Abstract

*The Color Purple* by Alice Walker is an acclaimed novel that has won the Pulitzer Prize. Translated to many languages, and adapted to a musical and later to a film it has become well known all over the world. Since its publication the novel has received wide attention by critics and readers. It received a range of reviews and critical interpretations. The novel was criticized among other things for being overly descriptive of lesbian love; for portraying a negative image of the Afro-American males in a black society; and for its representation of Africa. It was also praised, especially by feminist critics, for its focus on women’s resilience and the power of sisterhood. However not much has been said about the spiritual theme of the work.

This essay is specifically concerned with the theme of spiritual transformation in the novel. It focuses on the effect of spiritual evolvement on the four main characters of the novel and addresses the author’s personal interpretation of the divine. Additionally the relationship between spirituality and creativity, as the two are interrelated in Walker’s life and her novel, are examined. I want to show that spiritual transformation is connected with personal growth and that one can be equally triggered by the other.

The words “God is inside of you and inside of everybody else”, which one character shares with the protagonist, open up enormous potential for personal growth and liberation. The story of the characters is absolutely uplifting and transformative. The idea of spiritual quest is applicable to general conditions in life, as the notion of God, faith and spirituality has always been an important matter to humans.
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Introduction

Since its first publication in 1982 Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* has gained significant attention both by readers and critics. Critical response to the novel has been varied. Reviewers have focused mostly on “the generic identity of the novel; its representation of black men; the portrayal of Africa in Nettie’s letters; the dramatization of lesbian love; and the ‘utopian’ ending” (Lister 396-398). However, not much has been said about the spiritual theme of the novel.

In an interview for the BBC World Book Club from November 2008, the author Alice Walker states that *The Color Purple* is almost entirely about religion and spirituality, and that all of the other things that happen are to show how people free themselves from religious bondage and emerge into their own belief, whatever it may be. In this essay I will explore the theme of spiritual transformation in the novel. Such transformation is shown by the change that the characters undergo, being influenced by their circumstances and the people they come in contact with. In addition I will analyze the link between spirituality and a creative expression since both are shaping forces in human life and function as a step in the quest for self-realization of the characters in the novel.

Walker had created a remarkable and vivid story that is inspiring and uplifting. The transformation of the characters touches deeply the reader because of its timeless and cross-cultural qualities. The question of God and spirituality is one of the most fundamental subjects that trouble humanity. In her novel Walker portrays the possibility for change and hope for a better life. The character of Celie, a victimized woman who through a loving relationship with Shug redefines her spiritual belief system and eventually reclaims her power and self-esteem is a character that
embodies struggles of many women and men around the world. The character of Shug is a loving and spiritually evolved persona, an agent who inspires change in the other characters. The character of Nettie with her methodical way of exploring the history of her ancestors and the need to understand the divine speaks to the more pragmatic readers. Finally the character of Albert brings hope for a possibility of change through the power of spiritual evolution. His story is a quintessence of a tale where a villain becomes a saint a tale with hope for a better future.

1. Writing of *The Color Purple*

Writing *The Color Purple* was a life changing process for Alice Walker. She recalls the time in another work: *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. It was a phase of radical changes as she was simultaneously going through “illnesses, divorce, several moves, travel abroad, all kinds of heartaches and revelations” (Walker, *In Search* 355). Walker left New York and moved to a rural town in California. In order to stay with her characters as they took on a life on their own, she had to put aside her work and life as she knew: “the characters of my novel were trying to form (or, as I invariably thought of it, trying to contact me, to speak through me)” (Walker, *In Search* 356). The fact that Walker left her work in New York put her in a situation where she had to face the fear of lack of financial stability. She had to redefine her priorities. She did just that - she trusted the creative process and, settling upon a frugal life style, she spent a year writing. The process was intense, as she felt extremely happy writing yet she simultaneously felt overwhelming pain and compassion when imagining people all over the world going through the hardship that she was writing about (Walker interview). Furthermore, she had formed a relationship with the
characters to such an extent that when she finished the manuscript she felt a sensation of bereavement (Walker, In Search 360).

The writing process was also a journey to her past, to the time of her ancestors, as she found the framework for the novel in the history of her family. The characters that were forming in her imagination were based on actual family members. The character of Celie was based on Walker’s step-grandmother while Walker’s aunt inspired the character of Shug (Lister 8). Remarkably, the character of Albert was based on Walker’s grandfather, with whom she had a wonderful relationship when she was little. Walker recollects their relationship in an interview, stressing how loving and patient the man was and how she simply could not imagine that he had been an abusive and violent husband earlier in his life (Walker, “Interview”). By writing his story, Walker paid tribute to the inner change that he had gone through. Setting the novel in rural Georgia, Walker traveled with her imagination back to the places where her paternal grandparents once lived. Her choice of language in the novel – black vernacular - was an attempt to recapture the voices of her ancestors. Walker’s fictional world was a place that allowed her to reconnect with her grandparents, to bring them closer so she could “get to know them better” (Walker, “Interview”).

