppression they have suffered from their own men. All the women in the novel experience some kind of silencing and oppression by men. The silence the women in the novel are subjected to comes in various forms but there is always an element of it in the story of every woman. Each woman must understand her own dilemma and find a way to work through it in order to find her voice and claim her independence and freedom from male oppression.

Shug:

Shug is a very strong character in the novel and especially important to the main character, Celie. While Shug is strong and powerful, it is important to remember the struggle she has been through in order to gain her power. Shug's character is, in the first part of the novel, very different to that of Celie; she is comfortable in her own body, sexy and sexual. Celie describes a picture of her as "Shug Avery standing upside a piano, elbow crook, hand on her hip. She wearing a hat like Indian chiefs. Her mouth open showing all her teef and don't nothing seem to be troubling her mind" (475). Later, we read that "Shug wearing a gold dress that show her titties near bout to the nipple" (1242). Her sexiness leads to rumors that she is in fact "the other women" in both of Mr. _____'s marriages. The gossip she evokes because of this is part of the silencing forces in her life in the way that her credibility is compromised and she is not to be trusted or believed. People talk about her behind her back and she has no way of defending herself. When she becomes sick it gets even worse and Celie writes "Shug Avery sick and nobody in this town want to take the Queen honeybee in. Her mammy say She told her so. Her pappy say, Tramp" (704). When she becomes sick she is hidden on the farm, away from the public eye, and no-one (except Mr. _____) will help her. Being hidden away is a physical form of silencing that she must endure while she is weak in body. Although she has been a strong character she is preyed upon while her strength is low. Shug must suffer demeaning remarks and dirty looks from all directions and she tells Celie that she could not marry Mr. _____ because "his daddy tol him I'm trash, my mama trash before me, His brother say the same" (1828). Mr. _____ is sad when he exclaims that "nobody fight for Shug" (779) and Celie whimpers that "somebody got to stand up for Shug" (718). This is funny and tragic at the same time since Celie is, in the first half of the book, the most silenced and oppressed character in the novel and it is a long time before she stands up for herself, yet she feels the need to stand up for Shug and spits in her father-in-law's water when he trash-talks the "Queen Honeybee." While Shug is sick and silent Celie takes care of her and helps her find her voice again. Both her actual singing voice and her more figurative voice in society. At Shug's first performance she thanks Celie by saying "this song I'm bout to sing is call Miss Celie's song. Cause she scratched it out my head when I was sick" (1142). As Shug becomes stronger she gains a silencing effect on Mr. _____. Celie asks Harpo, when he is whining about his own wife, "do Shug Avery mind Mr. _____? ... she the woman he wanted to marry. She call him Albert, tell him his drawers stink in a minute (1325). When Shug regains her voice she is in no way afraid to use it.

Shug say, girl you look like a good time, you do. That when I notice how
Shug talk and act sometimes like a man. Men say stuff like that to women,
Girl you look like a good time. Women always talk about hair and heath.
How many babies living or dead, or got teef. Not bout how some woman they
hugging on look like a good time. (1259)

Shug learns to use male language and that in turn is a sign of her power. In Celie's mind man rules language and when a woman dares to use his vocabulary, his syntax, she is using power that does not belong to her, something that Celie is not ready for until in the second part of the novel. Shug is entering into male territory and merging with the male consciousness – thus she has power and a voice. The notion that equality is restored when the gender-roles are less apparent is reinforced in Shug's story

Nettie:

Nettie is saved from Celie's fate of incest-rape by her sister. Celie writes: "Dear God, I ast him to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick" (212) thus sacrificing herself for her sister to keep her safe and away from harm. Thanks to Celie Nettie is saved from Pa and by association saved from Mr. _____ who Pa deems not to be good enough for her as she has not been "spoiled" yet. When Nettie refuses Mr. _____'s affection (when she has come to stay with him and Celie) he sends her away, making sure that she cannot speak to her sister anymore. Furthermore, Nettie's letters to Celie do not reach her until long after they arrive in the country before they have been taken by Mr. _____. The discovery of these stolen letters is important to Celie they are proof that her sister is still alive. Mr. _____ has attempted to hold this information from her and to silence any potential dialogue with Nettie. They have no intrinsic value to him. Indeed, he has not even bothered to open most of them. His theft is an expression of his need to assert his power over both the women by making sure that they cannot communicate. In this way, Mr. _____ tries to silence Celie at home and Nettie in Africa, at the same time the women in the community must endure silencing and oppression at the hands of the men until they are ready to claim their voices and stand up to their oppressors.

Nettie gets away from the community and moves to Africa with Samuel and Corrine and their two adopted children; Celie's children. Nettie's silence does not end there; she is silenced by the secret she must keep about the children's real mother. She knows she is not

allowed to tell of what she knows and where they really come from. Although these silencing factors are minimal compared to other women in the story they are still present and they affect Nettie and her development as a character. The lack of response to her letters to Celie make her live in constant fear for her sister's well-being. At the same time, not being able to disclose the fact that the children are her nephew and niece keeps her at a distance from them. This secret also alienates Nettie from Corrine who suspects her to be the children's actual mother as they bear resemblance to her. Only after Corrine's death can Nettie tell her secret, in turn becoming a more whole person with more mental freedom and a voice to say whatever she wants.

