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“The Same River Twice”: An Analysis of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Steven Spielberg’s Film Adaptation

„Dvakrát do stejné řeky“: Analýza románu Alice Walker *Barva nachu* a stejnojmenné filmové adaptace Stevena Spielberga

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Declaration

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného či stejného titulu.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

Prague, July 11, 2021

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I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the source of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

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V Praze dne 11. července 2021

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Abstrakt

Alice Walker se ve svých dílech jakožto afroamerická spisovatelka a aktivistka zabývá tématy, jež souvisejí s černošskou kulturou a komunitou. V románu *Barva nachu* jsou středem jejího zájmu osudy černošek na americkém jihu mezi lety 1900 až 1940 a těžkosti, s nimiž se zde musely potýkat. Walker se zabývá problémy jako je domácí násilí či útlak nastolený patriarchátem a prostřednictvím ženských postav otevírá otázky ženské identity, sexuality a duchovní svobody. V roce 1985 byla *Barva nachu* pod stejným názvem zfilmována režisérem Stevenem Spielbergem.

Bakalářská práce nejprve představuje Alice Walker a její práci v historickém a literárním kontextu, dále obsahuje obecný úvod do teorie filmové adaptace. Tato kapitola stručně objasňuje související terminologii a komentuje různé typy filmových adaptací, proces tvorby a jeho závěrečnou a zásadní část, což je přijetí díla u veřejnosti. Na závěr pojednává o specifikách, jimiž se filmové adaptace literárních děl vyznačují.

Jádro práce tvoří podrobná analýza a srovnání románu s jeho filmovým ztvárněním. Zabývá se rozdíly mezi oběma díly, zkoumá klíčové nesrovnalosti ve znázornění postav a scén či ve výkladu a interpretaci konkrétních symbolů. Analýze předchází stručný a ucelený komentář ke kontroverzi, která knihu i film obklopuje. O explicitním užití jazyka a tabuizovaných tématech jako je incest, týrání, sexismus či znásilnění probíhala v kritickém diskurzu již od prvního vydání knihy debata, ke které značnou měrou přispěla i filmová adaptace. Otázku, zda lze příběh považovat za škodlivý pro černošskou komunitu, podtrhuje zejména autorčina prezentace a vykreslení černochoů v románu. Bakalářská práce obsahuje vedle kritických komentářů i vyjádření samotné autorky. Ta jsou do textu příležitostně začleněna, aby dotvořila představu o původním záměru románu *Barva nachu* a postoj, jež Alice Walker vůči své tvorbě a filmové adaptaci románu zaujímá.

Klíčová slova

afroamerická literatura, Alice Walker, černošská komunita, černošský patriarchát, filmová adaptace, Steven Spielberg, *Barva nachu*, próza

Abstract

As an African American writer and activist, Alice Walker explores themes related to the Black community and culture. In *The Color Purple*, she focuses on Black women and the struggles they had experienced in the rural American South between 1900s-1940s. Walker addresses issues such as domestic violence or oppression established by patriarchy, and through the female characters also elaborates on female identity, sexuality, and spiritual freedom. In 1985, *The Color Purple* was adapted into a film of the same name by Steven Spielberg.

This BA thesis first introduces Alice Walker and her work in the historical and literary context, and then provides a general introduction to the concept of film adaptation. This chapter briefly clarifies the term and then comments on different types of film adaptation, the process of its creation, and the importance of the adaptation's reception from the public, for that is considered to be a crucial and final part of the overall process. Lastly, it discusses the transition from a novel to a film specifically, which leads the reader to the core of this treatise: the detailed analysis of Walker's novel and Spielberg's interpretation of the story.

The BA thesis studies the differences between the two works. It examines the key discrepancies in the depiction of characters, and scenes, and in the understanding of specific symbols originally incorporated by Walker. Since their publication and release respectively, there has been an on-going debate in the critical discourse about both the novel and the movie on whether the story is or is not controversial and harmful to the Black community, judging by the inclusion of topics perceived by some as taboo e.g. incest, abuse, sexism, rape, or explicit language, and more importantly Walker's presentation of Black men in the novel in particular. The analysis is preceded by a brief, yet comprehensive discussion of this issue surrounding both the literary work and the film, and provides arguments of not only the critics, but also the writer herself. Alice Walker's perspective on the creative journey, as well as the final cinematic product based on her novel is incorporated repeatedly in order to illustrate *The Color Purple*'s original intention.

Key words

African American literature, Alice Walker, Black community, Black patriarchy, film adaptation, Steven Spielberg, *The Color Purple*, prose

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Introduction

Alice Walker has been contributing to American literary tradition by writing poetry and prose which, as suggested in *Lectures on American Literature*, “is concerned with the courage, creativity, and resourcefulness of black women of various ages and under different circumstances.”¹ That way the writer keeps enriching the American and African American culture, shedding light on multiple issues that Black women encounter on daily basis, not only in the past, but also in the present. Her novel, *The Color Purple*, is recognized as her finest work which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983. This BA thesis analyzes *The Color Purple* in comparison with its cinematic counterpart of the same name directed by Steven Spielberg, released in 1985.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. Firstly, it introduces the author in the historical and literary context. In this chapter (chapter 1), factual information on Walker’s life, as well as influences which impacted her career is provided in the date range from 1940s to 1990s. Secondly, the introduction to film adaptation follows. This chapter (chapter 2) comments on the meaning of an adaptation in a general sense at first, and then focuses on the cinematic adaptation of novel into film, in particular. It also discusses some key issues related to this field such as the process of the cinematic adaptation’s creation and then its reception, emphasizing the importance of the public’s opinion and its role in the final interpretation of the work. In relation to this, the question of fidelity is explored, presenting both pro and con arguments.

Chapter 3 is the core of this thesis. This section consists of three parts providing the detailed analysis of the two works of art. It opens with a discussion about the controversial nature of not only the novel, but also of the film, listing three reasons for such a reaction to it, that being the depiction of Black men; realistic as well as brutal presentation and description of sexual abuse; and the fact that the filmmaker, who was given the opportunity to direct and interpret this story, is white. Then a close examination of selected characters is provided. This study focuses on four characters in total: Celie, Shug Avery, Sofia Butler, and Albert Johnson, also referred to as Mister. The choice of the characters given above is based on the significance of their impact on the personal development of the protagonist, Celie.

Lastly, the third chapter analyzes specific scenes. Several sequences are covered prior to this part of the thesis, incorporated when relevant and useful to the particular discussion.

¹ Justin Quinn, et al., *Lectures on American Literature*, 3rd edition (Prague: Karolinum, 2011), 290.

Nevertheless, this section is divided into three subsections labeled as follows: inclusion vs. exclusion of Albert, depiction of Celie as a free woman, and presentation of the concept of God, each one dealing with a collective theme. The study explores the presentation of each theme in both Spielberg's interpretation and Walker's original story. The similarities as well as discrepancies are then demonstrated on specific moments in the film and passages in the literary work. Other elements mentioned and examined throughout the BA thesis are, for example, symbols such as the purple wildflower field, sea shells, or quilting, and the role of music in the film's production in general and its significance in the creation of this cinematic adaptation in particular.

