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Race and Feminism: The Evolution of Black Feminist Resistance

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## **Abstract**

This article analyzes Ann Petry's *The Street* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *Everyday Use*, showing how each author successfully challenges the expectations placed on women of color in white society through their writings. Through the careful analysis of these authors we can see how black feminism has evolved through literature over time and how it critiques and rejects the censorship of black, middle-class respectability imposed on women of color.

## **Introduction**

“Behind every great man is a good woman.” Whether you agree or disagree, you are most likely familiar with the phrase. The patriarchal idea that women should step aside (and stay in the background) in order to uplift men, which stems from the expectation that men should be given opportunities while women should offer moral support as traditional housewives, is absurd. Black men, however, often romanticize the concept of the traditional housewife to emulate the white man’s middle-class lifestyle. These beliefs are then imposed on black women, who are told, “You are not white and will never be white, but you should act as a white woman does, or is believed to act.” Women of color must then strive for this goal, knowing they will never be seen as equals of white women. Ultimately, their aspirations become futile. This way of thinking damages not only women of color, but the community as a whole. It is this situation in which women of color are held to an unattainable “white” standard that raises the question, “How have these women of color rejected (or accepted) the patriarchal, societal expectations that are imposed on them?” I answer this question by exploring African American authors who challenge societal norms through the use of feminist characters in their literature. Additionally, I also critique the censorship of black, middle-class respectability and illustrate how feminism has evolved through literature.

## **Feminism**

Due to the efforts of those within the first wave of feminism—Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Coffin Mott—women were able to gain their “demands for higher education, entrance into trades and professions, married women’s rights to property, and the right to vote” (Sandbox Networks, 2015). At this time, by law, women could not possess land, hold offices of power, participate in business, exercise control over their children, or even their own persons (Sandbox Networks, 2015). Within the workplace, there were limits on how much a woman could work per week in comparison to men, and women were excluded from some places of work that were deemed a better fit for those of the male sex, as these jobs were labeled as “high-risk” (Sandbox Networks, 2015). These limitations served as the primary motivation for the second-wave of feminism. While the second-wave yielded positive results for women as a whole, the feminist movement of the 1970s was circumscribed so that women of color, specifically black women, would be more tractable.

## Second-Wave Feminism

After being able to participate in the workforce during World War II, women were used to working and earning a living for themselves and for their families. When the men returned, women were expected to return to the way their lives had been pre-WWII. However, the role that women held outside of the home had shifted. Women were no longer content with being docile homemakers, and wanted to make names for themselves, or simply just to be heard. Betty Freidman, a psychologist and author of *The Feminine Mystique*, suggested that women wanted to be allowed to celebrate themselves and what made them women whether they were homemakers or worked outside of the home (Friedan, 1963).

Women within the second-wave feminist movement were hard-pressed in getting their voices heard, or having their concerns addressed as their movement paralleled the Black Power Movement and the war in Vietnam. As a result, women turned to literature in order to achieve firmer footing amongst the other movements.

[With the use of pamphlets] like “The BITCH Manifesto” and “Sisterhood is Powerful,” feminists advocated for their place in the sun. The second wave was increasingly theoretical, based on a fusion of neo-Marxism and psycho-analytical theory, and began to associate the subjugation of women with broader critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and the woman’s role as wife and mother (Rampton, 2015: npg.).

In spite of the progress it brought, the feminist movement was not changing the lives of, nor helping to alleviate problems for, those within the black community. In her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks (2010) critiques second-wave feminism and explores the limitations set by the movement. Hooks felt that the agenda set out by second-wave feminists did not include the concerns of black women. According to Kimberly Springer, hooks felt that feminism was an “emotional appeal [meant only to mask] the opportunism of bourgeois white women” (Springer, 2005: 114). Hooks felt that the idea of all women being oppressed is in a sense partially false; rather, to be oppressed one had to be without choices or opportunities, as is the case with black women.

Furthermore, hooks explains that feminists slogans such as “organize around your own oppression” delivered the much-needed excuse white women required to further disregard the inconsistencies that existed between black women and white women in social status. Moreover, the

ideals addressed within *The Feminine Mystique* coincided with the official start of the second-wave of feminism, amidst the growing concerns surrounding the Civil Rights Movement and anti-war protests.

### **Black Feminism**

Another branch of feminism, black feminism, can trace its origins to that of the Black Power Movement. Black Power, when it began, was just a slogan (after the shooting of James Meredith during the March against Fear) that soon took on a life all its own. The focus of the Black Power Movement was to enable blacks to have autonomy, especially political independence from their “white oppressors” and others who were deemed incompatible with the beliefs of the movement (Black Nationalism and Black Separatism). Although the Black Power Movement and those within the Black Panther Party promoted the liberation of the black community, their motives and actions were primarily meant to uplift black men, not women. As Kimberlé Crenshaw notes, “Black women are frequently absent from analyses of either gender oppression or racism since the former focuses primarily on the experiences of white women and the latter on black men” (Crenshaw, 1989). Therefore, women of color could find hope neither within the feminist movement nor within the Black Power/Black Panther Movement. This posed a problem for black women as they had concerns that needed to be addressed as well.