Nameless Mothers:

The story contains four nameless mothers who have almost no voice in the story. The first of these women is Celie and Nettie's mother, referred to as Ma. Ma can be seen as a subtle representation of the "Madwoman in the attic" originally portrayed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, she is driven crazy by the lynching of her husband and becomes silent and distant, unable to communicate with her abusive husband or her children. When Celie learns her story she begins to understand her. Although we do not know much about her, there are certain signposts that mark her silence in the story. Ma is married to a pedophile that molests her daughter and she is unable to do anything about it. Of her confrontation with Pa Celie tells us: "After a while ... Mama finally ast how come she find his hair in the girls room if he don't never go in there like he say" (1690) but he has a bogus answer ready about Celie having a boyfriend. She is sick and dies and, according to Celie, "trying to believe his story kilt her" (195). Ma knew what was going on in the home but due to her lack of voice she could not strongly confront the matter nor make it stop. When "she die[d] screaming and cussing" (166) it was her last change to use the voice she has been deprived of since she married Pa. She is about to die and uses her last ounces of strength to scream and curse in a desperate attempt to be heard. This attempt is futile and in the end she is buried in an unmarked grave; invisible and silent in death as she was in life. Celie's realization "My mama crazy" (2517) hints towards Gilbert's and Gubar's idea of the "Madwoman in the attic," a woman driven insane by society, robbed of her voice and power.

After Ma's death along comes "new mammy," the barely teenage new wife of Pa. This young woman soon realizes what is going on in the house and she, too, can do nothing to stop the molestation of Celie. "Our new mammy see it too. She in the room crying" (216). Again the mother knows what is wrong but has no voice to word her concerns or to make the problem stop. Eagleton's claim that the silence is perhaps more a social one than an actual one is clear. There is nothing physically stopping "new mammy" from voicing her concern but she knows that her words will not be heard; making it a moot effort. She is confined to crying in her room, a voiceless whimper that will save no one.

The third silenced mother at the near-bottom of the pyramid is the former wife of Mr. _____; Harpo's (and the other children's) mother. Her silence is total since she dies before the beginning of the story. Instead of hearing her personal account, all the reader learns about her comes from Mr. _____ and town gossip which Celie gathers along the way. When Harpo asks his father "what wrong with my mammy?" Mr. _____ simply answers "somebody kill her" (Walker 508). With this logic the only thing that is wrong with Harpo's mother is that she was killed. She was killed by her lover and none was there to defend her. She is an example of a silenced woman in a male driven society where she commits the same crime as her husband (who was sleeping around with Shug) but as she has no voice in the society she is killed but Mr. _____ remarries as if nothing has happened.

A last invisible mother in this story is Sofia's mother. We learn little about her except when she is mentioned by Sofia to Celie, "she say, to tell the truth, you remind me of my mama. She under my daddy thumb. Naw, she under my daddy foot. Anything he say, goes. She never say nothing back" (678). Sofia's mother, like the three other mothers, is absent in the story both linguistically and physically. Ma is sick and dies, New mammy hides in the bedroom away from others, Harpo's mother is killed and Sofia's mother is far away and later dies as well. All of these mothers are smothered by their husbands and men in the society with no ability to take part in a dialogue with the man that should be their equals; instead they are silenced by them and oppressed. Their lack of presence and utter lack of a voice in the story with no way of ameliorating gives them a common denominator and links their experiences. What puts these women apart from others discussed in this section is that they remain silent whereas the other women all find their voice in the end.

Squeak:

Mary Agnes, for a while known as squeak, becomes Harpo's girlfriend after his wife Sofia leaves him. Mary Agnes is mainly silenced by Harpo, who typifies a different aspect of men's treatment of women in the novel. He does not beat her or rape as Pa and Mr. _____ do to Celie, in fact he shows her affection. However, it is he who gives her the demeaning nickname "Squeak," an allusion to the way he perceives her manner of speech. Squeak is in fact said to have a "little teenouncy voice" (1287) but by naming her Squeak, Harpo suggests that she is nothing more than an annoying sound to those around her. With this name Harpo undermines the possible substance of what she says and focuses on the way in which she speaks. Moreover Harpo does not treat her as an equal. When she is hurt he "reach down and cradle poor little Squeak in his arms. He coo and coo at her like she a baby" (1308). Harpo does not speak to her as he would a grown up and instead "coo[s] at her" like he would an infant. Harpo displays a chauvinistic attitude of superiority when he treats her as a child, not using language to communicate with her, cutting her out of the adult (and human) dialogue but coo-ing at her instead of speaking. He portrays an attitude of not finding her complicated enough to use grow-up language; the language powered and used by men. Ironically Celie, who is at this point still completely silenced by Mr. _____, convinces Squeak that she must "make Harpo call [her] by [her] real name" if he is ever to see her clearly (1318). It is not until Squeak has been brutally raped during her attempt to save Sofia from death in prison that she can finally claim her name and her power. While at the police station Squeak is raped by the warden who also is her uncle. This uncle accuses Squeak of being a liar when she declares who her father is, a clear sign of silencing, one that Celie also endures. That is he devalues her words by claiming them to be untrue rendering them not worthy of being heard. Squeak asserts "he say if he was my uncle he wouldn't do it to me" (1482). By saying she is a liar the uncle takes away her voice and makes her word meaningless and unheard. When Squeak returns after the ordeal it is as if she is returning from a battle, "poor little Squeak come home with a limp. Her dress rip. Her hat missing and one of the heels come off her shoe" (1450), but she has come back stronger than she was upon departure. This ordeal brings about a change in her and she "acquires a voice and becomes a producer of meaning" (Hite 266). The first sign of this change is when she is about to tell what happened with the warden, Harpo tries to interrupt her but "shut up, Harpo, say Squeak. I'm telling it" (1450). She no longer allows Harpo to speak for her or treat her as a child. She is her own woman now and demands that she is listened to, "she stand up. My name Mary Agnes, she say"

(1482). With this sentence she claims her name echoing the self-naming in slave narratives of writers such as Frederick Douglass and Linda Brent. After she passes through this ordeal she finally feels that she has done something to deserve respect and the first sign of respect she insists on is being addressed by her real name, not an undignified and annoying noise and “6 months after Mary Agnes went to git Sofia out of prison, she begin to sing” (1490) thus claiming the final ounce of her voice by singing with a voice no-one previously had faith in but that proves to be of everyone’s liking. Had she not gone through this ordeal she might never have found her creative outlet in singing nor become a whole person as a result. Mary Agnes’s journey is something of a mini-version of Celie’s journey from silence to finding her voice and it is an important part of the story when the place of women is considered. Sadly, in BBC’s dramatization of the novel in 2008 the character of Mary Agnes is completely cut out and she is never mentioned. This way the producers of the dramatization have silenced her completely in their recantation of Walker’s novel. An important character is cut out and the foreshadowing of Celie’s rebellion against her enforced silence is lost.

