

Language, Gender, and Power in *The Color Purple*: Theories and Approaches

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Abstract

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* unfolds with the marvelous interplay of language, gender, and power. Walker's conscious use of language produces new narrative strategies, discloses unheard stories of women, and transforms traditional concepts of gender roles. The manipulation of language empowers the speaker, while failure in voicing causes silence and a lack of control. Walker's employment of Black English manifests her concern about the black cultural heritage and her challenge to the superiority of white people's language. Her experiments with the epistolary novel make the silenced women heard in a double-voiced narrative. Walker also voices concern over the polarity between gender roles, an arbitrary division resulting from language construction. For her black characters, the hierarchal gender structure is further complicated by skin color and skin tone. Drawing upon theories on language and gender, this paper addresses three major topics in *The Color Purple* and proposes pertinent classroom activities: (1) Celie's language: features and implications, (2) language and voice, and (3) language and gender.

Keywords: Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, language, gender, power

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I. Introduction

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) appears on my syllabus for a course entitled "Selections from Women Writers" not so much for the author's gender as for the challenges the text provides. My conviction that literature teaching in EFL contexts should be student-centered and process-oriented directs me to texts that bring about a lot of opportunities for students to think. Because it draws on variety of topics and displays a style that requires specific reading strategies, Walker's Pulitzer-winning novel permits affluent interactions not only between the teacher and the student, but also between the student and the text.

Walker's use of language, among other things, proves to be a great challenge for my students. After reading Celie's first letter in *The Color Purple*, a sophomore English major found herself both excited and perplexed. The letter was filled with "mistakes"—spelling errors, sentence fragments, incorrect verb tenses, lack of subject-verb agreement, etc. The student corrected all the "mistakes" with correction symbols she learned in the composition class and felt satisfied. It seemed Alice Walker wrote more poorly than she did. Meanwhile, however, she questioned the feasibility of studying the novel. What are the merits of the novel? Could reading the novel impair her English learning? The present study intends to answer these and other related questions and to explain my rationales for teaching *The Color Purple* in an EFL classroom.

An epistolary novel, *The Color Purple* unfolds the self-discovery of Celie, a poor, uneducated black girl, raped at 14 by her father (later revealed as her stepfather) and then married to Mr. _____, a widower, to take care of his children and house chores. Not knowing that her beloved sister Nettie works as a missionary in Africa, and that Nettie's letters have been withheld by Mr. _____, Celie can only write to God. Literary critics have been interested in a lot of themes in *The Color Purple*. Early critical excerpts collected in Harold Bloom's *Alice Walker*, a research and study guide for the novel, deal with topics ranging from "the linguistic experience" to "the erotic metaphysic."¹ The novel is placed under the category of feminist writing because of its depiction of women's plight and close bond. Sara Mills and Lynne

¹ Topics also included are "storytelling style," "the rhythms of dialect," "growth and change," "American Dream," "the Southern fictional tradition," etc. Bloom, Harold, ed. *Alice Walker* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House 2000. *NetLibrary* 30 Jan 2008 <<http://www.netlibrary.com/>>), pp.50-77.

Pearce's *Feminist Readings/Feminists Reading*, a comprehensive study of feminist theory, draws attention to different perspectives in reading the novel: realism, influence theory, and lesbian criticism.² Describing herself as a womanist, a "black feminist or feminist of color,"³ Walker strives to explore "the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women"⁴ and to sustain their creativity. Severe attacks have been launched against the novel because of "its pernicious characterizations of black men,"⁵ but Walker claimed that she based the characterizations on her two grandfathers, who were "really horrible people," "very misogynous, very mean," but who became mild when they got old.⁶

With gender and race issues in mind, some critics deal with the theme of voice and silence, claiming that patriarchal surveillance causes female speechlessness.⁷ Others contemplate self-assertiveness and subjectivity, laying emphasis on the growth and development of female characters as well as male characters.⁸ Critics also pay attention to Walker's writing techniques. Celie's and Nettie's letters exhibit two different "narrative voices" which complement each other and put the story in "a larger cultural context."⁹ Given Walker's "most radical experiment"¹⁰ with the

² Mills, Sara, and Lynne Pearce, eds. *Feminist Readings / Feminist Readings*, 2nd ed. (London: Prentice Hall, 1996), pp.56-90, 125-52, 225-56.

³ Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p.xi.

⁴ O'Brien, John. "Interview with Alice Walker," *Interview with Black Writers* (New York: Liveright, 1973), pp.185-212. Prt. in Christian, Barbara T., ed. "Everyday Use" (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1994), p.62.

⁵ Butler, C. B. "The Color Purple Controversy-Black Woman Spectatorship," *Wide Angle*, Vol.13, No. 3-4 (1991), p.63.

⁶ Walker explained how she molded her grandparents and parents into the novel's major characters in *Conversations with Ancestors* (Warner Home Video, 2002), a special feature to the novel's cinematic adaptation on DVD.

⁷ Cheung, King-Kok. "'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*," *PMLA*, Vol.103 (1988), pp.162-74; Abbandonato, Linda. "'A View from 'Elsewhere': Subversive Sexuality and the Rewriting of the Heroine's Story in *The Color Purple*," *PMLA*, Vol.106 (1991), pp. 1106-15.

⁸ Digby, Joan. "From Walker to Spielberg: Transformations of *The Color Purple*," *Novel Images: Literature in Performance*, ed. Peter Reynolds (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.157-74; Ross, Daniel W. "The Making of Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," *Teaching American Ethnic Literatures: Nineteen Essays*, ed. John R. Maitino and David R. Peck (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1996), pp.159-74; Winchell, Donna Haisty. *Alice Walker* (New York: Twayne, 1992).

⁹ Fifer, Elizabeth. "Alice Walker: The Dialect & Letters of *The Color Purple*," *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*, ed. Catherine Rainwater and William J. Scheick (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1985), p.155.

¹⁰ Butler-Evans, Elliott. *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989), p.163.

epistolary form and her strategy to “attain linguistic self-assertiveness,”¹¹ it is justifiable to treat *The Color Purple* as a postmodern novel for its “aesthetic manipulation of voice and discourse in order to contest and disrupt form within.”¹² Walker’s special use of language produces new narrative strategies, discloses unheard stories of women, and transforms traditional concepts of gender roles. The manipulation of language empowers the speaker, while failure in voicing causes silence and a lack of control.

