

The Evolution of Steven Spielberg's Film Theme  
through Alice Walker's The Color Purple

A Senior Studies Report

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## I. Introduction

This thesis on the story The Color Purple involves an analytical approach to both film and text. The emphasis will be on the film in an attempt to look at the maturing of Steven Spielberg as a filmmaker. In relation to his film development, and the films that show his maturation, I will present Alice Walker's novel in light of the film. The film and text will be viewed as equals in order to focus more on the film's unique approach of bringing the text to life through Spielberg's use of symbolic images and events.

Through the discussion of other Spielberg films this thesis will show how the director has chosen a common theme throughout his many films; a theme revealing the psychological, emotional, and spiritual development of characters and plot structures. The common theme running through Spielberg's films is one which addresses the liberation and freedom of childhood in the constant struggle of adulthood. Celie's character from The Color Purple is the key example in this thesis, but other characters from other films will be used in order to present the foundation for the core argument of the thesis.

The purpose of this thesis is to present the evolution and development of Spielberg's films through the lens of the story characters' spiritual,

psychological, and emotional evolution. Celie's character in Purple will take on the main example of this evolution. The liberation of Celie's psychological, emotional, and spiritual awakening will be used in this thesis as the summary for Spielberg's film making symbolism in common issues of oppression and liberation.

## II. Spielberg's Purple

In 1985 Steven Spielberg released a film marking a turning point in his film making. Spielberg took Alice Walker's novel The Color Purple and turned the text into motion picture story telling in traditional "Spielbergian" tones. The movie is a turning point because Spielberg enters onto foreign ground. Purple as a text challenges Spielberg to work with a story which doesn't involve the usual items which he is familiar with. This is partly why the movie was highly criticized. The Hollywood brotherhood regarded the film as a mistake and a subject piece beyond Spielberg's scope. At this point in his career Spielberg was viewed by his peers as being a master at fantasy and magic. After the release of The Color Purple the message given to Spielberg was clear: stick to ET and Indiana Jones, Mr. Spielberg.

In an article in Christianity and Crisis Jean Carey Bond chastises Spielberg for his production of Purple.

Although the film received eleven Academy Award nominations, there was no real chance for Spielberg to actually capture the award. Over the years, his powerful influence in film, backed by his refusal to play by the rules of Hollywood, exiled him from any sincere recognition. Bond's article follows up on this lack of recognition by criticizing the film's attempt at filming Walker's text.

One criticism from Bond's article focuses on a scene in the film where Mister orders Celie to shave him. Bond writes:

An especially offensive touch is Spielberg's juxtaposition of two images that have no business anywhere near each other. Soon after learning, through Shug's intervention, that Mister has been withholding Nettie's letters, Celie is shown standing with a razor poised near the throat of her seated tormentor. He has ordered a shave, but she's thinking murder. Cut to a ceremonial gathering in Africa, where a girl and boy are about to have their faces ritually scarred by a tribal elder. A drawn-out counterpoint ensues between Celie's razor and the elder's scarification tools. Mister's foam-covered jaw and the African children's about-to-be decorated cheeks. Shug arrives just in time to abort the murder as the elder's knife draws blood on the face of one of the children (94).

Bond's criticism fails to recognize the symbolism Spielberg sketches into the film. The symbolism throughout the film is strong and creates a beautiful

window visually into the struggles of the characters.

Bond continues to criticize Spielberg for making this scene into a cheap emotional technique (Bond, 94). What Bond does not understand is that Spielberg, as a filmmaker, uses visual channels to grab the audience, to create tension, and to express to the audience the entire drama of a situation.

More important to the razor scene is the symbolism Spielberg creates to show the audience the relations between characters and their individual emotional, spiritual, and psychological developments. The scars being made on the children of Africa is a metaphorical representation of Celie's personal scars. As the scene builds to the African ceremony, Shug is shown running through the woods, desperately trying to get to Celie and Mister before Celie acts out her anger. Shug's intervention is symbolic of her role in Celie's life. She arrives just in time to stop Celie from killing Mister. She saves Celie from making a mistake, which is indicative of Shug's influence and friendship.