Sofia:

When we first meet Sofia, Harpo’s wife, she is strong willed, independent and fierce. Nevertheless she constantly has to fight for her voice and admits to Celie “all my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles” (665). She is used to fighting and Harpo’s solution to being with her in the first place is to get her pregnant. He claims “if she big I got a right to be with her, good enough or no” (524), again demonstrating male power over women’s bodies and minds. If she is pregnant she will have to marry him whether she likes it or not. Sofia is a fighter and she doesn’t give up. When she comes to live with Harpo Celie soon realizes just how different they are. She writes: “I like Sofia, but she don’t act like me at all. Is she talking when Harpo and Mr. _____ come in the room, she keep right on. If they ast her where something at, she say she don’t know” (610). Sofia has a strong voice and is not afraid to use it, the first noticeably strong female voice Celie is exposed to. Not only this, but Sofia also is unafraid to take on the male role in her household. Celie describes this with an air of wonder and amazement, “I look cross the yard. I see Sofia dragging a ladder and then lean it up gainst the house. She wearing a old pair of Harpo pants. Got her head tied up in a headrag. She clam up the ladder to the roof, begin to hammer in nails. Sound echo the yard like shots” (968). Here Sofia shows male

characteristic in her appearance and actions as well as Celie's description of the racket she makes as the sound of shots, the sound of a gun representing the phallic symbol of a gun. It turns out Sofia has to fight more than just the men in her life; she has to fight the women as well. When Harpo asks Celie how to make his strong-willed wife "mind" Celie, surprisingly, tells him to "beat her" (610). This strange outburst on Celie's part might be explained by jealousy or simply that she sees beating as a normal part of male-female relations. It is due to Celie that Harpo and Sofia are "fighting like two mens" (622), enforcing the notion of Sofia's male characteristics. Celie takes on the role of a temporary anti-hero in the novel when she turns her back on her counterpart. Celie realizes this and writes "I sin against Sofia spirit" (645), finally understanding that women must stand together and that what she did was wrong. Sofia has won this fight but Celie's realization that "some womens can't be beat" (996) proves disappointingly incorrect. Sofia's sassy answer to the mayor's wife when asked to be her maid starts a chain reaction that leads to Sofia's imprisonment of body and soul. In an essay Trudier Harris has argued that Sofia "is beaten, imprisoned, and nearly driven insane precisely because of her strength" (157), showing that the white community cannot cope with a strong black person and must beat her down in the same way that Harpo, as a black man, could not cope with a strong female and tried hard to beat her down. This re-enforces Christian's above-mentioned claim that the understanding of the women in the story echoes images of slavery in the past. Although color is not the main focus of Walker's novel she "makes a group of black farmers the central social unit and uses this community as vantage point from which to deliver a blistering critique of the surrounding white culture" (Hite 261) and despite Sofia's words: "I love Harpo but I kill him dead before I let him beat me" (667) she is beaten in the end by the white community and "enslaved" both in the prison and later when she works for the mayor's wife. The beating Sofia suffers from the white people is extremely grotesque, bringing back images from slavery and separation. Celie recollects:

When I see Sofia I don't know why she alive. They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her on one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tounge 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 a eggplant. (1362)

Regrettably, the beating is inflicted physically and spiritually. While in prison, Sofia tells Celie "every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say" (1368). She has lost her strength and her voice. Sofia is silenced

all the years she works for the mayor's wife and it continues after she gains her freedom back. When telling of the white family she uses the words "I'm slaving away," her son interrupts her with "don't say slaving, Mama" (1565) trying to erase what she has said and wipe out the history of slavery. Tillie Olsen's argument that "censorship silences" (9) is evident in this scenario where the son tries to erase his mother's words with censorship. Sofia tells the story as she wants to anyways, showing how she is slowly regaining her voice.

Celie:

Celie, as the main character of Walker's novel, is also the one who is most silenced at the beginning but undergoes the biggest transformation as she finally claims her voice and rejects the silence which has been imposed upon her. As *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel the letters unmistakably play an important role.

Along with diaries, letters were the dominant mode of expression allowed to women in the West. Feminist historians find letters to be a principal source of information, of facts about the everyday lives of women and their own perceptions about their lives, that is of both 'objective' and 'subjective' information. In using the epistolary style, Walker is able to have her major character Celie express the impact of oppression on her spirit as well as the growing internal strength and final victory. (Christian 469)