Black women found themselves lost and without a place within either movement. The concerns of black women could not be taken seriously by white feminists due in part to the fact that many white women could not empathize with women of color. Preoccupied with their own agendas related mainly to reproductive rights and workplace equality, white women did not have the ability to analyze society through the political and racial lenses needed for women of color. In addition, many black men, including those active in the Civil Rights Movement, could not and did not want to see “implications of sexual politics in black women’s lives” (Hull, et al., 1982). The black man’s identity rested within his power, masculinity, virility, and self-worth, all of which were dependent on the black woman since he was not permitted to exude any of these characteristics anywhere in white society. Therefore, interactions with women and interactions at home were his main outlets for expressions of black masculinity, and oftentimes he had to overcompensate for not being allowed to be a man by exacting his will over his woman. It is thus not astonishing that

black women were unable to receive support from their male counterparts. An article published in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology school paper states that:

Freedom was equated with manhood and the freedom of blacks with the redemption of black masculinity. Take, for example, the assumption that racism is more harmful to black men than it is to black women because the real tragedy of racism is the loss of manhood; this assumption illustrates both an acceptance of masculinity defined within the context of patriarchy as well as a disregard for the human need for integrity and liberty felt by both men and women (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, npg.).

As mentioned earlier, the primary focus of the movement within the black community was on the betterment of men. But this way of thinking did not help in any way the women of the black community. Bell hooks (2000: 238-40) argues that black men have a fascination with masculinity and have a historical tendency to romanticize the role of man and how one can attain it; they have not evolved in regards to the social movements enacted to uplift the black community, specifically black women. For example, Lutie Johnson (the main protagonist of Ann Petry's *The Street*) is brought down and/or looked down upon by all of the male figures in her life. Her husband, feeling emasculated because he could not provide, turned to the comfort of another woman who would look to him for safety and shelter. Her father was a gambling man who resorted to drugs and sold hooch out of his apartment with his young girlfriend. Boots and Junto, only saw her as a sexual being to be used for pleasure and monetary gain. And the superintendent of her building only lusted after her and wanted to use her body for his pleasure despite her reluctance towards him as a person. As they are continually beaten down by white society and forced to repress and/or censor themselves, these women must find some way to lift themselves up in their minds and in their community.

### **Womanism**

Although black feminism offered more solutions than that of its white counterpart, there were still issues that the movement could not address. Carmen Mojica argues that a "womanist" is one who is devoted to the existence and completeness of all people, including men. Where feminism and even black feminism supports female independence, womanism promotes universalism (Mojica, 2011).

Although she has sometimes used the terms black feminist and

womanist interchangeably, Alice Walker defines the term womanist as:

A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally Universalist... Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless. (Walker, 1983a: 45).

Walker's definition of womanism allows for a deeper understanding of women's literature, especially as it relates to female roles and empowerment. This is particularly true in lesbian literature, which focuses on the relationships between women, both sexual and nonsexual. This can be seen in Walker's novel *The Color Purple* with Celie's romantic as well as platonic relationship with Shug Avery and in the platonic relationship between Sophia and Celie in Toni Morrison's *Sula*. According to Fraile-Marcos (2000), *Sula* is characterized by Barbara Smith (1977) as a lesbian novel, "not because [the] women are lovers, which they are not, but because in the novel Morrison is critical of the heterosexual institutions of marriage and the family, and because black women's autonomy and bonding [is portrayed]" (Fraile-Marcos, 2000: 71-92).

Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech "Ain't I a Woman" also gives rise to the ideals of womanism by criticizing the American public for failing to realize the difficulties faced by not only black men, but black women as well. As Mary Butler notes, the speech expressed concern about the black feminist movement's future, fearing that by its end the plights of women (both black and white) would not be considered in regards to the political rights of women (M. Butler, 2016). Sojourner Truth's entrance into the feminist argument is significant because of the dual roles in which black women exist within society: they are women, and yet they are hard workers (roles that are stereotypically associated with men). As stated in her speech, she was just as able to work like a man, and could work harder than any man if she put her mind to it. She was just as capable, if not more, at working and earning a way as any man and she had done, as expressed in her speech, when she was still a slave working in the fields (Truth, 1851).

Like her predecessor Truth, Frances Harper gave a rousing speech



to the members of the National Women's Rights Convention of 1866 in which she insisted on equal rights for women, specifically black women. Her speech for women's rights inspired the poems she published in a volume of collected poems entitled *Sketches of Southern Life* (Hine, et al., 2011). In a speech given after her husband's death, she says that being at the mercy of men and having nothing left to her was the catalyst she needed in order to see that she too had been wronged and could identify with the women of the feminist movement. At the Eleventh Annual Woman's Rights Convention in New York of 1866, Harper (as quoted in M. Bacon, 1989) said,

I did not feel as keenly as others that I had these rights in common with other women... Had I died instead of my husband, how different might have been the result? By this time he would have another wife, it is likely; and no administrator would have gone into his house, broken up his home. (as quoted in M. Bacon, 1989: 21-43)

Like many other women, Harper felt that she was treated unjustly for simply being born a woman. Just as Sojourner Truth had stated in her speech "Ain't I a Woman", Harper felt that she too was entitled to the same rights as men if she was able and willing to work just as a man would.