### III. Theme History in Spielberg's Films

To be able to understand the significance of Purple in the history of Spielberg's films, one must look at how his films have developed in theme and content. One of his earlier films is the classic, Close Encounters of the

Third Kind. For Spielberg scholars, Close Encounters is an important landmark. But there's something deeper here, and something more personal for the director, which becomes a continuing theme in his future movies.

The issue at hand in the developing themes of Spielberg's storytelling is one of spiritual, emotional, and psychological maturation. Spielberg chooses the adult male to exercise his unresolved childhood and adult crises.

In the first part of a two-part article on Spielberg's film maturation, Henry Sheehan writes about the director's theme and issue oriented development.

In Close Encounters of the Third Kind, Richard Dreyfuss' Roy Neary is a harassed husband and father who runs away from his family and ends up traveling off in a floating island of a spaceship populated by pint-sized, childlike aliens (55).

Sheehan is focusing on the essence of childhood and child-like innocence in Spielberg's films. Sheehan pans across Spielberg's catalog to show how the filmmaker has matured and how he has wrestled with the struggle between adult reality and child-like hope. In Encounters the character escapes back into childhood. As will be shown later in his films the characters start to face adulthood through childhood, but eventually embrace their place in life as adults who are liberated through child-like hope.

To exemplify Spielberg's developmental film making, Sheehan uses the movie Hook as a key and core film. According to Sheehan, Hook sums up the issues and themes of all previous films Spielberg has directed.

In Hook Peter Pan is played by Robin Williams. The audience is first introduced to William's character as Peter Banning, an overworked, over-stressed adult. Sheehan describes the plot:

Peter Banning (Robin Williams), successful head of a mergers-and-acquisitions firm, has been unable to take time from work to give to his children...

Together with his wife (Caroline Goodall), he takes them on a trip to London and the home of the woman who was his first foster mother, Granny Wendy (Maggie Smith). While Peter is giving the keynote speech at a dinner honoring Granny Wendy--who has spent her life helping orphans and who, as a child, was of the children for whom J.M. Barrie spun his tales--his kids are mysteriously kidnapped.

...Granny Wendy tells a disbelieving Peter that he is in fact Peter Pan, and that his children have been seized by his arch-nemesis Captain Hook (Sheehan, 69).

The difficult thing for Banning to believe is that he has lost his children to Captain Hook, not because he doesn't believe in Hook, but because Hook represents his own stolen childhood or loss of innocence. Sheehan adds that "the plot itself is enough to throw every previous Spielberg film into an overarching pattern." Sheehan



continues:

Here, in one form or another, is every characterization, every story structure, and every emotional development since Duel ('71) to Always (Sheehan, 69).

Sheehan has laid out in his article the evolution of Spielberg's sense of film theme. Sheehan suggests Hook as a hallmark for understanding the story and plot structure of Spielberg's films.

As Spielberg continued to portray the adult struggling with the inner child, he ran upon the road of paradox and mystery. Part of the paradox is one's doubting one's existence in relation to God. Spielberg addresses the characters and their relationships with God in The Color Purple and again in Empire of the Sun. Alice Walker deeply searches Celie and God in her text, revealing the evolution of her spiritual life. Spielberg explores this spiritual relationship also, using visual symbolism to express the events in Purple.

In The Color Purple, and again in Empire, Spielberg introduces and reveals the main character's struggle to resolve questions and doubts about God. The questions are directed towards the existence of God, but they return to enlighten the characters more about themselves. When this enlightenment occurs the characters are transformed, converted, and liberated.

In Empire the main character is a child. Jim Graham (Christian Bale) is a twelve year old English boy. He is "a member of the Western elite ruling the industrial-commercial precincts of prewar Shanghai from the comfort of their exclusive community. Jim's security is forever violated when the Japanese invade the city." After being separated from his parents he ends up in a prison camp (Sheehan, 66).

Jim is looking for freedom. Just as Celie in Purple is searching for freedom, Jim is also searching for answers to his own questions about God and himself. In the movie Empire Jim experiences his questioning through events all around him. After being forced to grow up faster than normal through the trials of a prison camp, he still does not have all his thoughts together about his relationship with God.