The novel consists of letters written from Celie to God, and later to her sister Nettie, as well as the hidden letters Nettie sends to Celie from Africa. Only one sentence in the novel is not part of a letter, it is a warning from Pa to Celie: "*You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy*" (Walker 155). In mortal fear of the man who has violated her, she follows his instructions and tells her troubles only to God through her letters. "Celie ... never speaks; rather, she writes her speaking voice and that of everyone who speaks to her" (Gates 243). Celie has been forbidden to speak. As Abandonato sees her she is "trapped in a gridlock of racist, sexist, and heterosexist oppressions, Celie struggles towards linguistic self-definition. She is an 'invisible women,' a character traditionally silenced and effaced in fiction" (1106). But before Celie can reach her goal she must go through tough trials and tribulations. Raped by Pa and "sold" to Mr. _____ she suffers physical and mental violence from all males around her. As for the physical abuse Celie is raped by Pa and beaten (and as good as raped) by Mr. _____, even Harpo, though only a child at the time, makes Celie suffer

on her first day as Mr. _____'s wife. She tells of her meeting with Harpo: "He pick up the rock and laid my head open" depicting the use of male cruelty in the novel as well as the often violent fight for power. Furthermore she mentions "the blood run all down tween my breasts" (283) where the blood; the fruit of the violence is displayed on the round, female symbol of the breasts, connecting to the safety of Shug's round bed later in the novel. Celie does not fight back at this point to the great annoyance of Trudier Harris who claims that "the woman just sat there, like a bale of cotton with a vagina, taking stuff from kids even and waiting for someone to come and rescue her" (155). This claim is true, though a bit unfair considering that at this point Celie is still very young and has been exposed to more abuse and cruelty than most girls her age. Harris continues her rant on Celie asserting "plowing a man's fields for twenty years and letting him use her as a sperm depository leaves Celie so buried away from herself that it is hard to imagine her being so deadened" (158). Harris does have a point in this matter but again it is a harsh claim on this young defenseless girl. She is completely alone in a world where everyone she loves has been taken away from her and she is forced into a loveless and abusive marriage. In fact "Celie is so cut off from everyone and her experience is so horrifying, even to herself, that she can only write it in letters to God" (Christian 470). Nettie writes in one of the letters to her sister "I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it" (1907). Celie writes the letters because she has no actual verbal voice and must use a pen to speak and the "imagined" figure of God as a listener. Since her speaking voice is silenced by the men around her she uses writing as a "verbal" outlet instead. As sad as the reason for her letter writing is they still lead to something positive and help Celie grow. "Walker represents Celie's growth of self-consciousness as an act of writing ... Celie, in her letters, writes herself into being" (Gates 243) moving her from young and confused to older and in understanding of her own situation.

The struggle all the women in the novel must go through to fight the silence imposed on them by men in the society is immense. Celie, and the others, "struggle to create a self through language, to break free from the network of class, racial, sexual, and gender ideologies to which she is subjected, represents the woman's story in an innovative way." (Abbondato 1107). The importance of women helping each other and forming an alliance between one another become increasingly important as the story moves forward and it is evident that most of the problem that are dealt with concerning the women are figured out between themselves. Moreover, as they move further from their gender roles and merge

with male the struggle becomes easier, moving towards “genderlessness in a world dominated by gender roles” (Hamilton 384) seems like the best way to minimize the suffocating power of men over women in the novel.

Silencing forces:

By the end of the novel the characters have, to a great extent, lost their gender-glasses and feel comfortable in different gender-roles. However, for a great part of the book this is not so. From the start of the novel it is evident that there are certain silencing forces that are stronger than others. In fact “*The Color Purple* begins with a paternal injunction of silence” (Abbandonato 1106). The first words of the novel, before Celie starts her story, is an ominous voice which exclaims: “*You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy*” (155). These words, seemingly uttered by Celie’s father, are the core of the novel. They represent the main problem to be dealt with. Celie is silenced from the very beginning by a force that is very strong. She dares not defy her father (who in fact is her step father) and conforms to the silence imposed on her. From the first word it is made clear that it is men who are the silencers and women who are silenced in the community where the novel takes place. Instantly after this threat Celie begins her first letter “dear God” (155). In this second line the next big oppressor is made evident. God also acts as a silencing force for Celie and it takes her a long time to change that. Hite has argued that “in *The Color Purple* the most important agent of suffering is also a (relatively) powerful male figure, Celie’s husband Mr. _____” (262). Celie is forced to go and live with him and he proves to be also an agent of silencing. Before the gender roles are eliminated Celie, and other women of the book, must endure oppression and silencing by these and other men.

The thing that Celie “*better not never tell nobody but God*” is about the abuse she is exposed to by her stepfather. Celie must, from the time she is a young girl, suffer abuse of all sorts. Her recollection of the first rape is horrifying.

He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t. 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 choking me, saying you better shut up and git used to it. But I don’t never git used to it. (166)

In this scene Celie is both mentally and physically abused as he chokes her and tells her to “shut up” when she tries to express pain. This choking is a very physical way of silencing as she will not be able to make a sound while he is choking her. The focus on gender is evident in this passage as the perpetrator “push[es] his thing inside [her] pussy”. The male dominance is enlarged by the penetration of the most phallic sign there is; the penis. Both in this relationship and also later with Mr. _____ it is apparent that Celie’s “sexuality and reproductive organs are controlled by men ... and her submission is enforced through violence” (Abbandonato 1111). Trudier Harris has argued that the novel has “done a great disservice through its treatment of black woman and a disservice as well to the Southern black communities in which such treatment was set” (155). She continues and claims that “*what* Celie records – the degradation, abuse, dehumanization – is not only morally repulsive, but it invites spectator readers to generalize about black people in the same negative ways that have gone on for centuries” (156). Her claim has a point; it is in fact not painting up a very positive picture of the men in the novel. However it is important to recognize that this is the story of a woman and this woman happens to be black. As stated above Celie’s color is not the main focus of the novel although it does play a part (for example with Sofia’s time in prison and virtual slavery as a white woman’s maid). The story is about a silenced woman in search of her voice. When Mr. _____ declares “you black, you poor, you ugly” (2984) he might just as well have said “you white-trash,” “you fat” or “you Asian.” Hamilton has argued that in the novel the “only relationship to men comes in the form of the master/slave arrangement, be the master black or white. The ideology of patriarchy as used by Walker applies similarly to all men; black or white, they have been united by sexism” (385). Furthermore, a student of Harris’s states that “Walker had very deliberately deprived all the black male character in the novel of any positive identity” (158). This is not entirely true as for example the character of Samuel is portrayed as decent and good throughout the whole novel. However Alice Walker herself had an opinion on this. In an interview she talks about Brownfield, a character from her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* published in 1970