Literary competence, linguistic competence, and personal growth are three targets of literature teaching in the EFL context. Students should be able to cultivate their sensibility to literature, have better command of the target language, and relate their personal experience to a larger world. It is the teacher’s role to “make the text accessible” and to give students “some say in what they read and how they read it.”¹³ In summing up their analytical introduction to debates between “literature teaching as product” and “literature teaching as process,” Ronald Carter and John McRae observe,

Indeed it has not always been sufficiently underlined that process and product, literature for study and literature for resource, teacher-centered and student-centered are not mutually inimical but can and should rather complement each other as necessary continuities in the development of learning to read literature.¹⁴

Carter and McRae’s observations hold true for a thought-provoking text like *The Color Purple*. Whereas the teacher should expose students to the social-political background of the creation of the text, participation and involvement on students’ part should also be strongly encouraged. Students’ interaction with the teacher and the text can produce multiple interpretations. By means of discussion and presentation, students can address various issues and relate the topics to their personal experience. In the following sections, three major topics and pertinent classroom activities will be dealt with: (1) Celie’s language-features and implications, (2) language and voice, and (3) language and gender.

¹¹Mainino, Wirba Ibrahim. “The Problem of Language in Modern Feminist Fiction by Black Women: Alice Walker and Calixthe Beyala,” *New Literature Review*, Vol.37 (2000), p.60.

¹²Waugh, Patricia. *Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), p.62.

¹³Tomlinson, Brian. “Introduction,” *Openings: Language through Literature: An Activities Book*, ed. Brian Tomlinson (London: Penguin, 1994), p.x.

¹⁴Carter, Ronald, and John McRae. “Introduction,” *Language, literature & the Learner: Creative Classroom Practice*, ed. Ronald Carter and John McRae (London: Longman, 1996), p.xxiii.

II. Celie's Language: Features and Implications

In spite of critics' affirmation of Celie's letters as "an extensive interior monologue"¹⁵ and "a medium of remarkable expressiveness, color, and poignancy,"¹⁶ students do have difficulty in fully comprehending the seemingly chaotic narration. Appropriate guidance from the teacher, however, can show them that Celie is speaking a rule-governed language. The representation of Celie actually reflects Walker's sense of history and aesthetics. Since the 1960s linguists have noticed that Black English (BE) is "a quite distinct dialect" because of "its consistency and widespread use."¹⁷ Labeled as African American English (AAE) today,¹⁸ it is further regarded as "a system of sound, word and sentence structure, meaning and structural organization of vocabulary items and other information."¹⁹ Walker attempts to utter "the black voice," like many of her black predecessors, by using "the recurrence of linguistic features,"²⁰ although she adopts only certain features and neglects others in order to eliminate difficulty in readability and to gain visibility.²¹ In order to make the black voice heard, Walker knows she has to compromise her position in a context where Standard English is the dominant language. However, she allows Celie no such concessions. As the plot of *The Color Purple* progresses, Celie's letters get more and more sophisticated in vocabulary, sentence lengths, and subject matters, but she insists on using her own language. After she starts her business, Celie is advised to learn how to speak properly, that is, to speak like "Whitefolks,"²² so that people would not think her stupid. Celie, however, has to struggle while speaking Standard English: "My mind run up on a thought, git confuse, run back and sort of lay down" (215). She refuses to enter the linguistic system of white people because she wants to keep her own autonomy.

¹⁵Butler-Evans, op. cit., p.163.

¹⁶Bloom, op. cit., p.56.

¹⁷McKay, Janet Holmgren and Spencer Cosmos. *The Story of English: Study Guide and Reader* (Dubuque: Kendall / Hunt, 1986), p.98.

¹⁸Black English (BE) and African American English (AAE) are two labels that refer to the same system of language. The "social climate" often contributes to the change of these labels. Green, Lisa J. *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. *NetLibrary* 26 May 2008 <<http://www.netlibrary.com/>>), pp.5-6. I use "Black English" in this paper for the sake of consistency.

¹⁹Green, op. cit., p.1.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p.8.

²¹Sauer, Hans. "The American Black English of Alice Walker's Novel *The Color Purple*: Its Structure and Status," *Poetica*, Vol. 42 (1994), p.127.

To initiate students into the novel, I would read the first seven letters with students in the classroom.²³ For one thing, these comparatively short letters enable students to detect certain clues in the context. They can meet most of the major characters. They will know Celie's name in Letter 7 although she does not sign it. Besides, they will see her vicious father, her poor dying mother, her sister Nettie, her newborn brother Lucious, Nettie's boyfriend Mr. _____, whom Celie later marries, and Shug Avery, a woman who is going to change Celie in the long run. Students are encouraged to read the letters aloud to experience Celie's conversational writing style, as exemplified in the very beginning of her first letter:

I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.

Last spring after little Lucious come I heard them fussing. He was pulling on her arm. She say It too soon, Fonso, I ain't well. Finally he leave her alone. A week go by, he pulling on her arm again. She say Naw, I ain't gonna. Can't you see I'm already half dead, an all of these children. (1)

The reader will say Celie lacks confidence and linguistic proficiency as a writer. Besides problems in verb tense ("Lucious come"), in verb to be ("I ain't"), and in spelling ("Naw"), she has difficulty in "reported speech." However, an oral interpretation will be another story. Read silently, the above passage looks chaotic; read aloud, it comes alive. Students can hear Celie talking to them so that the "grammatical errors" do not hinder their comprehension.

Students are then encouraged to find out recurring patterns of "mistakes" in the seven letters and analyze them. With some patience and their prior reading experience, students will soon realize that Celie's letters are not inaccessible, that she is actually using a rule-governed language. The first line of the novel, the only line precedes the first letter—"You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (1)—can be discerned as a very serious warning against telling, in spite of (or because of) its multiple negation. The sentence "But I don't never git used to it" (1) is another example of multiple negation. Two other manifest rules are the consistent use of the verb root, and the absence of the verb to be in third person present, such as "He say

²²Walker, *The Color Purple* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1982), p.215. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.