This sentiment echoes through the waves of black feminism and serves as the basis for activist and author Anna Julia Cooper. Cooper was an educator, an intellectual, and an activist. Her academic success and work ethic only further affirmed her belief that with the proper tools anyone could achieve the same accomplishment. Although more commonly known as a term coined by author Alice Walker, Cooper is credited with the early origins of womanist theory in regards to the fundamental concepts of the theory and its relation to feminist philosophy. In LaRese Hubbard's (2010) essay "Anna Julia Cooper and Africana Womanism: Some Early Conceptual Contributions" Hubbard states that Cooper did not make a formal announcement to her feminist approach (womanist theory), but that she is responsible for the key concepts instrumental to its theoretical being (2010: 31-53).

## **The Street**

### **Feminist Roots**

In a review of *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* by Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway, writer Jacqueline Ba-

con explains that when most encounter black feminist literature they are unaware of the historical context of the argument(s) being made. She notes that, for some, these pieces of literature are unique and looked at as a singular or isolated event, but this is not so. Black feminist literature has “a long history of black women’s ideas that move alongside, or in opposition to, the white discourses of feminism, liberalism, socialism, [and] conservatism” (J. Bacon, 2008: 584-88).

### **The Street**

This way of thinking, that anyone can accomplish anything with the right tools, mirrors that of Benjamin Franklin, an intellectual and inventor who is credited with the concept of the self-made man. This concept is the very basis of the American Dream in which anyone who works hard enough can achieve status and success. Because of their double identities, as women and women of color, black women must strive harder in order to achieve status, or at least comfortable stability, in a society that condemns them for their race and sex. However, it is the belief in the self-made woman which motivates protagonist Lutie Johnson, a recently separated, single mother who struggles to survive in New York while raising her young son in Ann Petry’s novel *The Street*. Historically, women have always been marginalized as the lesser sex in politics, education, and in the workforce. This is especially hard for women of color as they are treated as inferiors in comparison to their white counterparts.

This is the dilemma for protagonist Lutie Johnson, who embodies the epitome of the American Dream disciple. “Lutie’s hard work is driven by her belief that it will bring her out of poverty and into better situations in life”(Petry, 2014). Lutie believes in this wholeheartedly after overhearing Mr. Chandler, her former employer, state, “Richest damn country in the world...Hell! Make it while you’re young... Anyone can do it” (Petry, 2014: 42). His comment was in reference to Benjamin Franklin, who believed that if people would simply lift themselves up by their bootstraps they could successfully make it in America.

Lutie’s faith in this white-society-imposed dream is so unflinching that she does not consider whether or not the American Dream is possible for a black woman. *The Street*’s status as a feminist novel emerges from Lutie’s fight to rebel against the society that has failed her and her son.

Her journey begins with her realizing that the first part of her

American Dream, the American nuclear family, is not achievable. Her out-of-work husband cannot find work anywhere, cannot keep money, and cannot remain faithful to his wife. The latter occurs because of his inability to provide as a man should; it is the traditional belief that it is to be the man who provides for his family. Additionally, it was considered to be the obligation of the male figurehead to work, earn a living, and provide food, shelter, and protection to his family, and servants should he own such persons. This paradigm, already in practice throughout white society amongst white males, has propelled fascination and resentment of white manhood within the black male community. This traditional white model of men's and women's roles, however, is not practiced in the Johnson home, as times and expectations have changed. During the time period of *The Street*, black men were struggling to find employment and/or earn enough money to support their families. If a black man found work, the expectation was that he would make less than a white man." Additionally, it was foolhardy for black men to hope for advancement in jobs as they would be seen as lofty, presumptuous, and covetous, which was deemed inappropriate for men of their status and color. One might dare to say that for a black man to even expect to have the equalities of his white counterpart during this time period was a form of lurid recalcitrance.

Furthermore, it was difficult for black men to find work. Black women were becoming more and more qualified and taking over many jobs. Rather than hire a butler, nanny, and maid, white families could instead hire one black woman to do the work of three people for the salary of one. With his inability to provide, the black man's reliance on his wife's income created questions of his masculinity. This would lead him to believe that he could only salvage his lost manhood through extramarital affairs.

Disappointed in the breakdown of her marriage, Lutie takes her son, Bub, to Harlem in the hope of raising him away from the negative influences of her a philandering husband and a grandfather who sells hooch with his girlfriend. Rejecting her family, she retreats, leaving behind any and all things that would prove to be a bad example (her father, his girlfriend, and her cheating husband) on her young son. Lutie is well aware of how an environment can hold sway on a person's choices, opportunities, and quality of life. She hopes that by removing her son from a lifestyle wrought with deprecation, she will strengthen their chances at making a

better life.

Despite the negative aspects of her life that compelled her to leave, upon arriving in Harlem, Lutie struggles to feel positive about the apartment building as well as the street that they live on. Lutie continues to try and reach for her fair share as she works while also studying for an exam that she believes will help her acquire a decent, well-paying job as a secretary. Despite her best efforts, the environment, as well as white society, plays a major role, as do her own choices, in why she is not able to get ahead in life. Her environment, the street, is depicted as a bleak place; it is devoid of all light and has the atmosphere of being perpetually dirty despite all efforts to clean it. Furthermore, the very atmosphere of the street and the buildings that reside there give off the feeling of impending doom. Lutie can feel the walls closing in, and can feel herself struggling to make room for herself and her son whilst waiting for the proverbial other shoe to drop. “And Lutie thought no one could live on a street like this and stay decent. It would get them sooner or later, for it sucked the humanity out of the people – slowly, surely, inevitably” (Petry, 2014: 229).