I will not ignore people like Brownfield. I want you to know I know they exist. I want to tell you about them, and there is no way you are going to avoid them. You are going to have to deal with them. I wish people would do that rather than tell me that this is not the right image. You know, they say the

man Brownfield is too mean; nobody's this mean." (Walker quoted in *Black Women Writers at Work* 177)

The truth is that some people are this mean and it is acceptable of Walker to portray these individuals – not matter what the color of their skin is. In the same way as with Brownfield, Walker cannot avoid the character of Mr. _____ or that of Pa. They are both a part of the story and they, sadly, represent real characters. Walker refuses to pretend like these sorts of men do not exist in the black society; or in the white for that matter. For Walker, black woman should be more willing to talk about these issues and not be afraid to discuss the problem of sexism just to protect black men (Christian 467). All of these problems in the novel are plaguing the society while the gender roles are strict. Once they become looser the problem is not as apparent and men and women find a way to live together without silencing each other which leads to oppression and unhappiness.

The silencing and the oppression that women in the novel are exposed to is a direct subsequence of the power that the men have in the society in which they live. In her essay “ ‘A View From “Elsewhere” ’: Subversive Sexuality and the Rewriting of the Heroine’s Story in *The Color Purple*” Linda Abbandonato maintains that “the specific system of oppression that operates in Celie’s life symbolize the more or less subtle operations of patriarchal power in the lives of women everywhere” (1110). That is, it is men that hold the power and women that have to bend to that power. As the novel moves forward and the genders become less apparent the power shifts from the men and over to the women. However, until that happens the power is completely in the hands of the men who rule all and treat women as they like. It has often been said that “knowledge is power” and this novel does little to discourage this notion. When Celie claims “us both be hitting Nettie’s schoolbooks pretty hard, cause us knows we got to be smart to git away” (242) it is obvious that both sisters, Celie and Nettie, comprehend the importance of education. In order to get away from the violence, the oppression and the evil of Pa the sisters must study and learn. To deny someone the opportunity to learn and to deprive them of education and knowledge is a form of oppression that is not new. This is an echo from the time that black people were slaves for white people and it was a crime to teach a person of color to read and write. When denying Celie to go to school Pa is acting like a slave-master. Pa silences Celie by trying to keep her ignorant and un-educated. The image is re-enforced when the violence and rape is put into the mix. The rape is a big obstacle in Celie’s thirst for education. From her letters to God she tells us: “The first time I got big Pa took me out of school. He never care that I love

it” (249). Here Celie shows her longing for education and how Pa has ripped her of the opportunity. She is taken out of school because she is pregnant with his child. This makes it a double offence on his part. He also gives away her children, not caring whether she loves them either. When Mr. _____ wants to marry Nettie, Pa exclaims “I want her to git more schooling. Make a schoolteacher out of her. But you can have Celie” (222). Pa has absolute power over Celie, she is already “damaged” in his mind and there is no reason for allowing her to pursue her studies. However he is the one who has damaged her and the one who deprives her of what she loves; education and her children whom he takes away from her as soon as they are born. Harris argues that “her lack of understanding about the pregnancy is also probable within the environment in which she grew up” (156). In her first letter to God Celie exclaims: “Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (158). Celie is pregnant by her Pa but has no idea what is happening inside her body. When the baby is born she is quite surprised. This problem is echoed in “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” a poem by popular 90’s rapper Tupac Shakur. In his poem the young Brenda becomes pregnant with an incest child, much as Celie thinks she does, and similarly she is ignorant of her condition as well as being uneducated.

I hear Brenda's got a baby
But, Brenda's barely got a brain
A damn shame
The girl can hardly spell her name. (Disc 2, track 2)

The similarities of the two young girls’ stories show how big a problem lack of education is in this society. Although Celie’s story has an unarguably happier ending than that of Brenda it is certain that both girls would have been better off had they known what was happening to them and even if their stories happen a long time apart we see that this is a contemporary problem and modern society tells us that it is still happening. Furthermore, the problem of women’s education is proven to be not one that is only in the society where the main part of the novel takes place. When Nettie is in Africa she soon finds out that there it is very similar, women are not expected to learn or to go to school at all. When an increased amount of girls starts attending the missionary school Nettie writes Celie: “the men do not like it; who wants a wife who knows everything her husband knows?” (2436). In this tribe, much as the “tribe” the sisters have grown up in, the men want to facilitate what women are allowed to learn in order to maintain their power over them. Those who are kept ignorant are less likely to rebel against the ruling forces. Even when women are allowed education and knowledge Susan

Gubar has pointed out that “Claude Lévi-Strauss implies that the female must be identified with language used by men in the perpetuation of culture” (246). This means that even if women have the power, they must still be confined to the male language as they are the original rulers of the language. This fact is made evident in the letters written by Celie and Nettie as we see how different they are. Nettie has had schooling and speaks “proper” English. She has assimilated to the society and follows its rules. Celie, on the other hand, speaks her own idiolect that is far from the “proper” English her sister uses. Celie learns to appreciate her own language and at one point exclaims: “Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind” (3127). This way she refuses to conform to the male language and instead finds her own language that is good for her and she feels safe using. Much like the way she finds her own way of living; a way different from the norm.