In the comfort of his parents' secure home and lifestyle Jim is free enough from facing the world and his fears about the existence of God. He asks his mother what she thinks of God. She has no answers to give him. Jim continues to question. Just before the invasion into Shanghai, Jim is riding with his parents to a costume party. Leaving their home, they pull out of the driveway and through the high brick wall surrounding their home. On the street, just outside the driveway entrance, is an elderly Chinese man begging for food or money.

This scene is rich in film symbolism, and yet strikingly forward in its meaning. The symbolism of the scene addresses two main issues: one is the question of how Jim sees himself in relation to others. Jim is forced to consider himself within the context of the larger community of the world around him. Second, Jim is forced to search for truer freedom after the illusion of security is taken from him during the invasion of Shanghai.

Through Jim's search for freedom from illusion and his apparent lack of identity, Spielberg once again addresses the childhood and adult paradox. But in this film Spielberg takes the path of entry into adulthood. Jim is forced to grow up and abandon his childhood.

The character of Jim in Empire finds metaphorical symbolism in the idea of flying. Jim dreams of flying in the military, and it does not matter to him whether it is for the English, Americans, or the Japanese. He wants to fly to find his own inner freedom.

Aside from once again repeating the broad, overarching Peter Pan structure, Empire of the Sun also contains Spielberg's heaviest use of flight since E.T. However, for a change, the protagonist himself doesn't fly, he watches others fly; and it isn't so much flying, as the idea of flying and its metaphorical possibilities, that dominates. What matters is the sense of freedom and escape that the aircraft

represent to Jim, who has decorated his room to ensure that as he drifts off to sleep, models of airplanes are the last thing he sees (Sheehan, 66).

Jim never gets to physically fly in the film, but he sees others flying and is consumed by the power flying presents to him. While the Americans are bombing the Japanese airstrip near the prison camp, Jim is elevated to a new spiritual awareness by witnessing the aircraft in flight. Shortly after this scene the prisoners are forced to leave the camp. A key event in the film where Jim becomes aware of his innocence lost is when the atom bomb explodes while he is traveling with other prisoners to a new camp. He believes the bright light is another dead prisoner's soul going back to God. Spielberg uses the symbolism of light to express the reality of Jim's lost innocence. Not realizing that the light was really the atom bomb, Jim is quick to believe the light is supernatural.

Jim's liberation is finally seen when he is reunited with his parents at the end of the film. This reunion is symbolic for Jim's ideas about God and safety. He is a different individual by the end of the story, but mercy and God's grace are given to him at the moment he embraces his mother.

Just as in Empire, Purple is replete with questions

and "notions: freedom from what? escape to what?" Spielberg is searching through Celie for liberation. Both films deal with a child questioning his/her inner dialogue with God.

The search for dialogue with God is more prominent in Purple than it is in Empire. This is due to the influence of the story itself: the constant dialogue with God found in the text of letters formate.

Just as Jim is searching for his own freedom through the metaphors of the airplanes in Empire, Celie searches for her own freedom through the anticipation of her sister Nettie's letters. Celie's liberation starts with the promise that her sister makes to her about writing letters.

#### IV. Spiritual Approach in Film and Text

Both in Walker's text and in Spielberg's film the letter/dialogue with God metaphor is present. The novel "and its film adaptation reveal that their approaches to the supernatural differ completely." (Christensen, 152) But the differences are not differences of symbolism or metaphor, they are differences in approach to the spiritual aspects of the story.

Inger Christensen, in a book titled Literary Women on the Screen, writes:

Walker embraces an animistic view of existence; Spielberg discloses in this film a loyalty to Christian world view (152).

The Christian world view can be seen clearly at the end of Purple. Spielberg ties Walker's ending together in a spiritual balance with his own cinematic vision. "In the end of the film, everybody is connected to everybody else through love, care, and nurture. It is no wonder Celie addresses her last letter to the universe," tying together Walker's animistic view and Spielberg's filming eye of the Christian Church or ideology of community (Christensen, 100).

Walker's animistic approach is evident in Shug's character. The clearest insight into Walker's spirituality is present in a section, which is revealed in the film and the text, when Shug and Celie are taking a walk. The two women are talking about God. In the film they walk through a field and Shug claims that she believes that God would be really "pissed off" if you walk by the color purple and do not notice it. She goes on to explain to Celie that God is everywhere and in everything, opening Celie's eyes and soul to the world around her.