1. Alice Walker's Work: Historical and Literary Context

1.1 1940s/50s

The initial influence that had a lifelong impact on Alice Walker was introduced to the writer in her childhood. Before Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and many others who play an important part in Walker's evolution, there was nature. Nature impacted not only Walker's writing, but also her approach to being in general. Born and raised in Eatonton, Georgia, she had spent her childhood in the countryside surrounded by the natural world and felt connected to it since her early days.² As the writer recalls, "babysat by nature,"³ she usually stayed in the fields with her mother who, according to Walker, worshipped nature, and so does she till this day.⁴

Walker's lasting connection to Mother Earth is explained in several of her essays, one of them being "Everything is a Human Thing"⁵ (1983), and it is present in her fictional work as well, for example in *The Color Purple*. In the novel, the author elevates nature to the position of God. As she writes in her memoir *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* (onwards referred to as *The Same River Twice*), "when Shug says in the book [...] 'I believe God is everything that is, ever was, or ever will be,' she is saying what I, too, believe."⁶ In *The Color Purple*, the writer incorporates her personal view, using Shug's character to make a statement. In the book, Shug says to Celie, "God ain't a he, or a she, but a It."⁷ God is what can be found in all of us, all living things (flora and fauna), and the world we are surrounded by, regardless of gender, or race.

Walker's childhood and her family also served as a significant source of inspiration. The writer says, "when I go back to Eatonton, I get these new reverberations of things, new enlightenment; I understand on a deeper level."⁸ Her relatives inspired some of the characters in *The Color Purple* (discussed in 3.1), including her grandfather and grandmother. Walker's parents encouraged her to read and to value education. Following her older sister's example,

²Donna Seaman, "A Conversation with Alice Walker," *American Libraries Magazine*, published May 8, 2013, accessed October 5, 2020, <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2013/05/08/a-conversation-with-alice-walker/>.

³Seaman, "A Conversation with Alice Walker."

⁴William R. Ferris, "Alice Walker: 'I Know What the Earth Says,'" *Southern Cultures* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26390920>.

⁵Alice Walker, *Living by the Word: Selected Writings 1973-1987* (San Diego: Mariner Books, 1989), 139-152.

⁶Alice Walker, *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* (London: The Women's Press, 1996), 35.

⁷Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017), 176.

⁸Ferris, "I Know What the Earth Says," 12.

she was enrolled in school at the age of four and gifted her first typewriter. It was then when Walker started to develop her writing skill.

1.2 1960s/70s

In 1961, Alice Walker studied at Spelman College. Later, she transferred to the Sarah Lawrence College and graduated in 1965. Her studies at the university also count as one of the sources that formed Walker as a writer and an individual. That time provided her with opportunities to meet people who would later shape her approach to the craft and her art. Thanks to one of her teachers, the poet Muriel Rukeyser, who saw a potential in Walker, she was introduced to Langston Hughes.⁹ Hughes knew Zora Neale Hurston, whose work impacted Walker on a profound level. The writer claims that she thinks of both Hurston and Hughes as her “literary parents, or guardians.”¹⁰ As Walker writes in her essay “Turning into Love: Some Thoughts on Surviving and Meeting Langston Hughes,” she has “felt nurtured and nourished by both of them.”¹¹ Langston Hughes read Walker’s first short story “To Hell With Dying” and accepted it for the anthology he was compiling at the time.

Walker has been known as not only a writer, but also an activist. When studying at the Spelman College, she joined the Civil Rights Movement and was also involved in the Feminist Movement. Her participation in both Movements is perceived as key in her life as both a young Black woman and a young Black writer.¹² Walker said it allowed her to “claim her self [...] and to claim the lives of African American women of the rural South as the subject of her fiction.”¹³ In *The Color Purple*, the protagonist lives in the deep American South and the novel’s story revolves around the main character’s experience of the Black patriarchal Southern society. As an advocate of human rights in the USA and all over the world, Walker is primarily concerned about the rights of Black females. Through Celie, as well as protagonists from other novels, the writer commemorates the lives of the ancestors and addresses the inequality and oppression they suffered from. As Walker writes in her journal entry from January 7, 1984, “the books that I have produced already carry forward the thoughts that I feel the ancestors were trying to help me pass on.”¹⁴

⁹Alice Walker, “Turning Into Love: Some Thoughts on Surviving and Meeting Langston Hughes,” *Callaloo*, no. 41 (Autumn 1989): 663, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2931175>.

¹⁰Walker, “Meeting Langston Hughes,” 664.

¹¹Walker, “Meeting Langston Hughes,” 665.

¹²Roberta M. Hendrickson, “Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker, Meridian and the Civil Rights Movement,” *MELUS* 24, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 111, <https://doi.org/10.2307/468042>.

¹³Hendrickson, “Remembering the Dream,” 111.

¹⁴Walker, *Living by the Word*, 95.

Her experience of the political and social Movements appeared in Walker's work, for instance in the form of poems in the first volume of her poetry collection *Once*, published in 1968. Furthermore, the topic is also discussed in *Meridian* (1976) which, according to Roberta M. Hendrickson, is "a novel that affirms the Movement's vision of freedom and nonviolence, affirms blackness and African American heritage in a racist society [...], and focuses on black women and their participation in the Movement, refusing to make them less than they had been."¹⁵

It was not until the 1970s that Walker was introduced to the already mentioned late Zora Neale Hurston, a first-generation writer in the Black female tradition,¹⁶ and her legacy. As Dianne F. Sadoff writes, "Walker proclaims Hurston her precursor and appears to find that precedence a source [...] of nurturance."¹⁷ Hurston's presence in Walker's work is apparent, again in, for instance *The Color Purple*, which is often compared to Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Both novels are set in the first half of the 20th century, presenting a life and struggle of an uneducated woman coming from the American South. As Amanda Bailey clarifies, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a "bold tale of a Southern Black woman's discovery of her voice, her identity, and her autonomy,"¹⁸ which corresponds with *The Color Purple* and its main themes. Furthermore, some literary critics approach the character of Shug Avery in *The Color Purple* as Zora Neale Hurston's fictional reincarnation.

Both women represent an independent female artist who recognizes her personal freedom as her strength, embraces her artistic career with pride, and refuses to obey the conventional gender roles applied by society. As stated by Jennifer Howard, similarly to Shug Avery, "Hurston was also an artist [...] who pursued her work and her pleasure with an intense dedication and with little regard for the conventional restrictions society placed on both her sex and her race."¹⁹ There is a sense of responsibility towards the heritage Hurston left that Walker seems to feel compelled to honor and spread in the Black community. As noted above, she recognizes Hurston as a family member rather than a public figure. In fact, she sees the Zora Neale Hurston's persona as an important part of every Black man's life. In her essay "Looking for Zora" she writes, "as far as I'm concerned, she *is* my aunt — and that of all

¹⁵Hendrickson, "Remembering the Dream," 113.

¹⁶Dianne F. Sadoff, "Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston," *Signs* 11, no. 1 (Autumn 1985): 18, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174284>.

¹⁷Sadoff, "Black Matrilineage," 5.

¹⁸Amanda Bailey, "Necessary Narration in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *The Comparatist* 40 (October 2016): 319, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26254769>.