Men prove to be strong forces in Celie’s (and the other women’s of the book) life and it is not puzzling why, early in the book, Celie should claim “I look at women, tho, I’m not scared of them” (194). It is a man who has raped her, beaten and practically sold her to another man who mistreats her mentally and physically. Celie’s life is not easy and she is not the only one. “The facts of today allow us to identify completely with a lonely, isolated, alienated young woman, a woman left without a family because of the meanness of the significant men in her life – stepfather, father, husband” (Hamilton 381). There is one other significant man in Celie’s life that is also a strong force. This man is God. In Celie’s mind, and in modern day mentality, God is man, he is strong and he is powerful. Again the men in the novel, whether they be human or not, have power and authority. This is marked in Celie’s language as a young girl. As an example her sentence “but He won’t let her go” (202) shows this plainly. In this sentence “He” is Pa. The word “He” is capitalized as the word “God” would be, thus connecting the male power in her mind. Abbandonato has argued that

The God she conceptualizes is a cruel father whose identity merges ominously with Pa’s; when asked whose baby she is carrying, Celie tells the lie that is the truth: “I say God’s. I don’t know no other man or what else to say” (12). When Celie marries Mr._____, this man with no name becomes part of the system of male oppression, joining God the Patriarch and Pa in an unholy trinity of power that displaces her identity. (1110-1111)

Moreover Celie is imprinted with a misunderstanding from the Bible. She claims “Bible say, honor father and mother no matter what” (694). This results in Celie thinking that she must honor Pa even though he rapes her and takes away her children. In many aspects this is the root of the problem concerned Celie. Celie has no voice at this point in the story; she is silenced by the male forces in her life. Instead of speaking she writes letters to God as she has been warned to speak to no-one else prior to writing the very first letter. Nettie tells Celie in one of her letters: “I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn’t even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was” (1908). She writes letters to a male God who forces her to honor her oppressor, a God who seems to neither listen nor help. It seems that, as so often before, religion makes things acceptable that truly aren’t but she is too afraid to defy it. As time passes Celie develops further and so does her perception of God. After finding the letters from her sister hidden in Mr. _____’s trunk she loses faith. Her words to Shug sum up how she now feels about God: “Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (2726). At this hour of desperation, when Celie has lost her faith in the God she so long has believed in, she is fortunate enough to have her lover Shug. Shug’s understanding of God is much more mature than Celie’s has been until this point. Shug explains to Celie that

God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God ... Don’t look like nothing, she say. It ain’t no picture show. It ain’t something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be a happy to feel that, you’ve found it. She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then other people. But one day when I was feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. (2708-2789)

Interestingly Alice Walker herself talks about her concept of God in an interview where she says:

I’ve also been trying to rid myself of my consciousness and my unconscious of the notion of God as a white-haired, British man with big feet and a beard. You know, someone who resembles Charlton Heston. As a subjected people

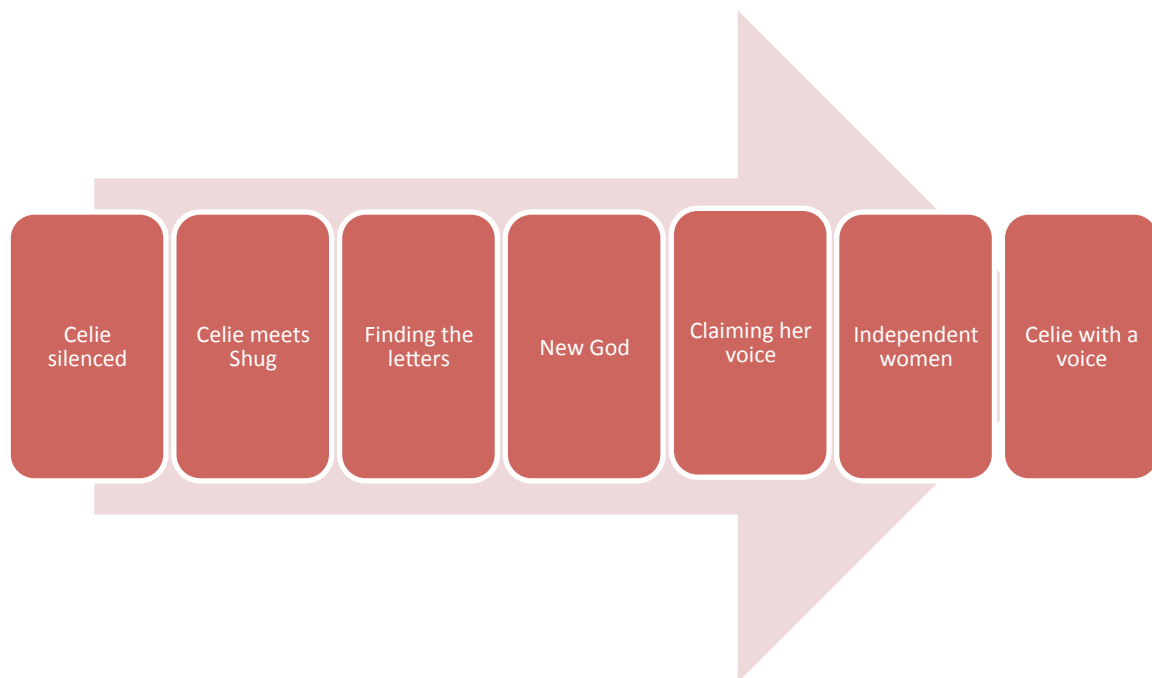
that image has almost been imprinted in our minds, even when we think it hasn't. It's there because of the whole concept of God as a person. Because if God is a person, he has to look like someone. But if he's not a person, if she's not a person, if it's not a person...Or, if it is a person, then everybody is it, and that's all right. But what I've been replacing that original oppressive image with is everything there is, so you get the desert, the trees; you get the bird, the dirt; you get everything. And that's all God." (Walker in Tate 178-179)

Both Walker and Shug (through Walker possibly) have come to a new understanding about God. When God loses his image he is no longer a man – no longer a white man, his possession as double oppressor is lost. He is no longer a "He" but an "It". When God is a white man, he is powerful in a negative way, but when "He" loses his gender "It" becomes powerful in a positive way. Both Walker and Shug come to an understanding about God where the idea of God is more connected to nature than to mankind. It is in everything around us. When God is nature "It" is approachable by everyone and by adapting this point of view Celie can find strength in God in a new way.