In addition to the physical environment, one must also look at how the social and societal environment shaped Lutie’s choices and influenced the outcomes of struggles she and Bub have endured. She chose to leave home and live with her father and his girlfriend rather than staying with her husband or demanding that he leave. This is a prime example of how the social environment influenced her choice. Even though Lutie was the sole provider for the house, and she paid for the mortgage, food, and other necessities on her own with no help from her husband, she could not demand that her husband leave her house. *The Street* is set during the era of World War II, and during this time, whether employed or unemployed, men still ran the household. Asking her husband to leave was not an option that Lutie could be realistically consider or carry out to fruition.

Another of Lutie’s choices was her desire to leave her father’s home where he sold hooch to vagrants, criminals, and his young girlfriend. Lutie knows what her father is doing is wrong -- he does not have a steady, respectable income, and is complacent with getting by through illegal means. This is not the life she wants to live and this is not the example that she wants to be set for her son. She therefore chooses to go to a place where she has no connections, no friends or family, in the hopes that this new place “devoid” of evil influences will provide a better envi-

ronment for Bub. Although the choices made by Lutie were done in good conscience, the society where Lutie and her son reside will conflict with Lutie's plans for their futures. No matter what Lutie decides to do, she is propelled into the path of destruction. One example can be seen when Lutie is asked to become a paramour of sorts to Junto, the older white man who owns most of the buildings frequented by the black community (including a bar and most of the apartment buildings on the street where Lutie lives). Lutie refuses his offer as she feels it to be beneath her to be a sex worker to any man, especially a white man. Lutie is a woman of morals and, naively, feels that she can get by with her acquired skills and education.

The biggest choice that she makes in the novel will thrust Lutie over the dangerous edge she has been heading toward throughout the entirety of the novel. Bub is caught up in some trouble, a matter of trifling with the mail of the building's residents. This could have been cleared up entirely if Lutie Johnson had opened a letter she received that same day, presumably from the Children's Court. If Lutie had read the letter herself, she would have seen that the letter was meant to inform her that, although Bub's tampering with the mail was a federal offense, Bub would have been let off with a warning as he is a minor. But Lutie fears that Bub will end up like all the other black boys, in jail with no hope for a future and lost to the system created to trap them, and this fear is only heightened by this unopened letter. "She held the crisp, crackling white paper in her hand. And they recognized it for what it was—a symbol of doom—for the law and bad trouble were in the long white paper. They knew, for they had seen such papers before" (Petry, 2014: 367). Because of this crippling fear she refuses to open the letter, allowing her fear-induced imagination to push her into thinking the worst. Unaware that upon appearing in court the charges will be dropped because Bub is a minor, she believes that her son will be lost to her forever, and so she goes to find a lawyer. Because Lutie did not read the letter and is naïve to legal matters, she is tricked by the lawyer into believing that she needs a large amount of money to pay his fees in order for her son to be freed. "And then, as the case unfolded, he began to wonder why she didn't know that she didn't need a lawyer for a case like this one. He went on scribbling notes on a pad" (Petry, 2014: 368). Desperate for money she goes to Boots in the hopes that, as a friend, he will loan her the money and let her pay him back.

"Lutie, being low-income, goes to Boots Smith to borrow money, but

instead of getting help, she murders him out of fear. While this act could be seen as one where she asserts herself and is empowered, it is an act motivated by distress rather than strength.” (Deshmukh, 2015: 4).”

As Deshmukh argues, she has chosen to let fear lead her through life’s decisions. Throughout the novel, Lutie Johnson makes a series of choices in response to the environments and situations that she and her son are in (within the frame of traditional masculinity and disempowered femininity). Her feminist intent is evident in her reaction to her husband’s infidelity and her decision to leave her father’s house because of the negative influences he and his girlfriend imposed on Bub. Although a pragmatic decision, there is still feminist intent in her choice to be independent instead of returning to her husband’s home. Despite the outcomes being the opposite of what she had intended or expected, Lutie’s choices still matter in that she chose not to give up and be beaten down by the environment around her. In other words, the environment acts a catalyst to induce an independent decision. Lutie chose to fight for something better because she knew she deserved it, thereby modeling the ideas of black feminism.

The other female characters also embody some elements of black feminism, although in different ways. Min’s character is a traditional depiction of the quiet and meek woman who is eager to please. Like a lot of women of this time, Min has a complacent countenance. She has been taken advantage of by men throughout her life, but for the first time, she is content with her life. She works, is able to put money away for future use, and is able to do things for pleasure such as shopping. But unlike Mrs. Hedges and Lutie Johnson, Min has a deep fear of what life will be like without a man by her side. Although she has no true love for William Jones, and he too has none for her, she clings to him still as she realizes she could lose him to his obsession with Lutie Johnson. Rather than face a life where she will have to work twice as hard in order to survive, she conceives a plan to ensure her place in William Jones’ life.

Min is not entirely anti-feminist though. She is opposite to that of Mrs. Hedges, yet she still struggles to survive just as Mrs. Hedges does. Min accomplishes this through her symbiotic relationship with William Jones. As stated before, Min is able to enjoy a comfortable life while still maintaining her independence due to the fact that she shares a home with William Jones. Jones receives food and, later in the novel, a clean home. Furthermore, during the final moments of the novel, Min finds strength



and is able to come into her own. This is essential for her as a black feminist character in that she has decided to take back control of her life in order to not fall victim to the wills of men. This is evident in her scheme to stay in the William Jones' home through the use of voodoo spells.