²³The letters in *The Color Purple* are numbered by me from 1 to 90 for convenience in discussion.

she too young, no experience” (6). Once students get used to the major patterns, they can follow the plot successfully.²⁴

One feature that especially gives pleasure to students is Walker’s aesthetic use of “eye dialect.”²⁵ Eye dialect, in Hans Sauer’s words, “shows that Celie does not master the correct orthography and that she tries to write as she speaks.”²⁶ Walker writes a lot of remarkable examples: *tho* (5), *flue*, *direar*, *neumonia* (19), *orkestra* (24), and *two berkulosis* (43), etc.²⁷ The above-mentioned words, when contextualized, are definitely intelligible, especially as students read them out. Walker’s use of “eye dialect” demonstrates the fact that Celie’s letters cling to the oral tradition of her people.

Walker has Celie speak vernacular because she wants Celie to maintain her autonomy. The two women who attempt to teach Celie to talk properly believe in speaking white people’s language, but they fail to persuade Celie to do the same thing. According to Janet Holmgren McKay and Spencer Cosmos, “all languages are complex, innovative systems and . . . it is inappropriate to say that one language . . . is better than another on the basis of its vocabulary, inflectional system, or other inherent features.”²⁸ Walker takes a similar position when she depicts Celie’s refusal to “talk proper” (216). In reality, however, Walker has to *write properly* so as to draw public attention to her concerns. Students can discuss factors that place one language in a higher position than any other language. The teacher can also have a discussion with his/her students about Celie’s Black English. Does the study of Celie’s language change their initial impression of the novel? How does Black English help with the representation of the black people in the novel? What difference does it make if all characters speak Standard English? How far can they defend Celie against using Standard English? Those questions can increase students’ consciousness of language issues.

²⁴For a comprehensive study of Walker’s use of “The American Black English,” See Sauer, op. cit. Since this is not a linguistic course, analyses of all patterns are unnecessary. I suggest that students should study only major patterns to proceed to their reading.

²⁵Eye dialect refers to deviant forms that “represent the standard pronunciation in a quasi-phonetic spelling.” Sauer, op. cit., p.130.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Correct spellings of these “words” are *though*, *flu*, *diarrhea*, *pneumonia*, *orchestra*, and *tuberculosis*.

²⁸McKay and Cosmos, op. cit., p.101.

III. Language and Voice

Ever since the eighteenth century when Samuel Richardson wrote *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, letter novels have been a traditional genre which allows the female heroine to address her difficult situations. Since the epistolary form creates sense of immediacy to what happens, readers will find themselves caught in troubles together with the narrator. Starting from Letter 51, in which Celie tells how Shug digs out all Nettie's letters hidden in Mr. _____'s trunk, Walker alternates the sisters' letters and hence creates a double-voiced narrative. Though far apart from each other, Celie and Nettie resort to writing and achieve self-awareness respectively. Due to the sisters' divergent life experience, Nettie's letters are in sharp contrast to Celie's no matter in language, in style, in rhythm, or in subject matters.

Unlike Celie, who is deprived of education because of pregnancy, Nettie has a good command of Standard English. Nevertheless, critics generally have a lower opinion of her letters. Elizabeth Bartelme describes her as "a colorless character,"²⁹ Robert Towers, "a mere reporter of events,"³⁰ and Joan Digby, "a biographer of [Celie's children] Oliver and Adam."³¹ If Celie's letters read like a diary, Nettie's letters remind one of a textbook. As Walker's spokesperson, Nettie addresses issues like slavery, women's place in society, colonialism, and environmentalism.

Critical opinions suggest that Nettie's language is "stiffly didactic,"³² "conventional and educational,"³³ characterized by "tilted verbosity" and "dreary correctness."³⁴ Although Nettie's letters are "largely ethnographic readings of African culture,"³⁵ my students found them intriguing. When asked what interested them most, they mentioned the lifestyle and the concept of the Olinka. They also reported feeling comfortable reading her letters. Students' responses show that reading a postmodern text takes more effort than reading a classic one. In other words, to subvert from within is a great challenge for writers. On the other hand, tensions between the two kinds of narratives will be lacking if Nettie's letters are absent from the novel. In view of the novel as a whole, Nettie's letters have three functions. First,

²⁹Bloom, op. cit., p.59.

³⁰Ibid., p.56.

³¹Digby, op. cit., p.158.

³²Winchell, op. cit., p.94.

³³Fifer, op. cit., p.155.

³⁴Warhol, Robyn R. "How Narration Produces Gender: Femininity as Affect and Effect in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," *Narrative*, Vol.9, No.2 (2001), p.185.

³⁵Butler-Evans, op. cit., p.166.

they broaden the scope of the novel. Nettie's African experience makes a grand narrative against which Celie's confessional narrative stands out. The letters also establish a connection between Celie and Nettie; therefore, Celie's life and writing becomes meaningful. Finally, they free Celie from hatred and sense of guilty. From Nettie, Celie knows that their Pa, who rapes Celie, is their stepfather, and that Celie's two supposedly abandoned children are raised in Africa by a missionary couple.

In addition to her vernacular, one thing that distinguishes Celie's letters is "the model of spoken language."³⁶ Celie tells stories by faithfully recording the dialogues between the characters. The effects are vivid characterization and verisimilitude. In her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Walker asserts that telling stories has made her mother "an artist."³⁷ Not having any access to written words, Walker's mother as well as many other black women resorts to the oral traditions to pass down her wisdom and creativity. Lizbeth Goodman further elaborates: "[T]he telling of stories is a way of presenting self in opposition to a language which is not your own, not part of your people's tradition."³⁸ Celie's crude words represent Walker's accusation of the political-economic plight that deprives black women of their education and hence their power.

Seeking the "I". A comparative analysis of Celie's letters can help students recognize her linguistic maturity. Celie's vocabulary is getting larger, her sentences, paragraphs and letters are getting longer, and her tone is getting more assertive. At the earlier stage of her writing, Celie narrates events but scarcely describes her feelings. At the later stage, she comments, reasons, and argues. As a result, Celie establishes her subjectivity through the process of writing. Celie writes fifty-four letters to God, none bearing any signature. Actually, she is dubious about both her writing and her addressee. Letter 68, her last letter to God, describes her bitter disappointment: "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" (177). It is not until Letter 76, when Celie moves to Memphis to live with Shug and owns her own business, that she signs her letter to Nettie with complete assurance: "Amen, / Your Sister, Celie / Folkspants, Unlimited. / Sugar Avery Drive / Memphis, Tennessee" (214). It is a signature suggestive of Celie's personal identity, financial security, and social participation.

