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The Theological Experience of
The Color Purple

by Dave Cushing

At first glance, most readers would not recognize Alice Walker's novel The Color Purple as a typical example of theological writing. After all, theological truths are usually revealed in ancient, often puzzling manuscripts which are neatly packaged and interpreted for us by doctrinal experts. Even some Sunday sermons take on an impersonal and other-worldly irrelevance which is a long way removed from the everyday earthiness of Walker's novel. But whether they have been exposed to theology in its strictest, formal sense or not, many readers will finish The Color Purple with the suspicion that they have somehow been exposed to a deeply theological experience.

In fairness I ought to say here that it is a little dangerous—presumptuous, maybe—for a white male to try appropriating or explaining the theological significance of an experience which is specifically black and female. If it can be done (carefully, and with reservations, for sure), it is possible only because the experience embodies a kind of universal theological truth which is not entirely limited to the particular circumstances in which it first occurred.

Walker's book is a journal of sorts, which traces in first-person narrative the life experiences of a poor black woman in the rural American South. It is told in the form of letters written by this woman to God, but the book's format is its least significant theological detail.

What strikes me first about the theological significance of The Color Purple is its basic theme, which might be summarized this way: a central character, Celie, enslaved in a kind of physical, emotional and spiritual bondage, is led gradually to freedom (redemption, as the theologians would say) by her exposure to—and her response to—a kind of divine teacher (a redeemer), Shug Avery. The essential similarity to the Jewish experience in the Hebrew Scriptures or the Christian experience in the New Testament is not insignificant. The parallels are strong enough and real enough to qualify The Color Purple as a re-telling (a personal experience) of the basic Judeo-Christian understanding of redemption—in this case from the perspective of one particular black woman. Even more, in a broader and more prophetic way, it translates that traditional understanding into an experience of redemption for women in general.
The redeemer in this story is Shug Avery. The book’s paperback cover describes her as “a flamboyant blues singer.” She is an illegitimate child who is rejected by her family because she had three illegitimate children of her own. She smokes, drinks, and sings bawdy songs in jookjoints for a living. Modern sociology might describe her personal life as one of “serial monogamy” (one relationship after another). Casual talk would not be as subtle, but I am not sure it would be entirely accurate to describe Shug Avery as promiscuous.

This is a Christ-figure, you wonder? Not the Christ of piety, for sure, but maybe not too far removed from the Jesus of the Gospels. Consider, for example, the uncertainty about the biological origins of the Savior, the rejection by his own family and the people of his home town, the scandal of eating and drinking with outcasts, and his failure to marry (a deviation from Jewish social standards of the day).

Traditional Christian doctrine insists that the Redeemer must be both human and divine—both like us, but different—an incarnated divinity, a God-made-flesh. So it is with Shug, in a sense. Alongside her unusual ability to transform people’s lives, she is entirely, painfully human. She is exceptional, but real—both like us, but different, too.

Shug Avery has an impact on people—principally on Celie, but on others as well. This is what makes her redemptive, but there is more that is unique about her. For Celie’s husband (Shug’s lover), Albert, it’s her style: “He say to tell the truth, Shug act more manly than most men,” Celie explains. “I mean she upright, honest. Speak her mind and the devil take the hindmost, he say” (236). Celie discovers this “uprightness” the first time she and Shug meet: “She look me over from head to foot . . . You sure is ugly, she say, like she ain’t believed it” (50).

For Celie, it’s not just “manly” honesty which makes Shug unique. What makes Shug different, Celie says, is “what she been through.” “When you look in Shug’s eyes, you know she been where she been, seen what she seen, did what she did. And now she know” (236). Celie’s insight suggests the difference which some perceived in Jesus of Nazareth: “A completely new teaching in a spirit of authority!” the crowds exclaimed. The author of Mark’s gospel explains: “The people were spellbound by his teaching because he taught with authority, and not like the scribes” (Mark 1:27; 22).

It is this spirit of authenticity which makes Shug a powerful and redemptive person. Her authenticity attracts people to her and empowers them to transform their lives. It is an almost mystical power, something which Celie perceived early on in her relationship to Shug: “I wash her body, it feel like I’m praying. My hands tremble and my breath short” (53).
Shug’s redemption, however, is not magical. It is not instantaneous either. It demands a response, an effort to change, but it empowers the response, too. Celie changes; her stepson’s girlfriend, Mary Agnes, changes; even, in the end, Albert changes. They change because of Shug and in response to Shug. But everyone is not changed, as if Shug had the power to change whomever she wanted; there is no evidence, for instance, that Shug’s husband, Grady, is changed by his relationship to her.

The nature of the change, when it occurs, spells out the kind of redemption Shug makes possible. It is not pie-in-the-sky salvation. It does not assume suffering in this world in return for reward in the world to come. Although Christian spirituality has not always preserved the tradition well, there is a resemblance here between the kind of redemption Shug made possible and the redemption established by Jesus Christ. While Jesus taught frequently of new life, and a “world” to come, he did not seem to imply a world entirely distinct, somehow completely divorced from, the present one. When asked to locate the heavenly “kingdom;” Jesus said: It is among you; it has begun (Luke 17: 20-21). Celie was clearly raised to expect the other kind of salvation. She explains her expectation in a discussion with her stepson’s wife, Sophia: “Well, sometime Mr. ____ [Celia’s husband; she never refers to him directly by name] git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways.” Sophia, who plays a kind of prophet-martyr, anticipates the salvation which Celie will later discover: “You ought to bash Mr. ____ head open;” she tells Celie. “Think about heaven later” (47).