¹⁹Jennifer Jordan, "Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 105, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464063>.

black people as well.”²⁰ Sherley Anne Williams explains, saying, “to Alice Walker and others of our generation, Zora was a woman bent on discovering and defining herself, a woman who spoke and wrote her own mind.”²¹

1.3 1980s/90s

In her novels, Walker focuses primarily on women, Black women in particular. She discusses generations of Black females in America, both past and present, and their position in the American and African society, in order to gain a full understanding of the historical progression.²² According to Melanie L. Harris, “Walker uncovers the lives and religious journeys of many African and African American women, including her own mother's, in order to establish a foundation for the black women's literary movement.”²³ In 1983, Walker had her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* published, also referred to as *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Womanism is a social theory associated with Walker, who coined the term and incorporated it in this particular book for the very first time. The definition provided at the beginning of the literary work says that a Womanist is:

a black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children [...] A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually, and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. [...] Loves music. Loves dance. Loves Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves herself. *Regardless*. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.²⁴

Walker introduced the idea of Womanism in order to amplify the voices of Black females specifically because, in the case of Feminism, they seemed to be muted by white women, as the Black women's issues were often not approached as equally important in the process of fighting for the same rights, in spite of the fact that they are more prone to experience violence and unequal treatment than white women.²⁵

²⁰Alice Walker, “Looking for Zora,” *Ms. Magazine*, 1975, 401.

²¹Sherley Anne Williams, afterword to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston (New York: Virago Press, 1986), 266.

²²Ferris, “I Know What the Earth Says,” 6.

²³Melanie L. Harris, “Buddhist Meditation for the Recovery of the Womanist Self, or Sitting on the Mat Self-Love Realized,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 32 (2012): 69, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23274470>.

²⁴Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), xi-xii.

²⁵“The Womanist Movement,” *Library of Howard University School of Law*, accessed on March 13, 2021, <https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/womanist>.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) was adapted into a movie of the same name, released in 1985. Since their publication and release respectively, there has been an on-going debate in the critical discourse about both the novel and the movie on whether the story is or is not controversial and harmful to the Black community, judging by the inclusion of topics perceived by some as taboo, for example incest, physical and mental abuse, sexism, rape, or explicit language, and especially Walker's presentation of Black men in the novel. The literary work was banned from several American school libraries between 1984 and 2013²⁶ for the reasons given above. In one of her essays published in her collection *Living by the Word* (1988), Alice Walker responded, "I felt I had written the book as a gift to the people. All of them. If they wanted it, let them fight to keep it, as I had to fight to deliver it."²⁷ Chapter 3.1 elaborates on the controversy around these two works of art but firstly, the following chapter provides a general, yet informative introduction to the concept of film adaptation.

2. Introduction to Adaptation: From Novel to Film

2.1 What is Adaptation?

Generally speaking, as specified by the *Cambridge Dictionary*, adaptation can be defined as the "process of changing to suit different conditions."²⁸ To adapt means to become accustomed to certain changes in one's life. In biology and environmental studies, it expresses organism's tendency to modify in order to prevent itself from extinction. Moreover, adaptation is commonly discussed in relation to the arts.

2.2 What is Film Adaptation?

There is a great number of definitions regarding the more general meaning of adaptation; however, as far as the media in particular is concerned, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as an "altered or amended version of a text, musical composition, etc., one adapted for filming, broadcasting, or production on the stage from a novel or similar literary source."²⁹ In the *American Studies Journal*, John Dean provides clarification, stating that an adaptation in the context of media may be viewed as a kind of "translation into a different medium which expresses itself by using a different group of techniques, essential

²⁶Isabel Joyce, "Alice Walker *The Color Purple*," *The Banned Books Project*, published September 11, 2019, accessed November 21, 2020, <https://bannedbooks.library.cmu.edu/alice-walker-the-color-purple/>.

²⁷Walker, *Living by the Word*, 56.

²⁸*Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. "adaptation," accessed ONLINE December 6th 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/adaptation>.

²⁹*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "adaptation," accessed ONLINE December 6th 2020, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/2115?redirectedFrom=adaptation#eid>.

materials, and rules of creative harmony.”³⁰ One of the examples of such artistic adaptation is a film adaptation. Film adaptation, the type included as a part of the analysis discussed in this BA thesis, deals with a literary work, usually a novel, or a play, and remodels it into a form of a motion picture. In many ways, the cinematic version is then the director’s interpretation of the original story.

2.2.1 Film Adaptation as Formal Entity, Process of Creation, and Process of Reception

Film adaptation is an active procedure, and does not merely represent the final product itself. Adaptation, as a complex matter, covers a number of various elements; different techniques, multiple stages of creation and a multitude of people whose decisions are behind the creation. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the importance of what comes before the outcome. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon divides the label ‘adaptation’ into two separate, yet interconnected groups. The term is commonly used when referring to the product; nevertheless, she also explores the concept in terms of its reference to the overall procedure rather than the final result of the creative journey only, and discusses the adapter’s responsibility to the original material and its author as well.

Hutcheon writes, the film makers are involved in the “process of appropriation, of taking possession of another’s story, filtering it, in a sense, through one’s own sensibility, interests, and talents. [...] Adapters are first interpreters and then creators.”³¹ When adapting a literary work, or any work of art, the director along with other members of the production are constantly making decisions on how to interpret the original, and that inevitably invites potential added value and authenticity. From Hutcheon’s perspective, adaptation is most of the time “a double process of interpreting and then creating something new,”³² which is usually not met with the public’s expectations (discussed in more detail in 2.2.2). Literary work and the director who interprets the literary work, are the two key components necessary for a film adaptation to come into existence. They build the cornerstone of the adaptation process. However, there is another factor which needs to be paid attention to, that being the audience.

The public, as the third party playing a significant role in the entire coproduction, finalizes the process by reinterpreting the film maker’s interpretation. In her book, Hutcheon

³⁰John Dean, “Adapting History and Literature into Movie,” *American Studies Journal*, no. 53 (2009), accessed December 3, 2020, <http://www.asjournal.org/53-2009/adapting-history-and-literature-into-movies/>.

³¹Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 18.

³²Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 20.

talks about the so-called “process of reception.”³³ It is a natural progression that after watching the movie one wants to share their experience with others. The circulation of the public’s opinion is what influences the rest of the people, so no matter what the director’s initial intentions are when making the movie, usually it is the response of the audience that decides whether the adaptation is or is not a success, as pointed out by John Dean,

the audience is a public made up of individuals and a mass. And in all likelihood people will see the film because of word of mouth... The audience is a maker and an adaptor. The audience will finally decide whether the whole process succeeded or not. You buy the tickets.³⁴

In film industry, the positive feedback coming from the cinema-goers is a key requirement which determines not only the movie’s lifespan after its release, but also, and more importantly, the film’s potential production and release in the first place.

Bela Balázs in *Theory of the Film Character and Growth of a New Art* writes, “a degree of success – in other words appreciation – is an inexorable material postulate for the birth of any film.”³⁵ He adds, “the situation is a paradox: in the sphere of the film art the public must be available before the film, the making of which is rendered possible only by an appreciation ensured in advance, on which the producers of the film can count.”³⁶ There is a complex preparation happening before the contract is signed and the movie goes into making. The pre-production during which all details are being agreed on before the camera rolls, including whether the proposed film idea is worthy of the production company’s time and money or not, plays a significant part in the film making process. In conclusion, the final call is primarily based on the public’s reaction. As long as the movie, film adaptation, is received well by the viewers it is predetermined to be successful in general. In addition, when thinking about the audience’s response to the film maker’s interpretation of the original literary material, the question of fidelity arises.