The characters of the novel would not only ‘decide’ as to where and how she should live while writing the book, but they also animated Walker’s search for the divine. She would interweave the question of God that she herself had been contemplating with the lives of her characters in her novel. Just as the characters redefined the divine in their lives, so did the author. Walker admits in In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens that although the question of religion and its interpretation is one of the main issues she had been exploring in her work and life, she is not quite
certain what her own beliefs are. She further asserts that she does not believe in the traditional Christian image of God and that she actually questions the sole existence of such a God. She reflects that for her, the only possibility of God’s existence would be in nature (Walker, *In Search* 265).

This interpretation of the divine in turn resonates with the questions that modern theologian and philosopher Mary Daly asks in her discourse: “Why indeed must ‘God’ be a noun? Why not a verb – the most active and dynamic of all?” (Daly 33). Although Daly explores her question further from a feminist point of view, her ideas resonate with Walker’s philosophy on the matter. Daly concludes that to be able to redefine God we need to find a way in which women in particular could feel liberated enough to be themselves, and that from there we can reinvent the image of the divine free from the ideas that were created by patriarchal establishments. If we can reconnect with the divine from this new space, there is hope for a better self-understanding and understanding of others (Daly 40). Walker’s characters do just that: through the process of spiritual development they liberate themselves from the existing conception of a God-Divine Father figure and gain a deeper understanding of themselves through the process.

Satisfied with forming a relationship with her ancestors, Walker however was afraid of failing as a writer. Evelyn C. White reveals in Walker’s biography that the author doubted her abilities to convey their story in a right way, the way that her grandfathers would like her to do (White 350). White later asserts that all the doubts that Walker had about her novel vanished after she received the Pulitzer Prize in fiction (White 351). The combination of receiving such a prize with the international interest that resulted from it, along with witnessing later on a great success of the theatrical musical and the cinematic adaptation of the novel, was a great testimony
that she did not fail as a writer, yet she humbly credits her ancestors for the success of this book as much as for her other works (White 440).

2. Spiritual Transformation of Celie

The character of Celie is introduced when she is barely fourteen years old. The girl is repeatedly raped and beaten by her stepfather and is emotionally neglected by her mother. She finds refuge in writing letters to God, which keeps her sane and works as a form of therapy. Celie tells her sister that her life made her feel so ashamed that she could not even *talk* about it to God; she had to write it (Walker, *The Color* 117). At the same time, she shows strong spirit: “long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along” (Walker, *The Color* 19). The role of sacred is however limited in Celie’s life in the beginning of the novel. Victimized by her stepfather, Celie feels ashamed of herself and of what had happened to her. She considers herself to be a bad and unworthy person, expecting punishment for her conduct therefore she does not hope for nor pray for a better life, she is just confessing her sins. Deprived of education Celie’s image of God is based upon pictures from the Bible rather than from the text itself; therefore, when imagining Heaven, Celie envisages angels dressed in white with white hair accompanying a white God looking like a bank official (Walker, *The Color*, pp 11 and 85).

Even though Celie’s notion of God is ambiguous, she is desperate enough to put her trust into this deity. She pictures God as a white male, and even though she is afraid of men she keeps on confiding to ‘Him’. Celie attends services in church but notices the injustice and lack of spirituality there – women in church are sometimes nice to her and sometimes not (Walker, *The Color* 42). The preacher does not offer support or spiritual mentoring to the girl; he only acknowledges her hard work
cleaning the church by saying: “you faithful as the day is long” (Walker, *The Color* 42). She becomes aware of how judgmental the churchgoers are towards Shug Avery, gossiping about the singer and referring to her as a “slut, hussy, heifer and a streetcleaner” (Walker, *The Color* 42). Even though Celie realizes the dysfunctional state of the religion she inherited, she does not question her own understanding of God.