The silencing forces in Celie's life are strong and male. The reason she has no voice for so long in the novel is that she has no power over anything; not even herself. "Still, it is like Shug say, You have got to git man of your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall" (1790). In order to find strength and independence Celie must defy the men in her life, be it Pa, Mr. _____ or God. The way that she can do so is that they lose their male characteristic and gain female or neutral characteristics. In fact "Albert and his son, Harpo, are absolved by becoming integrated into a female-define value community, 'finding themselves' at last in the traditionally female roles of seamstress and housekeeper" (Hite 262-263). When this happens the community can begin to move in a new direction where equality is a possibility.

Breaking the Silence:

While men have the upper hand in the story, the women are silenced and, as Abbandonato argues, “the narrative is about breaking silences” (1106). Another critic, Hite, explains this further by claiming that “Walker uses the Afro-American motif of ‘finding a voice’ primarily to decenter patriarchal authority, giving speech to hitherto muted women, who change meanings in the process of articulating and thus appropriating the dominant discourse” (265). The search for a voice, and the ability to use this voice, is central to the story and a defining aspect of Celie’s journey throughout the book. This search can be broken into a few defining steps that Celie goes through during her life. These are steps that have defined her as a person and lead her towards the end she deserves; a life where she is her own master and can use the voice she has been give. On her way from “being silenced” to “having a voice” Celie’s journey can be drawn up in this diagram with each important step in one box:



The first important mean to the desired end is when Celie meets Shug. Before Shug arrives Celie is completely under Mr. _____’s foot and has absolutely no power over her own life. Through Shug she sees how a woman can be the master of herself and how she can be in charge of the language she uses. She also shows Celie that she deserves love and respect and not to be mistreated by anyone. It is Shug who gives Celie her first letter from her sister Nettie, the next important step. The knowledge that Nettie is still alive brings faith and power

to Celie and she is brought closer to her confrontation with Mr. _____ where she claims her voice and the power over her own life. The letters from Nettie lead to Celie's re-definition of God with the help of Shug and this "new" God proves to be of great help in Celie's battle. Christian mentions that "in *The Color Purple*, the emphases are the oppression Black women experience in their relationships with Black men (fathers, brothers, husbands, lovers) and the sisterhood they must share with each other in order to liberate themselves" (469) but she might also have mentioned God and the relationship these women have with him. Celie goes through many changes in the book and possibly "the most significant of these is a reconceptualization of God the Patriarch" (Abbandonato 1112). As soon as God is not a man, a patriarch, anymore he can be of help to Celie in her battle for physical and verbal freedom. In a defining speech given by Celie she curses Mr. _____ with the words: "until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees" (2985). Her words seem to come from the trees, or from nature. As God has been re-established as everything and as nature she is in fact getting her strength from God. Furthermore she claims: "Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice, I say. Then I say, You better stop talking because all I'm telling you ain't coming just from me. Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words" (2989), her words are not only coming from her but also from her new understanding of God which is helping her and giving her strength. In this case "if the creator is a man, the creation is the female, who ... has no name or identity or voice of her own" (Gubar 244), but if the creator is genderless and more nature than man everyone can claim their own identity and have a voice of their own. Celie is not the only one in the novel who makes this discovery. Nettie, although on the other side of the world makes a very similar detection with the help of the Olinka tribe, she realizes that "not being tied to what God looks like, frees us" (3745). This is very similar to Shug's argument of a shapeless (and sexless) God that values everyone equally. In fact in the essay " 'The Blank Page' Issues of Female creativity" it is argued that "many women in patriarchy experience a dread of heterosexuality" (Gubar 254), and with "describing her feminist re-definition of God, Shug makes an explicit connection between spiritual and sexual jouissance" (Abbandonato 1112). The new image of God brings to Celie both the strength to stand up to Mr. _____ as well as a chance to embrace who she is and enjoy the love she is meant to have. Although this new affiliation to a God of nature is different Celie learns to communicate and enjoy this relationship. Late in the novel, in a discussion with Harpo and Sofia about drugs she claims: "I smoke when I want to talk to God. I smoke when I want to make love. Lately I feel like me and God make love just fine

anyhow. Whether I smoke reefer or not” (3197). Here the connection between speaking to God and making love is very close. Before she was forced to write to God because she had no one else but now it is by choice, much as the love making, that before was painful rape, is good and of her own free will.

As briefly mentioned, the step after the realization of a “new” God is the step where Celie claims her voice and sets the foundation for her independence and happiness. This step marks the climax of the story and a turning point in Celie’s life.