³³Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 8.

³⁴Dean, “Adapting History and Literature into Movie.”

³⁵Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film Character and Growth of a New Art* (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd., 1952), 19.

³⁶Balázs, *Theory of the Film Character and Growth of a New Art*, 19-20.

2.2.2 Question of Fidelity

Loius Gianetti divides film adaptation into three groups based on the correspondence between the book and the movie. In his work *Understanding Movies*, he writes about the so-called *loose*, *faithful*, and *literal adaptation*. The literal adaptation seems to be the hardest to achieve. According to Giannetti, it is primarily “restricted to stage plays,”³⁷ one of the famous representatives being *A Streetcar Named Desire*, adapted in 1951. Steven Spielberg’s *The Color Purple* (film) may be recognized as a faithful adaptation. The movie does differ from the original in multiple ways and these discrepancies will be analyzed in detail in the following chapter; however, it is still clear that the motion picture is based closely on the novel so the message of the story has been conveyed, and to preserve the heart and soul of the literary work is one of the main aims of the faithful adaptation.³⁸ Giannetti remarks that to remain as close as possible to the original material is a challenge³⁹ and he also admits the lines among these three types of adaptations are quite thin, having no set boundaries and in fact usually overlapping.⁴⁰ The question is: should fidelity be the desired goal in film adaptation?

One of the pro-arguments is that adaptation, meaning a work of art adapted based on another work of art, should include elements which resemble the source. Paisley Livingston argues that fidelity is an inherent aspect which needs to be present in order for the adaptation to be understood and appreciated fully. According to Livingston,

cinematic adaptation is a film intentionally and overtly based on at least one specific anterior work. For a work to be an adaptation, many of the distinguishing and characteristic features of this source, such as the title, setting, main characters, and central elements of the plot must be expressly adopted and imitated in the new work.⁴¹

To illustrate Livingston’s point on Spielberg’s adaptation, the director chose to keep the title, setting and characters, as well as a majority of the key events and symbols (for example, Celie making pants) because all these aspects are clearly symbolic and contribute to the deeper understanding of what Walker wanted to say and address in her novel. On the other hand, that does not necessarily mean the director managed to incorporate those characteristic features in the cinematic version well. Again, this is the subject matter of a debate provided later in the thesis. Livingston does find it necessary to preserve certain qualities of the original; however,

³⁷Louis Gianetti, *Understanding Movies* (New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2013), 402.

³⁸Dean, “Adapting History and Literature into Movie.”

³⁹Gianetti, *Understanding Movies*, 400.

⁴⁰Gianetti, *Understanding Movies*, 400.

⁴¹Paisley Nathan Livingston, “On the Appreciation of Cinematic Adaptations,” *Projections: the Journal for Movies and Mind* 4, no. 2 (2010): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3167/proj.2010.040207>.

he also ponders what kind of degree of fidelity is sufficient so that the new work could be considered an adaptation and not a simple copy of the literary material that is supposed to be interpreted. It appears to be difficult to find the fine line, as he admits, “there is no precise determination regarding the number and kinds of features that must be taken over from the source if a work is to be an adaptation and not merely a work loosely inspired by an anterior work.”⁴²

On the contrary, Brian McFarlane in his article “It Wasn’t Like That in the Book...” argues that it is not effective to perceive a lack of fidelity as inappropriate when it comes to film adaptations.⁴³ Whether the film version corresponds with the literary work which served as the foundation or not is a matter often targeted by the viewers. What seems to be the issue is that the audience comes to the cinema with expectations rooted in the study of literature. The movie version is evaluated as if it were a book. According to McFarlane, the viewers are “too often not interested in something new being made in the film but only in assessing how far their own conception of the novel has been transposed from one medium to the other.”⁴⁴ It is important to keep in mind that film and literature, as two different media, do not share the same qualities and tools.

The creative opportunities and techniques through which the literary narration is told are distinct from those of film, which are used to retell the story in the motion picture. It may be believed by some that a movie cannot really depict nor transmit the traditional beauty of literature and in a sense devalues the original. From a conservative point of view, the film adaptation of a novel may not be desirable or appreciated for the reason above, unless the cinematic version is correspondent completely. This adamant perspective then usually causes the adaptation’s common failure. As James Harold writes, “fidelity is often associated with a troublesome assumption that has plagued the academic study of film since its beginning: the privileging of the written word (particularly ‘high’ literature) over pictorial storytelling.”⁴⁵ McFarlane also talks about the fact that, as he puts it, “the precursor literary work is only an aspect of the film’s intertextuality.”⁴⁶ Therefore, before arriving at any conclusion and classifying the result of the director’s efforts as not worthy because of the possible

⁴²Livingston, “On the Appreciation of Cinematic Adaptations,” 2.

⁴³Brian McFarlane, “It Wasn’t Like that in the Book...” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2000): 165. <https://researchbank.swinburne.edu.au/items/0df92ec7-6917-4424-b01b-3e27928c1650/1/>.

⁴⁴McFarlane, “It Wasn’t Like that in the Book...” 165.

⁴⁵James Harold, “The Value of Fidelity in Adaptation,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 58, no. 1 (January 2018): 91, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayx041>.

⁴⁶McFarlane, “It Wasn’t Like that in the Book...” 167.

discrepancies between the two artistic versions, Hutcheon urges the audience to remember that,

[...] adaptation is a repetition, but repetition without replication. And there are manifestly many different possible intentions behind the act of adaptation: the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text, or to call it into question is as likely as the desire to pay tribute by copying.⁴⁷

John Dean elaborates on this subject in his article “Adapting History and Literature in Movies” by sharing his point of view,

the student, film buff, or movie connoisseur must give up the naive claim that a film should be faithful to the book. That is not the point of successful adaptation. Too many hands play their part in molding and shaping the completed movie. Adaptation requires originality. And it is a process of accretion, of leveling [...] enriched by the ongoing telling.⁴⁸

In *The Same River Twice*, Alice Walker shares her own experience as a writer having her literary work adapted. She says,

having a film made of one’s book is an agonizingly complex gamble, with hundreds of people having something to say. Though *The Color Purple* (film) is not what many wished, it is more than many hoped, or had seen on a movie screen before.⁴⁹

Oftentimes, almost every film makers’ choice faces criticism, a critique based on comparison between the original and new medium.

2.2.3 Novel to Film

Film adaptations based on novels, plays, short stories, or other literary material have become popular in the motion picture industry. As presented by *Forbes* magazine, in 2018, “according to the research commissioned by the Publisher Association and produced by Frontier Economics, film adaptations of books gross 44% more at the U.K. box office and a full 53% more worldwide than movies from original screenplays.”⁵⁰ In addition, numerous pieces of literature, for instance classic literature, had been adapted more than once. Such adaptations represent an interesting clash of two diverse artistic realms: the verbal and pictorial one.

⁴⁷Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 7.

⁴⁸Dean, “Adapting History and Literature into Movie.”

⁴⁹Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 40.