Celie's letters also record her journey from silence to articulation. What mutes Celie is the patriarchal language. In order to cover his crime, Pa threatens Celie and

³⁶Mills, Sara. op. cit., p.74.

³⁷Walker, op. cit., p.240.

³⁸Goodman, Lizbeth. "Gender, Race, Class and Fiction," *Literature and Gender*, ed. Lizbeth Goodman (London: The Open University, 1996), p.157.

silences her. When he suggests that Mr. _____ marry Celie instead of Nettie, Pa gives a commodity description: “She ugly. Don’t even look like she kin to Nettie. But she’ll make the better wife. She ain’t smart either, and I’ll just be fair, you have to watch her or she’ll give away everything you own. But she can work like a man” (8). In a word, Pa’s remark defines Celie. When Mr. _____’s sister tells Celie to fight, Celie doesn’t know what to do: “I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told” (21). Celie even tells Harpo to hit Sophia so that she will not talk back. Lack of her own language and voice, Celie can only live by the patriarchal system. After the mute woman can finally assert herself, however, she chooses to break away. As soon as Mr. _____ is informed of Celie’s plan to leave with Shug, he attacks Celie fiercely: “Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, . . . , you nothing at all” (206). Mr. _____’s remark rightly indicates the “multiple jeopardy” that a black woman can encounter.³⁹ But Celie refuses to stay in his linguistic restriction. She assures Mr. _____: “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here” (207).

As Wibra I. Mainino indicates, most black women writers regard language “not only as a means of communication, but also as an instrument of empowering the dispossessed.”⁴⁰ In addition to letter writing, Walker employs three forms of expression to free Celie and other female characters from male dominance: naming, singing, and sewing. Celie gains the power of naming after she finds her voice. In Letters 89 and 90, she calls Mr. _____ Albert, which she knows from Shug but which she has never endeavored to call. Urged by Celie, Squeak also reclaims her identity as Mary Agnes and voices her desire to sing: “When I was Mary Agnes I could sing in public” (203). As a professional singer, Shug knows the power of singing. “Miss Celie’s song,” a song Shug dedicates to Celie in Harpo’s jukejoint, kindles Celie’s intense emotions: “First time somebody made something and name it after me” (72). Walker believes sewing symbolizes creativity and expression. With the help of Shug and Sofia, Celie works on a quilt using a pattern called Sister’s Choice. The quilt turns out to be Sofia’s farewell gift when she separates with Harpo. Rage seizes Celie as she makes an attempt on Mr. _____’s life, but Shug takes her razor away and soothes her with the idea of pants making. Turning a razor into a needle, Celie embarks on a career path and achieves financial independence.

³⁹ Goodman observes that women of color are victims of “multiple jeopardy”: race, class and gender oppression. See Goodman, *op. cit.*, p.153. Similarly, Cheung argues that minority women are “thrice muted” because of “sexism, racism, and a ‘tonguelessness’ that results from prohibitions or language barriers.” See Cheung, *op. cit.*, p.163.

⁴⁰ Mainino, *op. cit.*, p.59.

Reading as Quilting. In terms of sewing, quilt making has great symbolic importance for *The Color Purple*. Firstly, in view of its epistolary form, reading *The Color Purple* is similar to quilt making; the reader picks up bits and pieces in the hope of the big picture.⁴¹ Walker identifies in quilt making “the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited.”⁴² In *Sister’s Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women’s Writing*, a book-length study named after Celie’s quilt, Elaine Showalter describes *The Color Purple* as “a narrative quilt pieced from the spectrum of literary and cultural texts which Walker has inherited.”⁴³ Seeing *The Color Purple* as a quilt piece, Showalter furthermore stitches the novel into the big quilt of American women’s literature.

Walker’s narrative strategy makes another pattern of quilting which deserves the reader’s attention. When reporting the characters’ speeches, Walker uses no quotation marks so that the narrator’s voice blends with those of other characters⁴⁴. An extract from Celie’s letter shows this effect:

But Shug spoke right up for you, Celie, he say. She say Albert, you been mistreating somebody I love. So as far as you concern, I’m gone. I couldn’t believe it, he say. All along in there we was as hot for each other as two pistols. Excuse me, he say. But we was. I tried to laugh it off. But she meant what she said. (279, emphasis added)

In the extract, Albert expresses his remorse for Shug’s unexpected departure. One can find three voices: Celie’s, Shug’s and Albert’s. Words like “he say” and “she say” indicate the shift of voices.

Walker experiments with the voice-shift strategy within a broader scope by inserting different narratives into a letter. Since the insert is usually several paragraphs long, one can see a clear-cut patchwork pattern. For instance, in Letter 80, where Nettie announces her recent marriage with Samuel, Walker inserts Samuel’s first-person narration introducing his past. Letter 87, the longest in the novel, manifests another instance where Celie’s letter is embedded with a letter Shug writes to her. At this moment, Celie feels lonely and bitter because Shug has been traveling

⁴¹ Christian, “Introduction,” op. cit., p.4; Kelley, Margot Anne. “Sisters’ Choices: Quilting Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Women’s Fiction,” in Christian, op. cit., p.184.

⁴² Walker, “In Search,” op. cit., p.239.

⁴³ Showalter, Elaine. *Sister’s Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women’s Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), p.20.

⁴⁴ Mainino, op. cit., pp.70-71.

for six months with Germaine, her 19-year-old new boyfriend. Shug's narration flows into Celie's with the signal words "she wrote me":

Besides, she [Shug] give me so many good years. Plus, she learning new things in her new life. Now she and Germaine staying with one of her children.

Dear Celie, she wrote me, Me and Germaine ended up in Tucson, Arizona where one of my children live. . . . (267, emphasis added)

The "Dear Celie" paragraph and five consecutive paragraphs make up a letter, in which the narrating "I" is Shug. After that, a new paragraph with the signal words "she write me" brings back the reader to Celie's narration, and the narrating "I" shifts to Celie again:

You know I never think bout mama and daddy. You know how tough I think I is. But now that they dead and I see my children doing well, I like to think about them. Maybe when I come back I can put some flowers on they graves.