#### V. Letters

In Spielberg's adaptation of The Color Purple Mister throws Nettie out of his house. Celie is trapped in her role as Mister's wife. Nettie was Celie's only hope and real friend. In Walker's text the scene follows with Celie narrating in a letter format style. She is telling how Mister decided Nettie must leave:

He say one night in bed, Well, us done help Nettie all we can. Now she got to go.

Where she gon go? I ast.

I don't care, he say.

I tell Nettie the next morning.

Stead of being mad, she glad to go.

Say she hate to leave me is all. Us fall on each other neck when she say that.

I sure hate to leave you here with these rotten children, she say. Not to mention with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. It's like seeing you buried, she say (Walker, 18).

Nettie's buried reference about Celie is very symbolic in metaphoric terms in regards to the continue struggle Celie has throughout Purple.

Celie is buried spiritually, emotionally, sexually, and psychologically at this early point in the story. Nettie is being educated by attending school on her own. She teaches Celie everything she learns before Mister kicks her out of the house. From the beginning of Purple Nettie is Celie's source of inner liberation. It is Nettie's teaching and letters that form the foundation for Celie's personal freedom from oppression. Much of

Celie's personal relationship with God is based on the fact that Nettie promises to write Celie. Consider this sequence from the text when Nettie is being thrown out of Mister's house:

I say, Write.  
She say, What?  
I say, Write.  
She say, Nothing but death can keep  
me from it.  
She never write (Walker, 19).

Spielberg uses the imagery of a beat-up mail box to emphasis Celie's tired longing for a word from Nettie. The imagery is simple yet strong. It is the conclusion that Nettie must be dead because she doesn't write that forms the metaphoric meaning in Celie's relationship with God. When Mister hides all of Nettie's letters to Celie, she believes that Nettie must be dead. In the film it is clear that Celie believes her sister to be dead. Spielberg explains this well when Celie voices her belief in narration form to the audience. In the text, the absence of Nettie's letters becomes much more centered on how Celie views God.

The letters from Nettie in Celie's life are symbolic in understanding the evolution of Celie's relationship with God. Williams writes:

...Celie openly expresses anger when she



discovers that her husband has for years hidden her letters from her sister, Nettie, and has allowed her to believe Nettie was dead (98).

When Celie comes to believe that Nettie is dead, she loses hope in any kind of creator God. She is cut off from dialogue with God since Nettie was Celie's truest hope for freedom. This remains a reality until Shug comes along as the moral agent, helping Celie to find God in her life by helping her find Nettie's letters. Celie "openly declares her independence from" Mister. "Confronting him for the first time, Celie calls him a 'low down dog' and says she is leaving him 'to enter into creation.'"

Celie is transformed into liberation and freedom in a new dialogue with God; not a dialogue in darkness, but in light and truth (Williams, 98-99).

Spielberg creates a visual drama for this scene, using the symbolism of the extended family around a dinner table for the metaphorical meaning of Celie's demons and her angels. In the movie, The Color Purple, Celie casts out demons when she leaves Mister by holding up her hand to him and saying, "Everything you done to me already been done to you."

Spielberg stays true to Walker's letters metaphor in the film. The letters reveal much about Celie's spiritual development. Christensen writes:

Celie's inner life is amply represented in her letters, and her personality is defined by and reflects her ideas of God. These are indirectly represented as not very positive (157).

The God who Celie first knows is silent and "to whom it is a waste of time to talk to (Christensen, 158)." This is echoed in the absence of Nettie's letters to her sister Celie. After Celie finds Nettie's letters she goes through a conversion, a change of liberation, through the help of Shug. Celie's "image of God has been replaced by his creation as expressed in the last letter heading, 'Dear God. Dear stars, etc.'" (Christensen, 159)

Celie's dialogue with God is changed with the finding of Nettie's letters. Celie's prayers are answered by God when she and Nettie are finally reunited in person at the end of Purple.