After she marries Albert, who she calls Mr._ , a vicious land-owner and widower with four children, her life does not change much. She becomes a victim to her husband and stepchildren and refuses to fight for her rights: “But I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive” (Walker, *The Color* 18). Feeling inadequate, unlovable and lonely, Celie simply vegetates instead of living her life. Because of this attitude, Celie bears the physical abuse with no complaints (Walker, *The Color* 23). Suppressing and ignoring her feelings is the only way she can survive and therefore numbness becomes her only defense mechanism; she literally imagines herself being a tree while her husband batters her (Walker, *The Color* 23). Despite the difficult life that she has to endure, Celie is a kind and caring woman. She has a capacity for love even though she does not realize it. She feels guilty about advice she gave Harpo to beat Sofia (Walker, *The Color*, pp 38 and 40). Even though she does not like Mr._’s children, she tends to them in a caring and considerate way (Walker, *The Color* 18). Being kind and loving she does not experience love back. She has no one to form a nurturing relationship with. Having lost her mother early in life and then later her beloved sister, the only two people she could relate to, Celie lives her life as a lonely and dejected person.
The lack of self-esteem is a primary issue for Celie’s character. As a victim of severe abuse and deprived of any quality of life, she suffers from a loss of pride and personal worth, which are the greatest obstacles in gaining independence, as Claudia Tate, a literally critic and scholar, observes: “to base one’s self-esteem on self-sacrifice by caring exclusively for others, whether it be one’s mate, children or one’s extended family, and not to care for one’s spiritual well-being is a self-destructive proposition” (Tate XXIII). Feeling worthless, unloved and lonely Celie is unable to progress.

It is not surprising that things start to change for Celie after she meets Shug Avery who, according to author and critic Eva Lennox Birch, loves everybody impartially and functions in the novel as “a guide and mentor to those whose capacity for love, of either self or others, is stunted by society” (Lennox Birch 227). In the course of the novel the two women become friends and then lovers. It is in Shug’s company that Celie finally starts to feel happy and alive (Walker, The Color 55). It is because of Shug’s motherly and loving presence that Celie rediscovers her strength and curiosity for life.

Celie’s dramatic spiritual transformation begins after the realization that all she believed about her family is not true: “my daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa. you [God] must be sleep” (Walker, The Color 160). Celie feels betrayed and abandoned by God and from that moment she begins to question the divinity that she “inherited” (Walker, “Interview”). It is Shug who helps Celie to “find her own reality of goodness” (Walker, “Interview”). Shug shares her own unconventional definition of God as “nature” (Walker, The Color 117), “God ain’t a he or a she, but a It[…]. God is everything […]. Everything that is or ever was, or ever will be” (Walker, The
Celie accepts this new version of God and from that moment her life changes dramatically. Her trust in the divine is restored and she feels stronger connected to the divine all around her. She frees herself from the oppressive hand of her husband and then proudly she reclaims the right for her existence: "I’m pore, I’m black. I may be ugly and can’t cook[…] but I’m here" (Walker, *The Color* 187). With bravery Celie leaves her husband and risks an unknown future. Determined to regain self-worth and freedom she moves to the city where she starts a completely different life.

In the beginning of the novel Celie maintains connection with the divine through a monologue. There is no possibility for dialogue with divine that she could not personally identify herself with. She is separated from the God - the powerful, superior and unapproachable deity. Later, Celie redefines her spiritual belief. She refuses to worship the traditional Christian male-like-idol, however she does not do it: “by attacking ‘him’ [but] by leaving ‘him’ behind” (Daly 18). She finds her own expression of spirituality following Shug’s animistic philosophy. The one-sided practice of confiding to God evolves to a deeply felt connection with the spirit that is perceived all around her. This deep spiritual connection allows Celie to heal the wounds from her past and achieve an inner peace in the present.

**3. Spiritual Transformation of Nettie**

Nettie’s spiritual road is different from that of Celie. Nettie is considered the pretty girl in the family and therefore develops strong self-esteem; furthermore, she is able to finish her education. Nettie is determined to study. She sees education as a way out of poverty and dependence (Walker, *The Color* 18). Nettie is a determined person.
Unable to endure abuse, she runs away from home and is forced to leave her beloved sister. Unlike Celie, Nettie fights against Mr._: “I started to fight him. And with God’s help, I hurt him bad enough to make him let me alone” (Walker, The Color 114).

Directed by Celie, Nettie finds refuge in the house of Reverend Samuel and his wife Corrine. Under the pious supervision of her new bread-givers, Nettie continues her education. Nettie’s new family are missionaries of the American and African Missionary Society. They are kind and virtuous people. The couple treats the girl as if she were their daughter. Not surprisingly, Nettie flourishes in her new home (Walker, The Color 116).