Oh, she write me now near bout every week. Long newsy letters full of stuff she thought she had forgot. . . . I wish I could be traveling with her, but thank God she able to do it. . . . (268, emphasis added)

Walker thus creates multiple perspectives and dialogues in a seemingly straightforward narrative. The blend of voices signals the change from silence to polyphony on Celie's part. It is also a celebration of the increase in her mastery of the language.

Writing to Celie and Nettie. Students can gain epistolary experience by writing to Celie and Nettie. When asked to write to Celie or Nettie, my students usually show editorial omniscience, shuttling between "letters," commenting on events, encouraging or condemning characters. A more challenging task would be like this: situating a student-writer into a certain letter, with as limited knowledge as the addresser, so that the student can have more empathy for Walker's characters. One thing that distinguishes present-day emails from traditional letters is their promptness and immediacy, which, however, are alien to the two sisters. Students can also picture themselves writing letters in that particular milieu.

Dramatizing the Text. The dramatization of selected extracts is another activity for students to experience Walker's narrative quilts. Using the above-mentioned voice-blending extract, for instance, the teacher can assign three students to do voice acting for Celie, Shug, and Albert. Successful performance depends mainly on students' reading comprehension, although fluency, pitch or pronunciation also matter. The student who plays Celie's part can participate in her manipulation of voices because only with Celie's indicator "he say" can Albert utter his words. Students can also discuss alternative ways to make one's voice heard in the modern world when technological advancement has almost replaced traditional letter writing.

IV. Language and Gender

When commenting on Walker's contribution to Black feminist criticism, Maggie Humm mentions Walker's strategy of "writing literary criticism as story and as autobiographical narrative."⁴⁵ As a classic example, *The Color Purple* records important hallmarks in feminist literary criticism.⁴⁶ Walker not only attacks patriarchal oppression and claims the submerged voice of women. One important thing that she also calls into question is the polarity between femininity and masculinity. Walker expresses her concern about gender roles and gender dynamics in her characterization and plot development.

Doris Baines, a legendary white woman missionary Nettie mentions in her letter, can aptly exemplify the interplay between language and gender. "Being a man or a woman," in R. W. Connell's words, "is not a fixed state. It is a becoming, a condition actively under construction."⁴⁷ Humm puts it more concisely: "[W]e acquire a gender through language."⁴⁸ Linguistic binary oppositions between women and men exclude one party from the other and supply role models for women and men respectively. One becomes a woman by acquiring the version of femininity her culture defines, as Simone de Beauvoir claims. Doris, however, resists the prescribed route and deliberately constructs herself as masculine. In order to remain single and to be

⁴⁵Humm, Maggie. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p.186.

⁴⁶Mills and Pearce, by rephrasing Julia Kristeva's framework, termed the three phases in the development of feminist criticism from 1960 to 1980 as "feminist critique of male-authored texts," "establishing a female literary tradition," and "new interrogations of gender." See Mills and Pearce, pp.2-5. They observed that the study of gender led to more complicated, revolutionary discussions from the 1990s onwards. See Mills and Pearce, op. cit., pp.2-5.

⁴⁷Connell, R. W. *Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), p.4.

⁴⁸Humm, op. cit., p.3.

“her own boss” (229), she volunteers to do missionary work but actually devotes herself to writing novels, which brings her fortune and fame. Doris’ self-introduction to Nettie and Samuel is a parody of adventure stories in which men play the lead: “My pen name is Jared Hunt, she [Doris] said. In England and even in America, I’m a run-away success. Rich, famous. An eccentric recluse who spends most of his time shooting wild game” (230, emphasis added). She respects the culture of “the heathen” and funds them so much so that the chief sends her a couple of wives in return. The chief’s particular act has two layers of symbolic meaning. Firstly, Doris has successfully performed masculinity so that, in spite of her female body, she is honored as a man of importance who deserves a couple of wives. Secondly, the word “wife” suggests more connotations than “the woman to whom a man married;” it also signifies cultural expectations of that woman. A wife can be a woman sent as a gift to a man or even to a masculine woman like Doris. More precisely, a wife is constructed as feminine and docile for a marriage partner who must have been constructed as masculine and authoritative.

Nettie’s picture of the Olinka wives enlarges on the construction of gender roles. The Olinka women live in a male-dominated world. Men use language to define their power and women’s subordination. Power only goes to “A father. An uncle. A brother or nephew” (161). Men have a monopoly of education because there is no place for educated women. Consequently, Tashi’s parents forbid her to study with Olivia. Marriage is the only goal for a woman, for “only to her husband can she become something” (155). A woman’s identity comes from her husband; as a result, to be the chief’s wife is “as high as they can think” (157). If a woman dares to rebel, she will be labeled as a lunatic and sold to traders, of which Tashi’s aunt is living proof. Nettie’s observations about the Olinka men and women reveal the hierarchical structure of the community:

There is a way that the men speak to women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don’t even look at women when women are speaking. They look at the ground and bend their heads toward the ground. The women also do not “look in a man’s face’ as they say. To “look in a man’s face” is a brazen thing to do. They look instead at his feet or his knees. And what can I say to this? Again, it is our own behavior around Pa. (162)

Nettie's reminiscences of Pa suggest that the gender hierarchy in Olinka is not an isolated system. Back in Nettie's hometown, Celie and other female characters also encounter patriarchal oppressions, although they deal with their problems using different strategies.

Instead of freeing Celie from male exploitation, marriage transfers Celie from Pa to Mr. _____, a man who despises women and takes wife beating for granted. For Celie, the parallels between the two men are clear to see:

Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr. _____ say, Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for—he don't finish. He just tuck his chin over the paper like he do. Remind me of Pa. (22)

Both Mr. _____ and Pa exert linguistic as well as physical violence against Celie, while Celie can only pretend she is a tree, silent and immobile. Gender dynamics produces gendered jobs. Housekeeping, for instance, is a job exclusive to wives. Harpo refuses to help Celie with housework because it is women's work, not men's. Mr. _____'s sisters condemn his late wife as nasty for her poor housekeeping, but they praise Celie as “[g]ood housekeeper, good with children, good cook” (20) in the belief that it is a wife's obligation to “keep a decent house and a clean family” (19).