⁵⁰Adam Rowe, “Report: Film Adaptations of Books Earn 53% More At the Worldwide Box Office,” *Forbes*, published July 11, 2018, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/adamrowe1/2018/07/11/why-book-based-films-earn-53-more-at-the-worldwide-box-office/?sh=a6c126306f0f>.

As discussed in subchapter 2.2.2, each medium possesses its own set of creative tools which the writer, or director uses to the best of their abilities to tell a story. Simply put, literature's narrative relies mostly on words and skilled turn of phrase, while the film makers rely on the visual impression. The early silent films prove that, in the case of cinema, it is not necessarily the words that do the work but the music, signature body movements, facial expressions, or later, application of visual effects. In *The Color Purple* (film), for example, flowers or flower petals of purple shade are a noticeably recurrent symbol incorporated throughout the entire adaptation.

In the opening scene, the audience is provided with the view of a large field full of purple wildflowers in which the sisters are playing care-free, living in the moment. To this scene, Walker responded, "I could barely stand the sight of all those cosmos blossoms at the beginning of the film."⁵¹ Despite the writer's disapproval, when reunited in the final scene, Celie and Nettie find themselves, again, in such a field, surrounded by these flowers. Therefore, the blossoms may be translated as the director's way of visually highlighting hope and the power of love. Prior to the closing scene, Shug and Celie discuss, rather briefly, compared to the conversation in the novel, the idea of God as they walk through a purple flower field. Shug makes the famous comment: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." (177) This claim implies that here the purple color represents beauty which can indeed be found in seemingly insignificant things, and should be experienced as well as enjoyed in one's life. Later in the film, when singing outside the juke joint, Shug hands Celie a bouquet of the same flowers, demonstrating the previous statement. In the scene where Mister attempts to rape Nettie, he hides purple flower petals in his hat which are sprinkled on the ground as he is courting her. In this instance, the petals may symbolize sexuality. Then music, mentioned as one of the supporting elements, helps to translate the mood.

As Lidia Kniaż writes, sound helps to not only enhance "the drama but also to express the atmosphere of a given space."⁵² She clarifies by using the role of sounds in the cinematic adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as an example. Kniaż mentions the sounds of hammers incorporated in the film. This sound effect creates the industrial urban music playing in the background, which, as she says, could be "viewed as a metaphor of

⁵¹Alice Walker, introduction to *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017), xiv.

⁵²Lidia Kniaż, "Creative Use of Sound in the Cinematic Adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*," *New Horizons in English Studies* (January 2016): 82, DOI: 10.17951/nh.2016.79.

manual laborers, [...] read as an inseparable element of city soundscape.”⁵³ In the case of a novel, this would be described verbally by the narrator. The significant role of music is apparent in Spielberg’s *The Color Purple* as well. One of the songs from the official motion picture soundtrack called “Miss Celie’s Blues” (also known as “Sister”), composed by Quincy Jones, was meant to evoke a sense of togetherness. It serves as a symbol of the strong bond that women, not only in the novel, but also generally speaking, share. Walker imagined “Sister” to be “a signal of affirmation that women could hum to each other coast to coast, [...] an immeasurable gift to the bonding of women.”⁵⁴ In the film, this tune transmits and highlights one of the central themes that the protagonist’s development in Walker’s novel revolves around: the special relationship that the two female characters, Celie and Shug, create together.

Another example demonstrating the value of music in the film adaptation may be Celie and her sister Nettie’s singing “me and you, us never part” while clapping their hands. This ritual is supposed to emphasize how strong the girls’ bond and love for each other are. It reoccurs in three key scenes in the movie: the opening scene⁵⁵ when the sisters are still quite young, both living together with their “Pa,” (6) then when Nettie is violently forced to leave Celie and her husband’s house,⁵⁶ and lastly in the final scene⁵⁷ when the two sisters are reunited after 30 years apart. This gesture which may be understood as a secret sign or language of theirs, serves as a reassurance, a symbol of their deep connection which survives the test of time and life.

These two instances represent a successful attempt of Spielberg’s on his journey of transforming the novel into a movie without degrading the book’s potential. On the other hand, the music composed for the opening scene was not as approved of. When recalling her first impression of the film adaptation in general, Alice Walker writes, “everything about it [the film] seemed wrong, especially the opening musical score, which sounded like it belonged in *Oklahoma!*,”⁵⁸ a musical released on Broadway in 1943. *Oklahoma!* is known for its debatable depiction of the historical period of that time, focusing on the white population, glamorizing history by ignoring the reality concerning the Black and Native American people living in that area. As Soraya Nadia McDonald states, “*Oklahoma!* has

⁵³Lidia Kniaź, “Creative Use of Sound,” 82.

⁵⁴Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 31.

⁵⁵ Steven Spielberg, dir., *The Color Purple* (Amblin Entertainment, 1985), 0:02:11-0:02:20.

⁵⁶Spielberg, *The Color Purple*, 0:27:41-0:28:11.

⁵⁷Spielberg, *The Color Purple*, 2:28:55-2:29:41.

⁵⁸Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 21.

always been a musical about whiteness. [...] It delivers a rose-tinted view of history that centers on happy white people whose greatest concern is a town dance that will raise money to build a new school. It's a classic example of willful erasure and ahistorical mythmaking.”⁵⁹

Walker's comparison of the very first scene in *The Color Purple* (film) to this musical in particular supports Minister Louis Farrakhan's thoughts on Spielberg's movie. His thoughts and an extended comparison with and detailed analysis of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Steven Spielberg's 1985 adaptation of the same name are provided in chapter that follows. In subchapter 1.3, multiple reasons for the negative feedback to the adaptation were listed. The next section of this BA thesis discusses specifically the depiction of Black men, the choice of a white director, and the realistic as well as brutal presentation and description of sexual abuse.

3. *The Color Purple*: Novel vs. Film

“Remember, the movie is not the book.”

-Alice Walker

3.1 Controversy

The publication of *The Color Purple* provoked two extreme approaches. As Charles L. Proudfit states, the novel caused “a wide range of praise and censure from an increasing number of black and white, female and male [...] literary critics.”⁶⁰ The writer herself did face criticism since the very beginning; however, with Spielberg's interpretation of the story the critique only escalated. It caused even more dissatisfaction felt by the Black community. As Jacqueline Bobo writes, the reason is said to be that “both works present a negative portrait [...] of black men in particular and the black family in general.”⁶¹ When reflecting on this period of her life Walker admits, “it was the hardest to tolerate the charge that I hated black men. From infancy I have relied on the fiercely sweet spirits of black men.”⁶² The evolution of the character of Mister (examined in more detail in 3.2.4) may possibly serve as a proof that the hate and complete rejection of men that the writer was accused of is irrelevant, as Walker allowed the antagonist to learn from his ill behavior and improve. On the other hand, she clarifies, “I was not guided or accompanied by the spirits of those [black men] who

⁵⁹Soraya Nadia McDonald, “The Unbearable Whiteness of ‘Oklahoma!’” *The Undeclared*, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://theundefeated.com/features/the-unbearable-whiteness-of-oklahoma-on-broadway/>.

⁶⁰Charles L. Proudfit, “Celie's Search for Identity: A Psychoanalytic Developmental Reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*,” *Contemporary Literature* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 12, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208336>.