While the females struggle to achieve the rights contained in black feminism, the male characters take on traditional patriarchal models to challenge them. Boots Smith is Junto's henchman as well as one of the many men who admire Lutie sexually. Although Junto has plans to make Lutie his sexual companion, Boots feels that he can have Lutie anyway. He does not see Lutie as a woman, or even a person due to his belief that women are inferior to men. To Boots, the matter of who she will and will not sleep with is not a subject that is up for questioning; she is a black woman admired for her body, by both black and white men, and there is no other reason for her existence than to supply pleasure to those above her.

The building's superintendent, William Jones, is one of the darker men in the story, both in appearance and in spirit. William Jones has grown tired of his pseudo-wife, Min, and wants someone who is more appealing. Lutie is young, well-groomed, and has a spirit within her that appears brighter than that of the quiet woman Min. Jones lusts after Lutie and imagines himself having her, owning her in every way possible. He also thinks that Lutie lusts after him and is simply playing hard to get. It is this patriarchal mentality, as well as an element of insanity, that make him a negative, if not dangerous, influence in Lutie's life.

Having explored the ways that environment, society, and one's own choices can influence one's life, another salient subject to explore is where this novel falls in terms of feminist literature. In the previous section, I discussed the differences and similarities in second-wave feminism, black feminism, and womanism. Based on the terms given, Petry's novel cannot be considered a womanist novel, but instead a feminist novel that crosses over to that of a black feminist novel. In order for *The Street* to be considered a womanist novel, it would need a positive, male figure within the story. The primary focus of womanism is to commit oneself to the community as a whole in regards to its well-being. In this instance, the community as whole includes both men and women. There has to be positive male and female figures striving for the same cause, the betterment of all and not just one particular sex. This is simply not the case in *The Street*.

Excluding Bub, a mere child, there are no male characters in the novel that can be depicted in a positive light. Lutie's husband, her father, Boots Smith, William Jones, and Junto are all seen as either evil, or as men who offer no positive future for her and her son.

Petry's *The Street* can best be described as a feminist novel and serves as a prominent milestone for the black feminist movement. It was the first successful novel authored by a black woman that focuses on a black, female protagonist. Additionally, *The Street* sold over one million copies, a feat unheard of for a black, female author in 1946 (Jimoh, 2002). Traditionally, female protagonists in black literature were not seen as self-sufficient. Although they could certainly work and take care of the home and children, it was inconceivable to depict a positive, black woman living on her own and surviving. Lutie Johnson represents a new type of female protagonist for black literature (Jimoh, 2002).

Black women are often stereotyped as women of loose morals, or as the archetypal, angry black woman. Another depiction of black women to be considered is that of the masculine female character: a woman unable to hold any real power in society due to her sex, who then must behave in masculine ways to compensate for what she is lacking. We see this in the character of Mrs. Hedges, Junto's right-hand man, a black woman scarred from a horrible fire, but useful in her strength and resilience. These particular qualities are what makes her valuable to Junto. Mrs. Hedges is described as rather large and crafty. Even while living off of what she could collect from the streets to sell she was thinking of ways to maximize profit and get ahead in life. She was proud and able to live on her own without the help of a man, and she did not want for one either. Despite this, Mrs. Hedges is not seen as a positive character. She is portrayed as a madam who runs a whorehouse, although it is a very tasteful one, from the confines of her apartment.

## **The Color Purple and "Everyday Use"**

### **Historical Feminism**

In an article entitled "The Second Wave: Trouble with White Feminism," Jessie Daniels states that "any discussion of second wave feminism must start with *The Feminine Mystique*." (npg.; 2014). Betty Friedman's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique* has been attributed to the birth of the second wave feminist movement. At that time, women were tired of their roles being



regarded as strictly within the home. They wanted a new form of independence that was, until Friedan's work, an unrealistic idea that could not be seriously entertained. Women wanted more than the dream house with the kitchen of tomorrow. They wanted more than the average 2.5 children and wanted to be seen as more than helpmates to their husbands. In his discussion of Friedman's work, Daniels notes:

Friedan's argument in the book is often boiled down to her famously coined phrase, the problem that has no name, which she used to articulate the malaise felt by college-educated, middle- and upper-class, (heterosexually) married white women who were bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life (Daniels, npg.; 2014).

There had to be life outside rearing children, keeping home, and giving moral and sexual support to their husbands. In 1963, the year Friedan published her landmark novel, the idea that a woman could have something more than home and family was radical by many traditional definitions. According to Friedan, the more that women sought after were careers. Friedan's forward way of thinking shaped the lives of many white women and offered them the chance to be able to do more in the world.

But Friedan's ideal was not perfect and had its faults. *The Feminine Mystique* failed to address the problem of who would have to step in and care for the children, as well as the household chores, that were being left behind while women joined the workforce. And as Daniels observes, *The Feminine Mystique* failed to account for women "[whose] highest aspirations included neither men nor children," (Daniels, npg.; 2014). Bell hooks also attended to the failures of Friedan in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2010), and stated that:

She did not discuss who would be called in to take care of the children and maintain the home if more women like herself were freed from their house labor and given equal access with white men to the professions. She did not speak of the needs of women without men, without children, without homes. She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women. She did not tell readers whether it was more fulfilling to be a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute than to be a leisure-class housewife. ... When Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, more than one-third of all women were in the work force. Although many women longed to be housewives, only women with leisure time and money could actually shape their identities on the model of the feminine mystique (hooks, as quoted in Fetters, npg.; 2013).