In order to subvert the stereotypical representation of husband and wife illustrated by Mr. _____ and Celie, Walker displays “reversal of gender roles”⁴⁹ in the characterization of Harpo and Sofia. Harpo is “strong in body but weak in will” (27), whereas Sofia is muscular and determined. The couple's job preferences are contrary to the traditional job division between genders, as Sofia explains to Celie:

He [Harpo] seem so much to love it [dishwashing]. To tell the truth, he love that part of housekeeping a heap more'en me. I rather be out in the fields or fooling with the animals. Even chopping wood. But he love cooking and cleaning and doing little things round the house. (59)

Unlike Celie, Sofia refuses to be controlled by her husband. She talks back and fights with Harpo when he resorts, as his father does, to violence. An urge to assume control of Sofia drives Harpo to gluttony. The depressed husband makes an attempt to gain weight and power by consuming a great amount of food, only to realize that it is not his weight that matters. Caught in the linguistic system that constructs arbitrary

⁴⁹Winchell, op. cit., p.95.

gender roles, Harpo can neither value his feminine qualities nor respect Sofia's masculine characteristics. His loyalty to gender dichotomy can only lead his marriage to destruction. On the other hand, Prizefighter, Sofia's new man, gives different interpretations to the male role. Although he is a big tall man, Prizefighter uses no violence and imposes no limitation on Sofia. He develops a version of masculinity that is in stark contrast to Harpo's.

What is Walker's ultimate concern about gender politics? Even though the reversal of gender roles can subvert the prescribed gender roles, it causes still another polarity between man and woman. Walker actually advocates "an androgynous blend of traditionally male and female characteristics"⁵⁰ in her creation of the character Shug. Walker characterizes Shug as a woman of masculine deeds as well as feminine charms. Celie admires her for she is "the most beautiful woman I [Celie] ever saw" (6). Mr. _____ notices that "Shug act more manly than most men" (269). He also comments that "Sofia and Shug not like men, . . . but they not like women either" (269).

Elliott Butler–Evans deems Shug to be "the embodiment of feminist existential freedom."⁵¹ In a sense, Shug frees Celie from linguistic constraints on both sexuality and religion. For one thing, Shug teaches Celie to appreciate her own body and initiates her sexual pleasure. Despite her hatred towards men, Celie learns she can love and have sex with a woman. Shug's challenge to heterosexual hegemony not only permits her sexual freedom. It also directs Celie toward alternative sexual attraction. The lesbian relationship between Shug and Celie entails a lesbian reading of the text; however, Shug's "sexual pluralism"⁵² allows the reader to have more interpretations. Daniel W. Ross, for instance, advises students to see Celie's relationship with Shug as "part of a larger growth and development that she needs to undergo."⁵³ Celie's bisexually active mentor eventually steers her toward an awareness of physical and spiritual freedom. Celie's pants business originates from Shug's ideas that pants should not be exclusive to men since women need comfortable pants at work. In the scene in which Celie and Mr. _____ sew pants together, Walker depicts a joint effort made by a man and a woman doing a gendered job, their products being clothes which used to have only masculine attributes. The scene, pretentious as it is, is a manifestation of Walker's ideals of gender dynamics.

⁵⁰Winchell, op. cit., p.95.

⁵¹Butler–Evans, op. cit., p.168.

⁵²Abbandonato, op. cit., p.1109.

⁵³Ross, op. cit., p.161.

Besides her contribution to Celie's awakening in sexuality, Shug also assists in deconstructing Celie's imaginary addressee—a silent God. In Letter 73, Celie informs Nettie: “I don't write to God no more. I write to you” (192). The shift of her addressee from God to Nettie suggests, on the one hand, her longing for a real connection with Nettie, but, on the other hand, her distrust of God. At Celie's delineation of God as an old white man, Shug explains that Celie's God is white men's construction—“that's the one that's in the white folk's white bible” (194). Refusing to take God as white, as a man, Shug refers to God as “it” and believes God is everywhere, even in “the color purple in a field” (196). In so doing, Shug deconstructs God's patriarchal image and teaches Celie to praise God by enjoying nature. In the novel's denouement, Celie claims her freedom from linguistic constraints by addressing her letter to “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear people. Dear Everything. Dear God” (285). Celie's God has been transformed from a father figure to Mother Earth.

Because *The Color Purple* deals with black men and women, dichotomy between males and females cannot be fully responsible for gender conflicts. As Connell rightly puts, gender is “a matter of the social relations within which individuals and groups act.”⁵⁴ One factor that essentially contributes to the social relations in the novel is race. Racial oppression, like the lynching of Celie's biological father, can make a psychological impact on black men and consequently bring about domestic violence. Miss Millie, the mayor's wife, is taking advantage of her higher position in social hierarchy when she asks Sofia to be her maid. In spite of Sofia's wristwatch and Prizefighter's car, which show the couple's financial status, Miss Millie can still justify her demands because she is white and because she represents male authority. While white/black dichotomy complicates gender conflicts, skin tone further causes intraracial prejudice. Shades of color place black people in different levels of hierarchal structures. Mr. _____'s father disapproves of Shug because, among other things, she is “black as tar” (54). Squeak, Harpo's mulatto girlfriend, stands on the other side of the spectrum. Squeak takes pride in her yellowish appearance, yet her lighter color incurs pain and humiliation on her. In her portrayal of Squeak's confrontation with Bubber Hodges, Sofia's warden and Squeak's white uncle, Walker parodies the mulatto character in American literature, who passes for white but generally ends in failure. Dressed like a white woman, Squeak attempts to ingratiate herself with Hodges so as to get Sofia out of the prison. Hodges, however, denies Squeak as his blood relation and rapes her. The warden's power derives from a combination of superiority in race, class, and gender, while Squeak's female gender

⁵⁴Connell, op. cit., p.9.

and assumed whiteness, symbolized by her patched clothes and borrowed accessories, can only leave her vulnerable and insecure.