The redemption which Shug initiates requires a re-imaging of what people had been taught to believe or expect, both about themselves and about the divine. If the Christ challenged some common misperceptions about God, so Shug challenges Celie’s perception of God. In a crucial exchange, which is the theological core of the book, Shug explains to Celie that she must abandon her image of God—not God, but her image of God as big, old, tall, gray-bearded, white and male. “You have to git man off your eyeball before you can see anything a’tall,” Shug says (179).

The God Celie knows is trifling, forgetful, lowdown, and deaf to her suffering: “All my life I never care what people thought bout nothing I did, . . . But deep in my heart I care about God. What he going to think and come to find out, he don’t think. Just sit up there glorying in being deaf, I reckon” (175-76). That is not the God Shug knows. Shug’s God is not the God found in churches, but the God encountered in life: “. . . have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought
in with me,’ Shug tells Celie (176). She continues: ‘‘God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for [God] find [God]. And sometimes [God] just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don’t know what you looking for’’ (177).

Shug’s God cannot be contained in predictable images, or a particular gender. Shug refers to God as ‘‘It,’’ not ‘‘He’’ or ‘‘She,’’ although the impersonal pronoun fails the speaker’s real meaning. God ‘‘ain’t a picture show . . . something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself,’’ Shug tells Celie (178). The personal qualities which Shug attributes to her God rescues her divinity from simple pantheism. For Shug, God is some one, more than inanimate nature, or every thing. Shug’s God has feelings, including what she calls ‘‘them feelings,’’ a reference to erotic attraction and sexual longing (178). Shug’s God enjoys those feelings, so much so that her God seems to spend most of the time in an unending pursuit of human recognition and admiration—the pursuit of relationship. ‘‘You mean [God] want to be loved, just like the Bible say?’’ Celie wonders, incredulously, and Shug’s answer is certain: ‘‘Yes, Celie, she say’’ (178).

Shug’s redemption changes more than Celie’s image of God. As genuine redemption must, it changes people’s understanding of themselves as well. It does not deny reality—‘‘I is a sinner . . . cause I was born,’’ Shug tells Celie—but it has the power to transform that reality: ‘‘Us worry bout God a lot. But once us feel loved by God, us do the best us can to please him with what us like’’ is the way Shug explains it (176).

A person’s new understanding of God means a new understanding of self and one’s place in the world. Celie gets a taste of what it means to belong, to have a place, early in her relationship to Shug: ‘‘. . . I see myself sitting there quilting tween Shug Avery and Mr. . . . . . . For the first time in my life, I feel just right’’ (61). Celie’s experience strengthens her sense of belonging even more, so that near the end of the book, in a confrontation with her husband (who cannot recognize Celie’s personal meaning), she declares: ‘‘I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook . . . . But I’m here’’ (187 emphasis added). Shug’s redemption clarifies the black woman’s place in the world. More than that, it affirms that place: in song (75), in her personal sexuality (79), in the insistence that each woman be called by name (95).

It is significant, I think, that Shug’s salvation redeems both the image of God and the understanding of self by restoring feelings to both. This explains the theological significance of sexual images and experiences in The Color Purple. As a child, Celie was repeatedly raped; for her, sex is painful, brutal, impersonal and meaningless. ‘‘Mr. . . . can tell you,’’ she confides to Shug, ‘‘I don’t like it at all. What is it like? He git up on you,
heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend
I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing.
Just do his business, get off, go to sleep'' (79). Sophia speaks what is miss­
ing: "Heart feeling don't even seem to enter into it" (68 emphasis added).

For Shug, however, the experience of sex is as distinctive as her experience
of God. "You still love him?" Celie asks Shug about Albert, and Shug
answers in a way which shifts the meaning entirely: "I got what you call
a passion for him," Shug says (78 emphasis added). Passion is what
distinguishes sex for Shug, so much so that she considers Celie a virgin
because she has never experienced passion or pleasure in sex (79). It is pas­
sion, too, which characterizes God for Shug—a God of feeling: "I think
it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and
don't notice it," she tells Celie. This is a God who is "always trying to please
us back," a God who is "always making little surprises and springing them
on us when us least expect," a God who "want to be loved, just like the
bible say" (178).

It is not certain and not likely that Celie ever "gets the man off her
eyeball" enough to enjoy the kind of sexual passion Shug treasures, at least
not outside of her relationship to Shug. But we are led to conclude that
Cbelie does grow to appreciate the connection between passion and life,
between feelings and God. Toward the end there is even a birth of feelings
between Celie and Mr. _____ : "Then the old devil put his arms around
me and jus stood there on the porch with me real quiet. Way after while
I bent my stiff neck onto his shoulder. Here us is, I thought, two old fools
left over from love, keeping each other company under the stars" (238).
Shortly afterward, she observes: "It do begin to look like he got a lot of
feeling hind his face" (239); she concludes: "He ain't Shug, but he begin
to be somebody I can talk to" (241).

Cbelie's reconciliation with herself, with the world, with God, and even
with the source of her pain and suffering, Mr. _____, summarizes the depth
of the redemption she has experienced. Shug moves on, like Christ in the
Gospels. Her "last fling" with a teenage lover is a kind of final statement
which affirms and completes the redemption-by-feeling which she has
begun in others. Celie cannot fully understand this final, authenticating
encounter with passion. She has not appropriated redemption complete­
ly; she is not completely transformed. But the transformation has begun,
and life is different now, even when the redeemer is no longer apparently
present.

Life is different because there was a redeemer who empowered and
transformed: "... I know I can live content without Shug ... . If she
come, I be happy. If she don't I be content" (247).
Life is different because there is a God who loves: "Nobody ever love me, I say. She say, I love you, Miss Celie" (109).

Work Cited