Moreover, the drama of Celie’s epistolary self-creation revolves around the discovery of a female audience that finally fulfills the ideal of correspondence. Celie initially writes to God as an alternative to speech. The process of finding her speaking voice is a process of finding her audience, first in Sofia, then in Shug. But she is not able to deliver the Old Testament-style curse that in turn delivers her from bondage until she is assured of the existence of Nettie, her ideal audience. (Hite 269-270)

The first letter addressed “Dear Nettie” rather than “Dear God” is the first letter Celie writes after the realization that “Pa [is] not Pa” (2519), signifying the relief and the freedom following this new insight into her own life and being. This, and the new notion of God, bring Celie to the confrontation with Mr. _____ when she announces that she will be moving to Memphis with her lover, Shug. With the power from the trees, from God, she revolts: “You was all rotten children, I say. You made my life a hell on earth. And your daddy here ain’t dead horse’s shit. Mr. _____ reach over to slap me. I jab my case knife in his hand” (2871). This exclamation marks a junction in Celie’s life both verbally and physically. Not only is this the first time in the novel she speaks her mind to Mr. _____ but it is also the first time she refuses to let him physically hurt her, and she takes it one step further by thrusting her knife in his hand. She finally speaks her mind and violently refuses to yield to Mr. _____’s dictatorship. Finally she is fighting back. Mr. _____ tries to punch back, “he laugh. Who do you think you is? You can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all” (2984). This feeble attempt to hurt Celie sums up the male view in the novel, the superior outlook on life by an inferior man. Using “you a woman” as a reason shows how men see themselves as more important and better built for greatness than the women, Mr. _____ who is alone and refuses to work still sees himself as better. However it is too late, Celie has claimed her freedom from Albert and she will not

retrieve. She later replies: “The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot” (2992). She turns Mr _____’s words back on him, taking hold of the language and making sure that “Albert no longer has the power of the word over Celie” (Gates 252). Celie’s self-realization is clear in her assertion “I’m poor, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here” (2999). Her words show that she cannot be silenced anymore, she is here to stay. This poetic sentence is an echo of a verse in Maya Angelou’s poem *Still I Rise*

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I’ll rise. (154-155)

Both Angelou and Walker show that women are powerful and once they have claimed their voice and their life, they have the power and nothing can keep them down. The readiness for a fight is apparent. Celie “is here” and she will rise as Maya Angelou does in her poem.

Only when Celie has claimed her voice can she become an independent woman, fulfilling the final step toward being a woman with a voice as stated by the diagram above. Celie becomes a small-business owner and employer of two, something that seemed far from possible in the beginning of the novel. It is difficult for women to find a purpose if they have no initiative and “only through individual initiative ... can the solution be found: women must find their solution outside the home and motherhood, in enterprise, entertainment, and education” (Hamilton 380). And the “moldy theory that women have no need, some say to capacity, to create art, because they can “create” babies” (Olsen 16) is blown away by Celie’s creation of pants. She begins sewing them to keep from killing Mr. _____ after she finds out about Nettie’s letters but later they become her artistic outlet. When she speaks about the pants it sometimes sounds like a poem rather than a garment-description. One of these sentences can be set up like a modern poem:

One leg be purple
one leg be red.
I dream Sofia wear these pants,
one day she was jumping over the moon. (3010)

Even though women can create babies it is important to realize that they have the need to create something else as well and Tillie Olsen insists that “the power and the need to create,

over and beyond reproduction, is native in both women and men” (16-17). The women in *The Color Purple* are in some aspects forced to create babies by society or by rape but they all show that they want to create something else as well. Shug and Mary Agnes create music and Celie creates her pants reminding us of the “close identification experiences between the female artist and her art” (Gubar 252).

Celie’s independence and power of the language makes her her own master. She has the power of her own life and can live it in a way that she sees fit. “Much of Walker’s work portrays the spiritual and physical devastation that occurs when the family trust is violated” (Tate 175) but when the trust return it shows how it can be preserved again. Christian accurately argues how “obvious is Walker’s attention to the Black woman as creator, and to how her attempts to be whole relates to the health of her community” (457). This means that when Celie is whole the rest of the community can follow; they become whole as well. Even more importantly Celie realizes that in order to be whole she must be herself and she “learns, and, as she learns, her pastoral community develops in a movement that implicitly restores a submerged Edenic ideal of harmony between individual human beings and between humanity and the natural order” (Hite 261). The natural order only happens when the gender-lines start to fade away. Celie is a woman who falls in love with a women; something that is more common for men to do. She also sews pants; a male garment and owns her own business, not common for women of her time. Sofia is earlier in the book described as preferring to do the “male chores” in the house and how Harpo enjoys cooking and doing the dishes. This notion is especially difficult for Mr. _____ to understand claiming that “men and women not supposed to wear the same thing ... men supposed to wear the pants” (3983). When he can rid himself of this view he is, however, ready to embrace the female in the male and the male in the female and in return he is a much happier and more complete person. After this change of mind he can sit with Celie and they both sew and they both smoke the pipe; each taking part in a “female” and a “male” act. Even though it is new and possibly unconventional it is the first time they can be complete equals. They do the same thing and engage in a dialogue where both are equal participants. Mr. _____ finds piece within himself only when he has acknowledged Celie’s freedom. He does not give her her freedom but he still has to recognize it before he can truly be content and feel good about himself. Something that he seems not to have been able to do since in his early courting of Shug. Also an important thing, when he is happy he gains female characteristics – sewing. When he was happy with Shug he put on her

dress. Happiness is when the line between male and female is fading. Balance has been restored and the community is whole.

Conclusion:

Ovid's tale of Philomela depicts the story of a young woman who is raped and silenced. She finds a way to tell her story by weaving it in tapestry thus breaking the silence she is exposed to (181-186). Much like Philomela, Celie finds a way to break away from the silence she has had to endure and finds her voice, her strength and her freedom. Celie journeys from a place of complete silence and with the help of the women in her life and the fading of gender-roles in the community she is able to stand up and claim her voice and her life. When Celie has done this her triumph rubs off on the people in her community and her fellow people become more whole as a result. Perhaps Molly Hite was correct in claiming that "in the last third of the book the narrator-protagonist Celie and her friends are propelled towards a fairytale happy ending with more velocity than credibility" (257) but maybe this is just the happy ending that Celie deserves after her hard fought battle.

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