In addition to the mulatto character, Walker challenges the representation of the mammy character, another stereotype of black women in American literature. Trudier Harris describes mammies as

older black women who have been shaped by a heritage of slavery; from working close to whites in their homes and taking care of their children, they believe that white people are intrinsically superior to black people and that blacks should therefore be subservient to whites. Their loyalties are to their white families, especially the children; many are guilty of neglecting their biological families.⁵⁵

Although, according to Harris, a mammy was “almost as natural a part of the landscape as baseball and apple pie,”⁵⁶ Walker felt uncomfortable when reading Faulkner’s Dilsey:

I studied Faulkner, as representative of the south and of the southern writer. Well, it’s very difficult for any bright black person to read Faulkner, and read his creation of Dilsey . . . and feel anything but embarrassed. She’s the maid in this white family. She doesn’t really have a context; you don’t know who she is when she is not with these white people.⁵⁷

The misconception about mammies is put right in *The Color Purple*, where Walker makes the mammy’s real voice heard through Sofia, who has worked as Miss Millie’s maid and has raised Miss Eleanor Jane, Miss Millie’s daughter. Separation has extremely negative influence on Sofia’s relationship with her children, while Miss Eleanor Jane’s increasing reliance becomes unbearable to Sofia at the same time. In response to Eleanor Jane’s complaint that Sofia does not care for her baby Reynolds, Sofia protests sarcastically:

⁵⁵Harris, Trudier. “Mammy,” *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, ed. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris (New York: Oxford UP, 1992. *NetLibrary* 21 July 2008 <<http://www.netlibrary.com/>>), p.474.

⁵⁶Harris, op. cit., p.474.

⁵⁷Goodman, op. cit., p.174.

I love children But all the colored women that say they love yours is lying. They don't love Reynolds Stanley any more than I do. But if you so badly raise as to ast 'em, what you expect them to say? Some colored people so scared of whitefolks they claim to love the cotton gin. (265)

The Color Purple does provide a context where Sofia can articulate her hidden emotions. Walker's writing threatens the power structures of gender and race from within, and turns the caricature-like mammy into flesh and blood.

Understanding Binary Oppositions. To analyze gender dynamics in the novel, students should first understand that binary oppositions are common in western culture as well as in theirs. They should realize that these oppositions are arbitrarily formed and that the formation involves power struggles. The following pre-reading activity can help students achieve these goals. Students are given a list of words and encouraged to form pairs using a slash.⁵⁸ After they have done the paring, students are asked to show and explain their pairs to the class. Most of the time, the pairs they make are not unexpected: father/mother, day/night, male/female, etc. Usually students will say they do it out of instinct, then a discussion as to what lies behind the instinct can be conducted. Some students might become so conscious of the teacher's intention that they deliberately reverse the commonly accepted mode: replacing presence/absence with absence/presence, for example. Not surprisingly, students are able to tell that the first item in the pair usually connotes positive values while the second, negative ones.

Doing a Gender Survey. Unlike English, some languages do not have words to distinguish what is biologically inherent (sex) and what is socially constructed (gender). While German has one word for both, Japanese has none.⁵⁹ In Chinese, there is just one word for both "sex" and "gender" since gender is a comparatively new concept for speakers of the Chinese language. Therefore, interpretation of the word "gender" is indispensable to the comprehension of gender dynamics. Based on that assumption, a gender survey is designed for students to do gender and to ponder what contributes to their responses. Respondents should examine twenty items to decide whether they have masculine or feminine attributes by marking M or F on the sheet.⁶⁰ The survey done in the year 2007 approximated a consensus on the polarity between masculinity and femininity. However, the instability in gender attributes of

⁵⁸See Appendix A.

⁵⁹Connell, op. cit., p.8.

⁶⁰See Appendix B.

these items was laid bare by further discussion. For example, though most female respondents in the classroom wore jeans, the item “pants” collected sixteen M’s versus five F’s. As one female respondent explained, she felt comfortable in jeans, but customs told her pants were not for females. Respondents such as the female student can gain more insights from reading Celie and Shug’s discussion on pants. In addition, items like “tears,” “long hair,” “alcohol” and “babysitter” got marks that showed a clear-cut dichotomy between masculinity and femininity, which can explain why Harpo feels it embarrassing to be a soft husband.

Cinematic Language and Gender. To better understand what motivated Walker to challenge the stereotypical image of mammies, reading Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* can be students’ high priority. Films like *Gone with the Wind* on the other hand can better reflect the cinematic representation of the mammy caricature. Loyal and doting, the obese black woman is what Sofia refuses to be. Steven Spielberg’s film adaptation also provides visual aid in the interpretation of *The Color Purple*. Spielberg’s version has caused controversy as to its crude image of black men, evasion of ideological issues, and accommodations to a mainstream audience, etc.⁶¹ However, Goodman observes that the film successfully “frames key ideas from the novel in visual images.”⁶² One horrifying scene takes place when Pa enters the dimly lit room where Celie gives birth to her baby. Pa’s dark shape is so huge that when he bends forward to take the baby away the viewers have no choice but to identify themselves with Celie. The visualization of Pa’s power absolutely intensifies the tension between the oppressor and the victim. The viewers can experience men’s positions of power and influence in another scene when Mr. _____ comes to inspect Celie in front of the house. Mr. _____ is riding on horseback, Pa, on the porch, and Celie, on the ground. Both men are strategically positioned high, while Celie, in a much lower physical position, looks nothing but helpless and vulnerable. After Celie establishes her self-identity and gains her voice, she has to stoop no more. In the scene when Celie is leaving for Memphis with Shug, Squeak and Grandy, Spielberg makes her stand in Grandy’s convertible, cursing Mr. _____ and defending her individuality. The power relation is reversed as Celie stands erectly in the speedy car and Mr. _____ chases them vainly. In view of the positions of the male and female characters in those scenes, the visual images have successfully impressed the viewers not only with the exploitation but also with the empowerment of women.

⁶¹Butler; Digby; Dole, Carol M. “The Return of the Father in Spielberg’s *The Color Purple*,” *Literature Film Quarterly*, Vol.24, No.1 (1996), pp.12-16.

⁶²Goodman, op. cit., p.172.