Any woman who has used her free time on the weekends and even during the work week can attest to the fact that keeping up with household chores and maintenance is hard work that should not be taken lightly. In addition, raising children is hard, back-breaking work at times, and it takes the most dedicated of souls to make it a career. With that being said, if white women abandoned their posts at home and entered the workforce in order to be equal to their male peers, who would care for the home?

In 1963, the answer would have been “mostly poor, working-class, women of color” (Daniels, npg.; 2014). Daniels goes on to further explain this reasoning by using her own mother as an example. She states that before her second marriage to her father, her mother was unable to live out her dream as a housewife.

She imagined something different for me. When I would ask her to teach me something having to do with housework – how to do laundry, for example – she’d shoo me away, with a dismissive “you don’t need to know how to do that” (Daniels, npg.; 2014).

Her mother, like many women of the time, assumed that if she allowed her daughter to work outside of the home, then she would obviously seek assistance from the colored help.

Friedan thought of “the problem with no name” as a universal plight, but in actuality, it was really only the plight of “an elite segment of women” (Daniels, npg.; 2014). The issue is that Friedan positions the lives and issues of white women at the center of every woman’s experience when in fact it is only the aspect of a certain few. It is because of this issue that black feminism was born, in addition to the issues that black women endured with their male counterparts within the Black Arts Movement and the Black Panther Movement.

## **The Color Purple**

In his 1962 speech, Malcolm X states that: “The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman.” These lines could not be truer than in the case of the female characters in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. Published in 1982 Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel that focuses on the life of Celie, the protagonist, as well as two other women, Sophia and Shug Avery. Like Ann Petry’s *The Street*, *The Color Purple* explores the themes

of racism, sexism, and the disruption of gender roles. It is in this regard that Walker's novel is a feminist protest novel. The women within the novel seek to liberate themselves through the rejection of societal norms (subservient housewives who are pliant to the wills and desires of men). This rejection of patriarchal expectations is evident in the portrayal of Celie's liberation from her abusive home life, Sophia's aggressive nature and her determination to not bend to any one person's will, and Shug Avery's lesbian lifestyle as well as her initial unwillingness to marry in order to pursue a career.

Having been born in an abusive home combines with her timid and insecure nature to propel Celie in the cycle of abuse that she endures when she is sent to live with Albert, or Mister. She is raped by her father, who we later find out is only her stepfather, and bears two children under him who are taken away to prevent emotional harm to Celie's mother. Celie is then "sold" into a loveless marriage to a begrudging Mister, who in actuality had wanted to marry her sister Nettie, but in the end got stuck with the other one. Mister has a farm, a young brood of children of his own, and a big house in need of tending. This is reason Mister took Celie on, echoing her father who says: "She ugly...But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it" (Walker, 1982: 14).

It is here that we as readers should take note that the men speak of Celie as if she is not even a human. Women were considered 'others' during this time period (1910-1940, rural Georgia), and were treated as property much like slaves on the auction block. In this instance, we can see that although this lifestyle was forced upon her, Celie does not see herself as having certain expectations imposed on her; this life is all she has ever known, and therefore, she does not see the need to liberate herself from her self-imposed silence. Until she meets Shug, she is mentally and physically cut off from anyone would want to help her or has tried to help her (her sister Nettie). The only person she can actually rely on and call upon to speak her mind and heart is God.

In a sense, her letters to God are a form of resistance, although subtle and unknown to anyone at the time, Celie's being able to read and write is an act of resistance. Although it was not uncommon for young girls to be educated, as is the case with Celie's sister Nettie, Celie was not

supposed to be educated in the ways of reading and writing. As the oldest girl in her family household, and a girl who had been “ruined” by pregnancy, Celie’s education had not been a concern. No one expected her to be able to read and write; her only concerns, in the eyes of her male superiors, were to cook, clean, and raise children. Her learning how to read and write is in itself an act of defiance because she is taking some part of her life into control. She is also using this form of control as an escape outlet for her abusive surroundings. Despite the fact that Mister tried to exercise every ounce of control he had over Celie by sending her sister away and keeping Nettie’s letters hidden from her, Celie’s secret letter-writing gave her the chance to have some autonomy in her life.

Violence is a reoccurring theme throughout the novel within loveless relationships like that of Mister and Celie, and even within relationships full of love like Harpo and Sophia. Although he truly does care for her, Harpo beats Sophia because that is what is expected of a man. A woman is supposed to mind her husband, and the only way to make a woman mind is to beat her. Sophia, however, is not the average woman. She is a prime example of a feminist character who takes it upon herself to defend herself. Unlike the other women in the novel, she is not afraid to physically fight back and does not care if her attacker is a woman or a man, black or white. Although commendable in that Sophia will not allow herself to be the doormat of society, her aggressive nature gets her in trouble with the law when she speaks up in defense of her children and herself toward Miss Mille, a prominent white woman who is also the wife of the mayor. Nevertheless, Sophia fought the system and pledged that she would not be beaten down again by man or any person within the patriarchal system.