Her persistence in learning, together with her ability to keep an open mind and her curiosity, lead Nettie to a deeper understanding of the world. However, even though she studies religious teachings, Nettie is pragmatic and intellectual in her approach to the divinity. Throughout her studies and reading, Nettie learns with surprise that her own image of God has been distorted through the church education she had acquired so far: “all the Ethiopians in the bible were colored. It had never occurred to me, though when you read the bible it is perfectly plain if you pay attention only to the words. It is the pictures in the bible that fool you. […] all of the people are white and so you just think all the people from the bible were white too” (Walker, The Color 120). Furthermore, Nettie learns the history of her ancestors, not only how they were forced to come to America, but also the history of African civilizations which she then compares to what the white people teach.

The journey to Africa is a stepping-stone for Nettie in her understanding of a sense of reverence, but the expedition also confronts the prejudice that holds her confined in her acquired spirituality. When, after a long preparation time Nettie gets the chance to set her foot on African soil, she experiences an ephemeral shift in
consciousness. The first look at the African coast leaves her ecstatic (Walker, *The Color* 128). It is the first time that Nettie experiences something beyond rational understanding of the divine. In Africa Nettie is mesmerized by the different culture: the clothes, the people, the language, yet she is constantly reminded of all of her own prejudice. People in Africa were not “downtrodden people from whom they (Afro-Americans) sprang. People who need Christ and good medical advice” (Walker, *The Color* 118). Nettie realizes that what she had learned from the white missionary training about African people may be actually unfair and deceitful. Later, living in a jungle among Olinka people - a native tribe - she experiences the clash of the native way of life and the globalization process of the superior westerners. She recognizes the needlessness of the missionary theological work among the deeply spiritual tribes in Africa, and even more, the intrusion of the western industrial expansion on the native land that seems so dangerous for the health and core existence of the native society (Walker, *The Color*, pp 153-4 and 214).

It was during the time that she was living among Olinka people that Nettie experienced the most profound spiritual development. At the welcoming ceremony, the Olinka people served food and wine to the missionaries and through their dance and songs they told the story of their God – the roof leaf. Their belief in a leaf, however, was not a simple-minded worshiping of a false God. The Natives exhibited a nature-based conception of the divine, acknowledging a balance and harmony in nature (Walker, *The Color* 138-9). Nettie is exposed to a different dimension of the divine worshiping and unconsciously she accepts the possibility of it being valid (Walker 139). She respects the native people’s wisdom and awareness.

In Africa, Nettie realizes that not everybody believes in Christianity and yet, like the Olinka people, they are deeply spiritual in their own way: “the women spend
all their time in the fields, tending their crops and praying. They sing to the earth and to the sky and to their cassava and groundnuts. Songs of love and farewell” (Walker, *The Color* 156). In the jungle Nettie becomes conscious of the fact that the pictures of holy people of the Christian religion that she brought from England do not fit in her little hut (Walker, *The Color* 147). In her spiritual journey, Nettie faces the fact that there is a difference between spirituality and religion. Having to deal with religious institutions for the missionary work she notices the pretentious attitude of those in power there. When she travels to England with Samuel in a desperate attempt to get help for the Olinka people she witnesses the bigotry of the religious establishment. The bishop whom they were pleading to for aid was more concerned with the marital status of the couple than the unjust treatment of the tribe or their suffering (Walker, *The Color* 209). She unconsciously chooses to diminish the importance of symbol worshiping. It is as if she had realized that such symbols “obstruct the becoming of God” (Daly29) and therefore are obstacles in the actual understanding of the divine.

Finally, Nettie embraces the indigenous philosophy that “everything is inhabited by spirit”, which Walker describes later in her collection *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* regarding African-American and Native American spiritual heritage. Walker emphasizes the intuitive way of perceiving the world and advocates the “openness to mystery” (Walker, *In Search* 252).

Nettie describes her final interpretation of God in one of her letters to Celie, where she explains that having spent many years in Africa and therefore being influenced by the natives, she perceives God more as a feeling of reverence within, more a spirit than a persona – a source without form or gender. The fact that she has no image attached to God is liberating for her. She concludes with an idea of establishing a new religious movement which would
base its mission on seeking God within, completely disengaged from symbolic and idol worshiping practices (Walker, *The Color* 233).

Although Nettie was not consciously searching for the connection with the divine, her studies and voyage lead her to it. Set to intellectually comprehend the world, she ended up discovering a deeper understanding of spirituality in general.