⁶¹Jacqueline Bobo, “Sifting Through the Controversy: Reading *The Color Purple*,” *Callaloo* no. 39 (Spring 1989): 332, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2931568>.

⁶²Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 23.

embarrass and oppress us [...] for whom the humiliation and subjugation of women is the preferred expression of masculinity: I feel no regret for this.”⁶³

As typical of Walker’s work, *The Color Purple* is preoccupied with the females and their lives. Its main focus is on the development of Celie, taking into account the environment she spent her formative years and then most of her adulthood in. Secondly, it pays attention to other female characters as well, for example Shug Avery, or Sofia Butler. Therefore, it can be assumed the novel’s purpose was not necessarily to diminish Black men specifically, as that would mean the opposite of what the writer aimed to do with the literary piece in the first place: providing women, instead of men, with a space to address issues which, ignored till that point, have been affecting them for years. Simply put, the novel was created for women not men. Walker elaborates in her essay “In the Closet of the Soul,”

an early disappointment to me in some black men’s response to my work is their apparent inability to empathize with black women’s suffering under sexism [...] If they do recognize there is abuse, their tendency is to minimize it or to deflect attention from it to themselves. This is what happened, to a large extent, with the movie.⁶⁴

As Whoopi Goldberg, portraying the character of Celie, says, “*The Color Purple* (film) is not a movie about race. What happens to Celie is happening to women all over the world, of all races and backgrounds, that is the fact. This is a story about the trials of the human spirit.”⁶⁵ Black males disputed *The Color Purple*, both the novel and the adaptation, for it seemed to degrade Black manhood. Nevertheless, after the film’s release, many African American women joined the discussion and let themselves be heard, often sharing their personal stories and experience of humiliation as well as domestic violence. In 1986, Eartis Thomas confided to *The Times*, stating she did know many women, herself included, whose lives bore close resemblance to the one of Celie’s. When asked about Spielberg’s motion picture, Thomas replied, “black women should not be sacrificed for black men’s pride. Let the film roll.”⁶⁶ Nevertheless, some African American men find the work offensive still.⁶⁷ More comments were made on the fact that the film was directed by a white director.

⁶³Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 23.

⁶⁴Walker, *Living by the Word*, 79.

⁶⁵Susan Dworkin, “The Strange and Wonderful Story of the Making of *The Color Purple*,” *Ms.*, December 1985. reprinted in Alice Walker’s *The Same River Twice*, 181-182.

⁶⁶E.R. Shipp, “Blacks in Heated Debate over *The Color Purple*,” *The New York Times*, published January 27, 1986, accessed January 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/01/27/us/blacks-in-heated-debate-over-the-color-purple.html>.

⁶⁷Shipp, “Blacks in Heated Debate over *The Color Purple*.”

This observation led to questioning what kind of effect it had on the creative process and how different the final film version is as a result of two perspectives coming from the opposite ends of the spectrum. Walker was accused of, as Jill Terry puts it, allowing Steven Spielberg to “take control over the fate of the adaptation of her novel, whilst she abdicated the responsibility which her critics feel was hers.”⁶⁸ To this, one of the film’s producers, Quincy Jones, objects, “most people [in the film production companies] just buy the book and shove the author under the rug. Not this time. At every moment, Alice was considered the last word.”⁶⁹ Some believe that if the book, as a work written, in fact, by a Black author, was not meant to attack Blacks, then the film which made the debate even more heated certainly was because of the “inherited racist mentality” of the white film maker as well as the white production.

In one of his lectures in 1986, Minister Louis Farrakhan discusses *The Color Purple* (film) and claims that despite the movie being an “all black cast” movie, the white supremacy hidden behind the scenes is still there. In addition, he believes not only the whites behind the camera, but also historically speaking the oppressive white population and white slaveholders in general were those who made the cruel beast out of a Black man who is portrayed in the film. In other words, according to Farrakhan, the white slave masters made the Black males what they are today. He says, “in the absence of you seeing the cause that produced this effect, your hatred is focused on the effect [the black man] because the evil one threw the stone and hid his hand.”⁷⁰ Quincy Jones defends the producers’ choice of Steven Spielberg, claiming,

I wanted a great director, who had all the sensibilities in every aspect to make this a great film...Who could handle the million decisions that it takes with skill and confidence, with the strong personal insight and directing skill. White, black, man, woman: these are the wrong considerations.⁷¹

When it comes to this matter, Alice Walker agrees,

Steven [Spielberg] is quite capable as a director of really understanding a lot more than people will give him credit for, being white, being a man. Without someone like Steven, all the people who should really see the

⁶⁸Jill Terry, “The Same River Twice: Signifying *The Color Purple*,” *Critical Survey* 12, no. 3 (2000): 69, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41557063>.

⁶⁹Dworkin, “The Strange and Wonderful Story of the Making of *The Color Purple*,” reprinted in Alice Walker’s *The Same River Twice*, 176.

⁷⁰“*The Color Purple* Part 5- Minister Louis Farrakhan, N.O.I.,” Youtube video, 0:24 - 0:38, posted by Saviours Helper, August 2, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWqxIrnhtFk>.

⁷¹Dworkin, “The Strange and Wonderful Story of the Making of *The Color Purple*,” reprinted in Alice Walker’s *The Same River Twice*, 181.

movie wouldn't see it— it would never reach Eatonton, Georgia, my hometown.⁷²

The cast members were of same opinion. In one of his interviews, Danny Glover, who portrayed the character of Mister, responds to the question regarding Spielberg's lack of sensitivity to the African American story, saying, "I didn't find any problem at all. There are two things that happen. One that you are insensitive and forge forward with your own idea, or that you admit that you don't know and look or seek for some information. The latter was what Steven was about."⁷³ Another element discussed in the critical discourse about the film's controversial nature is the realistic presentation of abuse and rape.

As noted earlier in the BA thesis (1.3), the novel was banned from schools and libraries multiple times. Apart from the debate on whether incorporating the Southern Black folk speech is appropriate or not for students to read because it influences their communication skills, the language and manner of expression were found offensive by many, specifically in the passages where Celie, an innocent little girl, is sexually abused by her stepfather and then her husband. The novel is opened with a rape scene which is presented to the reader through the victim's perspective:

He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say, You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurts, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. (3)

In one of her letters to God, as he⁷⁴ is the only one the girl can confide to, Celie shares her memory of the situation as she sees it. The writer admits,

I remember actually trying to censor this passage in Celie's voice as I wrote it. Even I found it almost impossible to let her say what had happened to her as *she* perceived it, without euphemizing it a little. [...] I could have written that Celie enjoyed her abuse and done it in such pretty, distancing language that many readers would have accepted it as normal. But to do this would have been to betray Celie; not only her experience of rape, but the integrity of her life.⁷⁵

In defense, Walker explains her goal was to keep the language as raw as possible and the experience as realistic as it could get because that meant staying true to Celie, and more

⁷²Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 204.

⁷³"Danny Glover for *The Color Purple* 10/13/84-Bobby Wygant Archive," Youtube video, 4:43-5:21, posted by The Bobby Wygant Archive, June 6, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/...A8U>.

⁷⁴In this part of the BA thesis, the masculine personal pronoun is used intentionally because at this point, Celie's image of God has not been reformed yet and; therefore, is still represented by a white male.