V. Conclusion

As *The Color Purple* unfolds, the reader sees the marvelous interplay of language, gender, and power. Walker's conscious use of language in *The Color Purple* provides a lot of opportunities for classroom discussion. Language is not only a means of communication; it also conveys political messages. Celie's Black English, though challenging at the first sight, proves to be a rule-governed language in that there is consistency in phonology, morphology, and syntax. Rich in characteristically black usages, Walker's conversational style enlivens the reading experience of the novel. Although for the general public's benefit Walker has made some modification to the dialect, her primary concern is to preserve the black cultural heritage and to challenge the superiority of Standard English.

Through her revolutionary employment of the epistolary novel, a genre traditionally used to discipline women, Walker makes the silenced women heard. Celie and Nettie are empowered by letter writing; in so doing, they acquire not only their voice but also their subjectivity. Walker also creates a double-voiced narrative by contrasting Nettie's formal English with Celie's vernacular. In addition to their languages, the two sisters' subject matters also differ. Celie's narrative deals with private affairs, whereas Nettie's primarily brings focus to African culture. Although Nettie's letters are of great significance to Celie, Celie's personal matters subversively overshadow Nettie's historical and geographical overview of Africa. As an illustration of the feminist slogan "personal is political," Celie's journey for autonomy and assertiveness constitutes the main plot of the novel. Nettie's African experience, on the other hand, is a perfect foil to the plight of Celie and her women comrades.

In *The Color Purple*, Walker also voices concern over gender dynamics. The polarity between masculinity and femininity causes the division of gender roles. Not being able to fit into role models is frustrating; men and women are supposed to show masculine attributes and feminine attributes respectively. The division of gender roles, however, is problematic, for it is an arbitrary division resulting from language construction. Since men are empowered and placed in a higher position of the hierarchal structure, they use language to manipulate and define women. Walker experiments with the reversal of gender, sexual pluralism, and lesbian sexuality in the novel, and eventually proposes a blend of masculinity and femininity for both men and women. Since for black people race is closely related to gender, Walker also attempts to deconstruct the white/black binary opposition, to subvert the hierarchal gender structure which is further complicated by skin color and tone.

In the classroom, students should not be daunted by Celie's vernacular. Instead, they should be led by the teacher to fundamental rules and patterns of Celie's language so as to explore her world which is excluded partly by a mainstream language. The epistolary form corresponds to the quilt imagery in creating a patchwork metaphor, and the metaphor initiates students into a postmodern text, a text abundant in disruptive elements that students may have never encountered in their reading experience. Since nowadays a literary text is no more regarded as "an object of worship,"⁶³ students should be encouraged to interact with the text in varieties of approaches. Mark Currie's remarks clearly indicate the reader's responsibility in creating the meaning of a literary text: "[T]he values of standardization have been replaced in literary studies by the values of pluralism and irreducible difference; not only difference between texts but difference between readers."⁶⁴ What Walker portrays in *The Color Purple* are not happenings exclusive to black men and women in twentieth-century American South. The instability of language, the fluidity of personal identity, and the combat for one's silenced voice: those are byproducts of globalization and, consequently, essential lessons for EFL learners to comprehend and analyze western literature and culture.

⁶³Mao, Sihui. "Interfacing' Language and Literature: With Special Reference to the Teaching of British Cultural Studies," Carter and McRae, p.181.

⁶⁴Currie, Mark. *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p.14.

Appendix A

Pick up any two from the following list (marked as A and B) and label them as a pair (A/B). A is higher than B in position. Make as many pairs as you can.⁶⁵

black	father	up	culture	silence
emotion	dark	white	day	male
presence	down	speech	reason	night
nature	mother	female	absence	light

A	B	A/B

⁶⁵The pair *white* and *black* deserves special consideration. In Chinese, *black* usually precedes *white* when the two words are paired off, as in the idiom “shi (right) fei (wrong) hei (black) bai (white),” yet it is recognizable that “hei” and “bai” are reversed, perhaps, to create linguistic effects. Students are likely to pair these two words as *black/white*, though clearly realizing what the words can connote. In addition, the Confucian tradition that values modesty may cause debate on whether *speech* is higher than *silence* or vice versa.

Appendix B

In your opinion, which of the following items have the masculine attribute? Which items have the feminine attribute? Mark an item with M if it has the masculine attribute; mark it with F if it has the feminine attribute.⁶⁶

M / F

19 / 3 ambitious*4 / 17 tender20 / 1 muscular3 / 18 nurturant5 / 16 sewing1 / 20 makeup19 / 1 mechanics0 / 21 long hair21 / 0 alcohol18 / 4 president*1 / 20 pink

M / F

18 / 4 aggressive*17 / 5 brave*7 / 13 passive9 / 11 dependent19 / 2 boxing0 / 21 tears14 / 8 fiction*17 / 6 pants*0 / 21 babysitter20 / 1 farmer5 / 18 earring*

⁶⁶This is the result of the gender survey done in spring 2007. Respondents were twenty-one sophomore and junior English majors. On the line preceding each item are numbers of respondents that marked M and F respectively. For example, 19 / 3 indicates nineteen students marked the masculine attribute and three marked the feminine one. An asterisk indicates at least one respondent marked both M and F for that specific item.

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《紫色姊妹花》中之語言、性別與權力： 理論與方法

蕭碧莉*

摘 要

愛麗絲·華克的《紫色姊妹花》展現出語言、性別、權力的精采交鋒，華克對語言的使用刻意著墨，創造嶄新的敘述策略，發掘前所未聞的女性故事，並轉變傳統的性別觀念。說話者藉由對語言的掌控獲取權力，反之則陷入沉默且失去支配能力。華克運用黑人英語表達對黑人文化遺產的關切，以及對白人語言優勢的質疑。此外，華克針對書信體小說做創新的實驗，使用雙聲敘述來彰顯女性的沉默聲音，她也關切性別議題，男女性別特質之兩極化來自武斷的角色分工，而此分工則由語言建構而成。就華克的黑人角色而言，深淺各異的膚色更加強了性別的階級結構。本文援用語言與性別理論來探討《紫色姊妹花》中的三項議題並提出相關的課室活動：(一) 西莉語言的特性與涵義、(二) 語言與發聲、(三) 語言與性別。

關鍵詞：愛麗絲·華克、《紫色姊妹花》、語言、性別、權力

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