### 4. Transformation of Shug Avery

Shug Avery seems to be the most controversial character in the story. She is a long-time mistress of Albert - Celie’s husband. They have children out of wedlock who are being raised by Shug’s mother, while Shug travels around the country singing in clubs. She is a strong and independent person, not trapped by society’s view of women and therefore lives her life in her own way. As the story develops, Shug finds herself living in Albert’s home, being nursed by Albert’s wife Celie. The two women become friends and then lovers.

The distinctive trait about Shug Avery in the story is the fact that she seems to have a ready notion of a divine in her life. She is spiritually awakened in that sense: “God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for” (Walker, *The Color* 176). Being spiritually evolved she acts, according to literary critic Eva Lennox Birch, as an “agent for […] miraculous changes” (Lennox Birch 226) that other characters undergo. Therefore the change that she undergoes is a little different. The change that
Shug undergoes is “not in herself so much as in how she is perceived by others” (Lennox Birch 227).

The character of Shug is introduced to the story not as an actual person but as a photograph and an object of gossip (Walker, *The Color* 21). The fact that Shug is introduced as an image and not as a person provides a feeling of mystery to her. Celie is mesmerized by that image and later becomes almost obsessed with the singer. Celie is fascinated by the stories about Shug and she idealizes the singer, seeing her as a majestic person, imagining her as a queen who is wearing beautiful red and purple gowns – beautiful yet unapproachable.

From the very beginning of the story there is an ambivalent image of Shug. She is adored by her fans and is popular, however she is not welcomed when in need (Walker, *The Color* 42). People in town who are not her fans have a lot of preconceived ideas about Shug. Being an object of desire and therefore perceived as a threat, she is stigmatized by the religious institution (Walker, *The Color* 42). She is judged by the religious establishment also because she does not conform to the expectations of society – disillusioned by the lack of spirituality in church, Shug does not attend services (Walker, *The Color* 174). Although Shug abandoned the church that she was born into, she found a different way towards spirituality. Having had a spiritual experience when little, Shug embraces a belief that everything is interconnected, coming from and embraced by divine power (Walker, *The Color* 176-7).

As the story develops and Shug becomes a guest in Albert and Celie’s home, her image slowly changes: she is no longer just an idol to worship nor a person to condemn. A vulnerable side of Shug surfaces as she behaves almost like a wounded animal: “she weak as a kitten. But her mouth just pack with claws” (Walker, *The
Also, in Albert and Celie’s home the reality of cruel and false gossip clashes with the affectionate perception of her by Celie. As the two women become close and share their secrets, we learn about Shug’s past. As a young woman, Shug felt unloved by her mother (Walker, *The Color* 110). Not surprisingly, after meeting Albert she falls passionately in love with him (Walker, *The Color* 110). Shug turns out to be a woman hurt in her past who learned how to foster her independence but who is simply objectified by the public.

Over time and with the accepting, loving and nurturing care of Celie, the true nature of Shug emerges. She is a compassionate friend, and a wise and spiritual companion (Walker, *The Color* 72). She is mature enough to recognize and acknowledge her own selfish behavior from the past, which had wounded others. She regrets the way she treated Celie when they met but also is ashamed by the way she treated Albert’s first wife many years ago (Walker, *The Color* 112).

Shug seems to be unconcerned about material things. Even though she is rich and famous (Walker, *The Color* 101), she is neither arrogant nor selfish. She is actually a very generous friend, quick to shower her closest with gifts: “She buy Grady anything he think he want” (Walker, *The Color* 101).

Shug is an interesting person, evolved, an original thinker and having a valuable insight on life. Independent and capable of standing up for herself, Shug also helps the other characters to develop a firm and confident sense of self. It is Shug who helps Mary Agnes to find her own voice and to launch a career. It is also Shug who helps Celie to start an independent life and to find a new dimension in her spiritual development.

In the course of the story the perception of Shug changes gradually as from unseen, unheard and unwanted she is later perceived as lovable, wise and worthy of
care. In the end Shug is not just seen as a ‘sweet’ flirt but recognized as an individual with individual strengths and weaknesses: “Shug acts more manly than most men. I mean she upright, honest. Speak her mind and the devil take the hindmost […] Shug will fight […] she bound to live her life and be herself no matter what” (Walker, The Color 244). The character of Shug is exactly the person who, in the view of philosopher Mary Daly, could have the power to transform the patriarchal belief system of today. She is rejecting the patriarchy and does not fit in to the stereotypical polarization of sex roles. With characters like Shug, there is hope for an androgynous spirituality system.

5. Transformation of Albert

The theme of spiritual transformation continues with the dramatic change that the character of Albert undergoes in the novel - from lazy, self-centered, abusive and violent into a sensitive, quiet and deeply spiritual man.