Just like in Petry’s *The Street*, the environment plays a role in *The Color Purple*. Although free, blacks are still slaves to white society in the novel and are made to realize their place – which at that time was to be subservient to white people as maids and servants. White people did not want an uppity black woman who thought that she was beyond her place in society talking back to them. When asked, “Would you like to work for me,” instead of feeling grateful for the offer to work in Miss Millie’s home, Sophia was insulted and had the audacity to say so. This put her in a defensive state when onlookers felt insulted by her disrespectful manner. In this case, the environment seeks to keep control over Sophia and does so by punishing her for her brazenness. Sophia is imprisoned and kept

from her children. Upon her release she is expected to work for the same woman who she insulted and was consequently sent to jail for defying.

In the article “Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker’s ‘The Color Purple’”, author Christopher S. Lewis states that “Black lesbian and lesbian-allied writers brought attention to the fact that sexualized shame often dictates what is representable in African American literature” (Lewis, 2012: 158-75). This idea is referencing the opinion expressed by E. Patrick Johnson in which he argues that the “representation of effeminate homosexuality [within black writing is] disempowering,” (as quoted in Lewis, 2012: 158-75). Alice Walker proves that this is not so in her character Shug Avery. Shug is a singer and a former love interest of Mister’s who’s life openly rejects the expectations imposed on women.

Although a natural thing, as well as an act that is heavily portrayed throughout the novel, the act of sex itself is discouraged with regard to women. For men, sexual desires are seen as normal and they are encouraged to partake in such acts that are pleasing to them. This is not so for women. As I mentioned before, women are not truly seen as equals to men, let alone human beings, and their sexual appetites are regarded with shame. Additionally, for women to step out of their imposed, societal norms and to embrace their sexual natures and/or desires is regarded as unnatural. Having said that, one must consider why Alice Walker would choose to portray a lesbian relationship in her novel. As stated earlier, Walker’s definition of womanism created room for discussion in understanding women’s literature, especially as to how it relates to female roles of empowerment. This is evident in lesbian literature that focuses on the relationships between women, both sexual and nonsexual. This can be observed in Celie’s romantic as well as platonic relationship with Shug Avery. Shug’s character, I would argue, is meant to represent the sexual liberation of women within the feminist movement. In a sense, Walker is trying to remove the shame imposed on sex and the exploration of one’s sexual conscience.

This is extraordinary in that not only is Shug rejecting societal norms of heterosexual relationships, but she is also embracing the myth that black people, especially women, are highly sexual creatures. Historically, blacks were portrayed as creatures who could not contain their sexual desires (which made them dangerous). Black men wanted to rape white women, and black women wanted to seduce white men. To combat

this popular opinion, blacks took to adopting an air of respectability in that they censored themselves. Blacks behaved and spoke so as to not draw unwanted sexual attention to themselves. Women especially were under high scrutiny as they were regarded as temptresses. Instead of continuing this tradition or trying to shy away from such attention, Shug embraces it. She is best described as a lover: she loves to love and loves to be loved. Instead of finding shame in her sexuality, she finds power from it and is able to liberate herself from the stifling confinements that most black women find themselves in.

Although Walker's and Petry's novels share some attributes such as gender roles, racism, and feminism, there is a distinct difference between the two protest novels. Walker's novel is a protest novel because it rejects the patriarchal expectations that are imposed on black women and their bodies. Unlike Petry's *The Street*, Walker's novel focuses on the relationships between women within the novel and how these relationships help to heal and enlighten each character.

Shug and Celie's relationship, though strange, is one of healing, love, and friendship. Walker's purpose for portraying such a strong bond between the two is essentially for the uplifting of women in general, but specifically Celie. Strong bonds among women, black women especially, have the power to heal the emotionally and physically wounded, as well as the power to give courage and strength to those that society would perceive as weak. Shug teaches Celie to see herself as beautiful and to see her own worth, something that she is sorely lacking due to the emotional and physical abuse she has endured. When Shug leaves to be with a younger man, Celie must learn that in order to survive in a cruel world she must rely on herself, and to do that she must find strength and love within herself. In this regard, Shug acts as a catalyst that allows for Celie to harness her own potential and her own strength and leave Mister.

"And then, just when I know I can live content without Shug, just when Mr. \_\_\_\_ done ast me to marry him again, this time in the spirit as well as in the flesh, and just after I say, Naw, I still don't like frogs, but let's us be friends, Shug write me she's coming home. Now. Is this life or not? \*I be so calm.\* If she come, I be happy. If she don't I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn," (Walker, 1982: 99).



## **“Everyday Use”**

Originally published in 1973, Walker’s short story focuses on three women and their struggle to find and/or celebrate their identities, as well as their heritage, during the trying time of the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, blacks were desperate to find themselves; they were children of Africa who had lost themselves and were in need of guidance from the various movements taking place (Black Arts Movement, Black Panther Party, Civil Rights Movements, and Black Nationalism). It is during the height of these movements that Walker places us within the story. The narrator, who is not given a name other than Mama, and her young daughter Maggie are awaiting the arrival of Mama’s oldest daughter Dee, who left home in order to find herself and escape the life her mother created. While gone, Dee gets an education and changes her name in order resist the oppressive lifestyle imposed on blacks by white society. This is evident when her mother calls her by her name, and Dee responds that she is no longer Dee but “Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo.” Like others of the various black movements, she does this in order to distance herself from her slave past and create a new life separate from “the people who oppress [her]” (Walker, 1973:271).