⁷⁵Walker, *Living by the Word*, 58.

importantly, yet again for once giving the voice to the victim, not the rapist. This moment is one of the central points in Celie's life and her personal development, as discussed in the analysis of her character which follows.

3.2 Characters

Apart from the protagonist, Celie, this subchapter explores characters which were selected based on their significant role in the main character's evolution. These are: Shug Avery, Sofia Butler, and Albert Johnson, also known as Mister. Other characters included in the story and not examined in this study are then Nettie, Harpo, Corrine, Samuel, Kate, Carrie, and Mary Agnes, also referred to as Squeak. In comparison to the previous three, their impact is not as profound; therefore, they are omitted from this analysis.

In spite of the fact acknowledged in this treatise, Nettie's character is indeed one of the two most important people in the protagonist's life, nevertheless, her presence in the story is mainly implied through her letters, which are, for the most part, being hidden from the main character. Celie discovers the correspondence only later in her life, so there is not much of a direct interaction between the two women. This led to the final decision to exclude the character from the analysis in order to provide, on a limited number of pages, a sufficient analysis of the three characters who are actively contributing to Celie's transformation.

Furthermore, Albert's sisters, Kate and Carrie, are the only characters who were not portrayed in the film adaptation. This may also be recognized as one of the differences between the two depictions of the story. In Spielberg's film, apart from Kate and Carrie, all characters and their names were preserved. In her memoir, Alice Walker expresses her initial concern that the cast are not going to be accurate,

the thing that scared me was that the people would be so unlike the people in the book, that when you tried to read the book you'd bring the film characters into it. But [...] they all looked just like the people I had been writing about. So in a way, no matter what happens with the film [...] Harpo will be Harpo no matter what the actors and director do.⁷⁶

Introduction of each one and an analysis based on the comparison of their portrayal in both the novel and the film follows.

3.2.1 Celie

The Color Purple is the story of a fourteen-year-old African American girl who is raped and impregnated repeatedly by a man she believes to be her father. Celie's two children are then taken away from her shortly after the birth, which deepens the trauma she

⁷⁶Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 204.

experiences. Continuously mistreated by men, first her stepfather and then her husband Albert, the protagonist relies on love of women. The two most significant influences in Celie's life, her sister Nettie and Shug Avery, not only represent hope, but also create the foundation that Celie builds on when gradually reinventing herself. As expressed by Marc-A Christophe, the reader witnesses "in all its sorrow and beautiful epiphany the miracle of Celie's rebirth;"⁷⁷ her evolution from a scared beaten little girl who is obedient and does not dare to speak much, and whose main aim in life is to survive, to a mature woman who learns to know her worth and lives on her own terms: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook...but I'm here." (187) "You was all rotten children, I say. You made my life a hell on earth. And your daddy here ain't dead horse's shit." (207) Towards the end of the story, Celie is not afraid to speak her mind anymore nor is she worried about the consequences of her words.

Being silenced pervades the story and Celie's life in both the novel and the movie. The reader is introduced to Celie's thoughts and way of thinking through her letters to God and her sister Nettie. Otherwise, she is not permitted to express herself. The story is opened with the famous quote: "You better not tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy." (1) This line is the reader's introduction to the world of the protagonist. It very sharply sets the tone to the atmosphere and background of Celie's life, since the very beginning of the story is charged with oppression performed by males. This may also be one of the reasons for the controversy, speaking of Walker's depiction of Black men specifically (addressed in 3.1). As the author recalls, "it was said that I hated man, black man in particular; that my work was injurious to black male and female relationships; that my ideas of equality and tolerance were harmful, even destructive to the black community."⁷⁸

The Color Purple is an epistolary novel. Celie's letters are the only source of information. The letters not only provide readers with the protagonist's mental state and perspective, but also offer the course of events. The story itself unfolds gradually through the letters. In Spielberg's film, this narrative technique is to a certain extent preserved. Celie's opening line in the movie starts with "Dear God,..." and, in this manner, she addresses God multiple times throughout. Nevertheless, her thoughts are never presented as written down. In the cinematic version, they are portrayed as an abstract voicing which happens and stays in her mind only with no meaningful, or creative purpose behind it. Unlike in the book in

⁷⁷Marc-A Christophe, "The Color Purple: An Existential Novel," *CLA Journal* 36, no. 3 (March 1993): 281, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44322526>.

⁷⁸Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 22.

which, based on Walker's personal notes, Celie is a writer to her very soul.⁷⁹ As Jill Terry writes,

whereas in Walker's novel the first person narrative of Celie allows her to directly 'tell' her story, the film adaptation uses a large amount of visual footage with voice-overs to mimic the addresses to 'God.' [...] As she is 'shown' from a variety of different points of view on screen, Celie's own point of view, which is presented without mediation in the novel, is substantially marginalized.⁸⁰

Walker explains, Celie creates “herself through her writing (and without her writing it is clear she would have remained unformed, even to herself).”⁸¹

When comparing Spielberg's movie to the literary work, in the film, the letters do not seem to be as important, as far as the character's personal development is concerned. Early in the adaptation, Celie's literacy is indeed emphasized in the scene when Nettie teaches her to read, placing written words on every object around the house. This is also an example of Nettie's impact on Celie but it was cut short due to the sisters' separation, so even though Celie did learn how to read, in the film, the writing still does not seem as the primary space for the character's evolution as both a human being and a woman to happen. In this case, it is her relationship to Shug Avery which the director recognized as the main source of Celie's transformation, rather than the reflection and self-reflection which happens in the process of documenting her thoughts in the form of letters in Walker's book. In the novel, the two women's bond is also crucial; however, the reader can sense that the writing activity is in fact as equally significant. Celie changes as her writing progresses. Mel Watkins writes, “as Celie grows in experience, her observations become sharper and more informed; the letters take on authority.”⁸² Her personality and opinions are being remodeled, or established. Gradually, the correspondence becomes longer. Outside the letters, the protagonist's feelings and emotions are not valued by most people in her community. As implied already, in both the novel and the film, women serve a purpose in Celie's personal journey.

Apart from Nettie and Shug, nobody seems to care for Celie much. In her life, she experiences mostly misery and suffering; to love and be loved is a foreign concept to her, as she confides to Shug: “Nobody ever love me.” (103) This statement is not entirely correct because of her beloved sister Nettie's love for her. However, speaking of romantic love, that

⁷⁹Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 35.

⁸⁰Terry, “The Same River Twice: Signifying *The Color Purple*,” 63.

⁸¹Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 51.