Albert, whom Celie calls Mr. __, is a widower with four children who makes advances to marry Nettie. After a long time of hesitation, he settles for the uglier Celie (Walker, The Color 11). The process of asking for Celie’s hand resembles a transaction and foreshadows his future treatment of Celie in his household. It soon comes to light that all Albert wanted was a housekeeper and a nursemaid as he himself is not interested in working or child raising (Walker, The Color 14).

The marriage is marked by abuse and Albert turns out to be an unloving, inconsiderate, dogmatic and lazy man (Walker, The Color 43). He exploits and physically abuses Celie, rationalizing this behavior with the idea of superiority of males over their female partners (Walker, The Color 23). Albert’s attitude towards his wife resonates with the insight that Daly shares on the nature of the popular image of
God: “if God is male, then the male is God” (Daly 19). Albert - being the husband, the man and therefore unquestionably the superior one - expects that the woman in his household is inferior and should be submissive. His chauvinist distinction of gender roles is portrayed also by the ideas that his son Harpo inherits from him: “Women work, he say […] I’m a man” (Walker, *The Color* 22).

Even though Albert embodies the image of the oppressive God, he does not seem to have much interest in religion. Occasionally he attends a church service, but he goes there either because of his superstitious nature or because it is socially expected. He seems not to question the religious institution or lack of spirituality in there, even when the preacher officially condemns his beloved one in church (Walker, *The Color* 43).

As the story develops, the reader gets a little more insight as to why Albert is so mean. His heartlessness seems to be a result of an unfulfilled love and life. Albert is simply an unhappy man. Raised and restricted by an authoritative father who “gave [Albert] the wife he wanted [him] to have” (Walker, *The Color* 245), even though he was deeply in love with Shug (Walker, *The Color* 111). Forced to abandon the love of his life and his own children, Albert resigns himself to follow social conventions and marries somebody else. Trapped in a world of unhappiness he becomes violent and mean. Suppressed by his controlling and dominating father, Albert conforms to a person who does not question what he is taught and does not wonder where that leads him; therefore he becomes inflexible, dogmatic and overbearing.

His world is chaotic and out of control. When Shug reappears in his life once again, two different sides to Albert are revealed in that the inconsiderate husband is contrasted with the romantic lover (Walker, *The Color*, pp73 and 74). This ambivalence in his behavior reflects the possibility that he is not a completely
aggressive and dominating male. With Shug around, a more romantic and sensitive side of Albert emerges. Dressing up to meet Shug Avery, he suddenly is concerned about his looks (Walker, *The Color* 25). Surprisingly, the previously indifferent man turns out to be loving, gentle and caring after all, trying to tend to his sick lover, he sits at her bedside all night (Walker, *The Color* 45).

The positive side of Albert surfaces also when there is trouble in the family. When Sofia is put in prison it is Albert who: “go plead with the sheriff to let [his family] see Sofia” (Walker, *The Color* 82). He is also sincerely concerned by Sophia’s wellbeing (Walker, *The Color* 85). And then he tries to find a solution – sending Mary Agnes to the prison official to manipulate the man into giving Sofia a lesser punishment.

Unfortunately, Albert is not able to stand up for himself and decide what he really wants from life, and falls back to his old ways from time to time (Walker, *The Color* 73).

The beginning of Albert’s transformation starts when Celie leaves him. Suddenly the world as he knew it - the world he thought was secure and in order - changes in just one day. He is left puzzled, almost like a little boy, asking what people would say about Celie leaving him and going to live on her own in the city (Walker, *The Color* 181). Caught up in social restrictions, he actually believes that this notion could stop Celie from going away. His wife left him, his lover left him, and the only thing that he is left with is the curse that his wife casted upon him. The drastic change in his life leads Albert to an emotional breakdown. Not being able to cope with the new reality, he withdraws from the outside world and goes into a sort of state of hibernation. During that time, he does not take care of himself or the house. He
experiences problems with insomnia, having nightmares and panic attacks; in short, he exhibits the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Walker, *The Color* 202-3).

During the period of his seclusion, Albert had to acknowledge his fate. He has realized that, unlike God, he is not omnipotent and that his life is just a human structure that is prone to change. Such a drastic change of one’s circumstances can, according to Daly, trigger a breakthrough that can “drive consciousness beyond fixation upon ‘things as they are’” (Daly 24). Eventually, Harpo convinces him to send Celie the rest of Nettie’s letters, and after that Albert begins to recuperate. While he seems to discover a deeper meaning to life, the change in him is quite visible:

the first thing I notice bout Mr. __ is how clean he is […] Mr. __ acts like he trying to git religion […] He don’t go to church or nothing, but he not so quick to judge. He work real hard too […] He sure do. He go out there in the field from sunup to sundown. And clean the house just like a woman. Even cook […] wash the dishes when he finish […] But he don’t talk much or be round people (Walker, *The Color* 201).