After Nettie is gone, Shug Avery is the woman who shows Celie that life is full of goodness and love, and Shug shows Celie that life and love exist in her. This takes on a process that leads to Celie being freed from the control and oppression of Mister. Shug helps Celie find all of Nettie's letters, putting Celie back in touch with her sister, and thus liberating Celie into an open dialogue with God. Spielberg calms the audience with a soft visual creation of this scene in Purple. Celie and Shug are shown sitting on a bed reading Nettie's letters.

Behind the two woman a bluish-white drape covers windows. The effect is calming and gives a sense of safety and security.

Shug is the moral agent. She helps Celie change, while she herself "does not change with the process; rather the other woman undergoes personal, social, and religious transformations that help her to become a whole, self-confident person (Williams, 96)." Through Shug's intervention, Celie changes inside herself. She is eventually liberated emotionally, psychologically, sexually, and spiritually through Shug's role as the moral agent. Shug is a strong and independent woman. Celie admires Shug and looks to her for guidance and strength.

Through this process Celie goes through a personal conversion in the way she thinks and sees the world, not to mention the way she sees and understands herself. Celie is transformed and liberated from her old "notions about morality, God, sexuality, and the meaning of human relationships (Williams, 96-97)."

## **VI. Kingdom of God Metaphor**

The community of the Christian Church and Walker's view of God's creation in a "Kingdom of Heaven" approach is fused together at the end of Purple. Spielberg reveals the full transformation of Celie by showing her

at home with her extended family, at peace with them, including Mister.

When the main characters turn out happily united in the end, with all their wounds healed despite polygamous and lesbian relationships, use of marihuana and years of wife battering, one will have to ask oneself if the author is truly honest. This has nothing to do with her portrayal being "realistic" or not, but it is a question of the truthfulness of the human feelings recorded in the novel (Christensen, 156-157).

The point here is that the Christian view of the "Kingdom of Heaven" is unrealistic in human terms, but real on a spiritual realm. The symbolism in the story is trying to convey that in the end all will be healed and be untied in God's love in creation and beyond creation. Spielberg represents this in the film by showing Nettie and Celie's children arriving in bright colored clothing with long flowing pieces of cloth flying in the wind. This scene is symbolic for the freedom and liberation found through the reunion of Celie and Nettie.

Celie's transformation takes on its full and realistic form when she discovers Nettie's letters and that Nettie is not dead. In this way, the metaphor works in opening her dialogue with God and presents a direction to lead her towards reunion with everyone in the Kingdom of Heaven. From Walker's text:

Dear God,

This letter I been holding in my hand.

Dear Celie,

I know you think I am dead. But I am not. I been writing to you too, over the years, but Albert said you'd never hear from me again and since I never heard from you all this time, I guess he was right.

...But if this do get through, one thing I want you to know, I love you, and I am not dead. And Olivia is fine and so is your son.

We are all coming home before the end of another year.

Your loving sister,  
Nettie

(122)

Celie's hope is restored; the hope found in the love between sisters. Through this sister-love God speaks to Celie.

## VII. Conclusion

Both Spielberg's film and Walker's text give light to a dark place. Celie's transformation through liberation shines off the pages of the novel, and shines just as bright off the silver screen.

Spielberg has taken a novel which fits to his evolving film theme of childhood and adult reality, and he has created a movie which remains true to the text yet stands strong in its own visual sensations. The film is a sign of Spielberg's maturation as a director.

Celie is Spielberg's vehicle for the child-adult struggle. He directs his filming centered on her, and

through her reveals the liberation of her character and of his own filming creativeness.

The letters metaphor in Walker's text is strongly present in Spielberg's film. The letters play a central role in directing the story. Spielberg uses this metaphor to strengthen the symbolism of the story on screen.

Symbolically Spielberg uses the characters to thread the story along. Shug plays a main part of Celie's liberation by being the moral agent of the story. Nettie is the metaphorical promise of God's love by her faithfulness to Celie through her letter writing. Celie is the main character for Spielberg to reveal liberation and freedom to the audience.

The oppressed child, seen so much in Spielberg's films, is given a chance to run free in the adults of his films. With The Color Purple Walker provides a text for Spielberg to show the strength of a child in the adult. Celie was never allowed to be a child when she was a minor. As an adult she reclaims her childhood by starting to live as free as a child should be allowed to be. Walker creates this freedom, and Spielberg adapts it to liberate his own film making.

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