Although Dee goes through this metamorphosis in order to find her authentic self, she only succeeds in isolating herself. She is not being authentic; she is playing dress-up. She is so worried about being black, that she turns into something unrecognizable and becomes mentally and spiritually lost. This is most evident when she asks her mother for two quilts she finds in her mother’s trunk. Upon learning that these quilts will go to Maggie, Dee is outraged. How can something so precious be given to someone who will only spoil it with everyday use? A hand-crafted quilt is like an old photo album. Patches, like photos, hold memories of the past. For Dee, the quilt represents an extraordinary practice of art; antiquated with its unsophisticated characteristics and qualities, but attention-grabbing nevertheless. Furthermore, the quilt embodies Dee’s heritage. Not as a time piece that she finds in a store and has to buy, but as a family heirloom that has been passed down like old portraits of aristocrats of blue-blood families. If left with Mama and Maggie, it won’t be preserved as the prized possession that Dee sees it to be. They would actually use it; wear it out; damage it. But with Dee, it will be protected so that it may be bestowed to the next generation.

In some respects, Dee is like Sophia from *The Color Purple*. Although free of her perceived chains, her feminist liberation does not give her the results or the satisfaction that she is seeking. As Tuten (1993) observes, instead of finding her heritage, she rejects it (her mother, her sister, and the everyday use of the quilt).

Dee's feminist liberation, as well as her aggressive attitude toward the life she sees as beneath her, is similar to that of Sophia in *The Color Purple*. Both Mama and Maggie express resistance in their own ways. Maggie was badly burned in a house fire as a child and was kept hidden away because of her appearance. However Mama's desire to protect Maggie from the outside world has made her timid and subservient in that she cannot stand up for herself and attempts to make herself invisible. "She will stand hopelessly in corners, homely and ashamed of the burn scars down her arms and legs... 'How do I look, Mama?' Maggie says showing just enough of her thin body enveloped in a pink skirt and red blouse for me to know she's there, almost hidden by the door," (Walker, 1973: 268-9). Maggie is quiet and does not like to intrude upon the goings on of life, but when Dee states that she wants the quilts, she speaks up, albeit nonverbally. She is defiant in this instance, expressing outrage that her sister Dee, the one who has everything (beauty, education, and a will of her own), should get something that she truly desires. It is here that we learn that Maggie does have a will of her own, but does not feel the need to exert unless it is for something of true value to her. For her it is the quilts. These are not mere scraps of fabric used to fend off the cold, and they are not pieces of art meant to be admired from a distance as if in a museum. The quilts symbolize the enduring bonds amongst family and the women of different generations. As Houston and Pierce-Baker (1985) note, the quilts are the last piece of history that they have in order to connect with the past and move on into the present.

Mama's resistance stems from her rejection of societal gender roles. Instead of trying to marry and rely on a man in order to succeed in life or simply get by, Mama rejects traditional housework and other feminine roles in order to work the land herself. She has hands and legs that work and she provides for her family just as any man can. Mama is proud of this and even more so of her appearance. Because she has chosen a life of hard labor rather than the more "comfortable" life of housework, she has taken on the appearance of a man. She is hardy, wears men's clothes



(as it is the practical thing to do for her chosen line of work), and has even taken on the rough personality of a man. Additionally she has taken on the male role of protector. It is up to Mama to be Maggie's voice as well as to make life choices for her as a man would do.

## Conclusion

This article has explored the idea of the woman behind the man. It is immoral and unjust that men should have such freedoms as education, voting rights, job opportunities and the like while women are meant to be help-mates, shapeless figures in the background, in order for men to feel good about themselves. Furthermore, it is absurd to reduce a woman to nothing more than a housewife meant to raise children and not her voice in politics and business. Women were created for much more, and have the potential to be much more as is the case with the women of *The Street*, *The Color Purple*, and "Everyday Use." Each author in her own way uses her female characters to express feminist thoughts and feelings and how they have evolved.

Petry showcases this through the subtle subversionary acts of Lutie Johnson in her struggle for independence in a society that longs to oppress her despite all her efforts and Walker demonstrates how Shug's lack of shame in her sexual exploits reimagines the imposed censorship on black women in addition to giving life to the very definition of womanism within lesbian literature culture. This is evident in Celie's awakening and evolution in mind, body, and spirit via reading and writing, sexual exploration, and confidence gained from her friends and sister.

In contrast with the spiritual awakening observed within Celie and Shug in *The Color Purple*, in her short story "Everyday Use," Walker explores the vast complexities of black womanhood through Dee and Maggie. Both women struggle with their identities as black women. Dee, who only wanted to be free of her perceived shackles, loses her true self as she struggles to find her black identity: a distinctiveness she feels has been stolen from her by white society. Maggie struggles to see herself as strong and confident in spite of her disfigurement. She gains confidence through the quilt, a source of power for the women of her family, as well as through her choice to live the life that her mother lived. For Maggie, feminism and being strong was not about going out and changing who she was to fit in, but to find happiness in her simple life as she so chose.

*The Street*, *The Color Purple*, and “Everyday Use” all challenge the barriers placed on black women while opening doors for the women of both the novel and the audience to see themselves changed -- negatively *or* positively -- by overcoming their struggles. This paper has examined this evolution, and also how the relationships forged among black women make them stronger, both mentally and physically, and act as a catalyst for further progress in their empowerment.

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