Albert has finally realized that he is not the center of the universe – a God-like husband who dominates his wife, an image that Daly refers to in her discourse (Daly 15). This time, Albert is a changed man, a man not confined by restrictions. Just as for Celie, for whom the turning point came when she freed herself from the restraints of her life, freedom came to Albert when he freed himself from social restraints and redefined his divine. Through the process he learned to take responsibility for his life and his actions. The idea that his past does not need to define his future is the stepping-stone in his recovery, as he admits that the change in him was a process and it started with a realization: “experience. You know, everybody bound to git some of that sooner or later. All they have to do is stay alive. And I start
to git mine real heavy long about the time I told Shug it was true that I beat you cause you was you and not her” (Walker, *The Color* 245).

By replacing a socially accepted image of male superiority and reconnecting with his more feminine side, Albert finds peace within himself and with people around him. After that, Celie and Albert reconcile and recognize a new dimension in their relationship: as friends who share a love for Shug (Walker, *The Color* 246). This reconciliation, after redefining the divine in their lives goes along with what Daly observes: “God who is power of being acts as a moral power summoning women and men to act out of our deepest hope and to become who we can be […] authentic hope will be active and creative” (Daly 32).

Albert’s new notion of God is similar to the one that Shug holds: they both find beauty in nature and the presence of the divine in all that surrounds them. This spiritual evolution allows him to be happy and true to himself as a person:

look like he is trying to make something out of himself. I don’t mean just that he work and he clean up after himself and he appreciate some of the things God was playful enough to make. I mean when you talk to him now he really listen, and one time, out of nowhere in the conversation us was having, he said Celie, I’am satisfied this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. It feel like a new experience (Walker, *The Color* 236).

Albert learns that “it is possible to heal from the hurts and humiliation of the past” (White 338). Such a dramatic metamorphosis bears testimony to the healing qualities of spiritual quest. It is a testimony to the need for a spiritual revolution. Daly in her discourse talks about such a revolution and although she talks about it within a feminist context, the character of Albert is a perfect example that men could greatly
benefit from such a transformation. And while they thrive in the new spiritual
dimension, the whole society evolves – and there is a better relationship between the
genders. Albert’s dramatic transformation also bears a testimony to the universal truth
that taking control of our life allows us to create a better future.

6. A link between the creative and the sacred

A modern spiritual mentor and a writer Christine Valters Paintner states that:
“Creativity is a powerful shaping force in human life. It is an intangible human
capacity of a transcendent nature – it moves us beyond ourselves in a similar way to
spirituality” (Valters Paintner 2). Walker embraces this idea in her life and work.
With Walker, there is a link between the creative and the sacred. This same applies
for her characters in the novel.

Writing the novel was a spiritual process for Walker. She opens her novel with
a dedication to “the Spirit” and later she identifies herself as an author and a medium.
Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines medium as “the material or the form
that an artist, a writer or a musician uses” and “a person who claims to be able to
communicate with the spirits of dead people”. Both of those definitions seem to be
relevant in this case. Walker expresses her spirituality through writing and at the same
time claims to be a medium who channels the story. In her other work, In Search of
Our Mothers’ Gardens, Walker depicts her characters as if they were actual spirits
that communicated with her. Walker’s description of the process suggests that the
writing practice was indeed like channeling where characters “would come for a visit”
(Walker, In Search 358). To be able to tap into the source of creativity and higher
intelligence, Walker had to prepare herself. She would consciously seek a quiet place
in a drowsy and relaxed state, she could reconnect with her imagination (Walker, In Search 358). Her work was meditative. Professor and writer Barbara Christian states in her essay that: “In her insistence on honesty, on examining the roots of her own creativity [Walker] invokes [...] the creativity of her mother, her grandmother, the women around her” (Christian 86). These women expressed their creativity in everyday activities, like growing a garden, cooking or quilting. Not surprisingly then, Walker’s characters find a way of creative expression in sewing, singing and caring for others.

It is never clear if the process of creating brings the divine closer or if it is the opposite: because of rediscovering the divine, the creative potential appears. It seems that each enhance the other. Once you are spiritual you are able to connect to the higher wisdom that can guide you. There is also a possibility that in the process of creating you find the Divine.

Although Celie shows interest in sewing throughout the story – she sews curtains for Sofia and had been sewing quilts - it is after she redefines her sense of the divine that she expands her sewing activity. The practice takes her to another level of being. It is almost as if she became possessed by the process: “I sit in the dining room making pants after pants. I got pants now in every color and size under the sun [...] I ain’t been able to stop” (Walker, The Color 191). She shares that medium of creation with Albert later in the novel. Although Albert had shown interest in sewing as a child, he had unfortunately been restricted by the conventional gender role division in his family and the fear of being ridiculed, and he subsequently abandoned the practice (Walker, The Color 247). However, it is after he finds spiritual peace within himself that he actually picks up the task once again. Spending time with Celie sewing, Albert surrenders to the process and reaches a greater dimension of understanding the world
around him. During moments like that, he starts to reflect upon the meaning of life: “I start to wonder why us need love. Why us suffer. Why us black. Why us men and women” (Walker, *The Color* 256). This contemplative state while in a process of creating is a testimony to the observation that Valters Paintner makes in her article, namely that: “the process of art-making itself can be a path to discovery” (Valters Paintner 4).

Nettie’s creative expression emerges through teaching and caring for others. Missionary work is a medium for that expression. She is fully conscious of what she is doing when she is participating in the volunteer service for the Olinka people and also raising her sister’s children (Walker, *The Color* 219). Spending most of her adult years in the middle of an African jungle, Nettie selflessly dedicates her life to the work with the natives. Enduring difficult climate and living conditions as she lives the same manner that the Olinka people do – sleeping in a mud-hut and eating food that they eat. Her days are filled with teaching the native children in a missionary school, in addition to managing her own household responsibilities and caring for her sister’s children (Walker, *The Color* 140). Despite the harsh conditions Nettie is not complaining, she actually finds joy in this kind of life (Walker, *The Color* 219). Her attitude is a living example of the fact that God is not a statue but rather the love within. Although Nettie advocates the need for a spiritual belief without the idols, she embodies the living wisdom of Christianity; she is like Jesus focusing on the life of people not on a dry religious philosophy. Her creativity grows in everyday experience. She is sensitive enough to recognize preciousness of each person and patient enough to endure humiliation coming either form the natives, who belittle the westerners (Walker, *The Color* 146), or from the fellow missionary Corrine who becomes jealous of her (Walker, *The Color* 155-6).
Shug employs many different outlets for her creative expression. It is almost as if her whole life is a creative process of spiritual manifestation. Whatever she does is done with careful consideration. She is a blues singer and her performance has such a great impact on her listeners that fans, simply pours in to the club to see her (Walker, *The Color* 69). She enjoys cooking, but for her, food preparation is not just a task, it is a ceremony (Walker, *The Color* 189). She acknowledges that everything that is alive and everything that we do is a creative expression of God: “God love all them feelings. That’s some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves ’em you enjoys ‘em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that’s going, and praise God by liking what you like” (Walker, *The Color* 176).

Walker seems to cultivate “a sense of spontaneity that opens up our imaginations to new possibilities” (Valters Paintner 5). Creative expression allows us to focus on the present moment. Once focused on the “here and now” we maintain a spiritual connection with the divine. At this same time by taping into our sense of divine we are able to channel the creative ability. However it is done, the state generates joy and wonder and that is the core of spiritual transformation.

**Conclusion**

The theme of a spiritual quest and change is a focal point in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. It also reverberates in her personal creative process of writing. The spiritual quest of the characters allows for self-knowledge and self-acceptance, and ultimately results in growth. Walker’s work addresses what it means to be human. Her fictional characters engage in struggle to maintain spirituality in everyday life. She uncovers a core and intimate dilemma which plagues all of us, regardless of our race or gender –
the questions concerned with God and spirituality. The characters’ struggle is in a sense symbolic. It is, as Tate asserts in her introduction to *Black Women Writers at Work*, “a quest theme – a character’s personal search for a meaningful identity in a world of isolation and meaninglessness and moral decay” (Tate XiX). It is a struggle each of us can assume in our own way. Perhaps Walker’s explanation that she poses in the preface to her book is the most significant one: “to explore the difficult path of someone who starts out in life already a spiritual captive, but who, through her own courage and the help of others, breaks free into the realization that she, like Nature itself, is a radiant expression of the heretofore perceived as quite distant Divine” (Walker ix).

Although very different, the characters of the novel are united in one pursuit – rediscovering spirituality. The book is like a personal channeling, dealing with the past and the ancestors, but at the same time conveys a universal truth about an individual spiritual quest.

Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985. Print