⁸²Mel Watkins, “Some Letters Went to God,” *The New York Times*, published July 25, 1982, accessed February 5, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/07/25/books/some-letters-went-to-god-by-mel-watkins.html>.

is something she has never experienced before. Sexually abused by her 'Pa' and degraded by her husband who treats her as a slave, Celie was dehumanized. Mister sees her as an object and does not pay any attention to her, let alone her needs. He abuses her both physically and mentally. As a defense mechanism, Celie eventually represses her feelings completely. In the first half of the novel, until Shug's appearance, Celie does not feel entitled to even be mad. She is passive and does not care about living:

I can't even remember the last time I felt mad, I say. ... Couldn't be mad at her [her mother]. Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy... Then I start to feel nothing at all. (40)

When Mister is beating her, Celie overcomes the situation of terror and pain by convincing herself she is a tree, or more precisely a piece of wood, a lifeless entity: "It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree." (23) It is God and the afterlife that provides her with comfort and hope, as she tells Sofia: "This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways." (40) Her relationship to God develops simultaneously along with her identity. The arrival and presence of Shug Avery represent one of the turning points and mark the beginning of Celie's transformation, in both the literary work and the film adaptation. As Michelle Wallace writes in her essay "Blues for Mr. Spielberg," "Shug abandons her children but nurtures women around her."⁸³ Among other things, as Daniel W. Ross puts it, "Shug teaches Celie to find God in herself, in nature, and in her own feelings, including erotic ones."⁸⁴ The character claims: "God loves all them feelings." (176) In both the literary work and the movie, it is only when Shug Avery enters Celie's life that her heart, spirit, and body are awakened.

The protagonist slowly begins to perceive herself as a woman, and more importantly recognizes her needs, desires, and dreams. With the guidance received from Shug, Celie is introduced to her own body for the first time: "It a lot prettier than you thought, ain't it? She say from the door. It mine, I say. Where the button?" (75) According to Daniel W. Ross,

the process of discovering or developing desire begins, for Celie, with the reappropriation of her own body, which was taken from her by men. The repossession of her body encourages Celie to seek selfhood and later to assert that selfhood through spoken language. During this process Celie learns to love herself and others.⁸⁵

⁸³Michelle Wallace, "Blues for Mr Spielberg," in *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (Verso, 1990), 72.

⁸⁴Daniel W. Ross, "Celie in the Looking Glass: the Desire for Selfhood in *The Color Purple*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 34, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 72, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26282404>.

⁸⁵Ross, "Celie in the Looking Glass," 70.

In Walker's original story, it is obvious that the two women are physically attracted to each other. The literary work includes moments which prove Celie to be a lesbian and Shug to be bisexual:⁸⁶ "First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples I thought I had turned into a man... My hands tremble and my breath short." (47) The book also includes passages in which Celie and Shug become sexually intimate: "*Um*, she say, like she surprise. I kiss her back, say *um*, too. Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other. I don't know nothing bout it, I say to Shug. I don't know much, she say." (103) Wallace explains, "for Walker, lesbianism, which is never called that in the novel, becomes a kind of developmental narcissism, essential to Celie's discovery of orgasm, and so to her accomplishment of self-esteem."⁸⁷

From Spielberg's perspective, as presented in the film, the relationship appears to be based on a spiritual connection and understanding rather than a pure physical attraction. The passages in the letters which indicate both implicitly and explicitly this passion between the females in the book had not been incorporated into the cinematic version. Furthermore, in the film, there is only one scene in which Celie and Shug kiss. In addition, as pointed out by the writer in *The Same River Twice*, "in the movie, almost all the women kiss each other, making the kiss between Celie and Shug less significant."⁸⁸ Walker also recollects, "it was important to me that Celie and Shug be portrayed [in the film] as the lovers they are in *The Color Purple* [...] [but] I knew their passion would be sacrificed on the day 'the kiss' was shot."⁸⁹ Again, as far as the kissing scene is concerned, more likely the impression is that Shug feels sorry for Celie and wants her to experience love in the true sense, and that seems to be the primary reason for the kiss – to make her feel loved.

3.2.2 Shug Avery

Shug Avery is a free-spirited and sexually curious prosperous blues singer. She is a woman that controls her own life. Unlike Celie, Shug is not afraid to use her voice. She is a very vocal person, saying what is on her mind out loud: "Turn loose my goddamn hand, she say to Mr ——. What the matter with you, you crazy? I don't need no weak little boy can't say no to his daddy hanging on me. I need me a man." (45) In the story, both Shug Avery and Sofia Butler (Sofia's character being discussed in more detail in 3.2.3) are revolutionary

⁸⁶Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 35.

⁸⁷Wallace, "Blues for Mr Spielberg," 70.

⁸⁸Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 168.

⁸⁹Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 219.

figures when taking into account the historical and cultural background the story is set in. As Albert claims:

Shug act more manly than most men. I mean she upright, honest. Speak her mind and the devil take the hindmost. You know Shug will fight. Just like Sofia. She bound to live her life and be herself no matter what. Sofia and Shug are not like men, but they not like women either. (244)

Her character is the direct opposite of Celie's. Shug is eccentric, self-assertive ("Good thing I ain't your damn wife." (69)), and knows how to make men love her. Again, Albert points out: "Shug got talent, she can sing. She got spunk. She can talk to anybody. Shug got looks. She can stand up and be notice." (186) In addition, and most importantly, she knows how to fight for herself.

In the film, Shug Avery is played by Margaret Avery, and Walker was pleased with this casting.⁹⁰ In the novel, the character of Shug was inspired by one of Walker's aunts who worked as a domestic worker in the North but always dressed beautifully and carried herself with confidence. As Walker recollects, "you couldn't imagine her [her aunt] cleaning her own house, not to mention anybody else's."⁹¹ This confidence and overall impression have been preserved in the movie. Yet, there is a difference between Walker's and Spielberg's vision of the character as far as the appearance is concerned.

Originally, similarly to Walker's aunt, Shug Avery has the "requisite 'stout' shape to qualify as sexy and 'womanly.'"⁹² The female figure admired in the rural American South in 1900s through 1940s was a "voluptuous, and portly"⁹³ one. Therefore, appearance-wise, Celie's main 'flaw' is that she is too skinny.⁹⁴ Walker clarifies this is where Mister's comment "you shape funny" (186) comes from. In addition, as mentioned in chapter 1.2, there are speculations that Shug Avery's character is partly based on one of the most significant influences on Walker's creative journey, Zora Neale Hurston. Supported by a statement made by one of the people who knew Hurston personally, she was also of a rather stout figure.⁹⁵ It seems that Walker's intention was to create Shug as the opposite to Celie in every sense, not only personality-wise, but also physically. Shug is meant to be recognized as attractive, which in the context of *The Color Purple* means plump. For this reason, the film version of Shug may be criticized for not being completely correspondent because in the film adaptation the

⁹⁰Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 30.

⁹¹Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 52.

⁹²Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 52.

⁹³Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 52.

⁹⁴Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 51.

⁹⁵Walker, "Looking for Zora," 407.

woman is rather scrawny. Furthermore, in both the novel and Spielberg's adaptation, Shug Avery's role is one of the intermediary.

Shug is the love interest of both Celie and Albert. The three characters create a love triangle. Ironically enough, this is what makes Celie feel as if she belonged: "Then I see myself sitting there quilting tween Shug Avery and Mr ——. Us there set gainst Tobias... For the first time in my life, I feel just right." (55) Shug then uses this position of hers to save Celie from the battering. When she learns that Albert beats Celie for not being her, Shug is determined to use her privilege and advantage, meaning her power over Albert, to make it stop: "I won't leave, she say, until I know Albert won't even think about beating you." (72) Furthermore, the love that Albert and Shug have for each other is also the reason why Celie does not loathe her husband completely: "I know you wonder why I don't hate him. I don't hate him for two reasons. One, he love Shug. And two, Shug use to love him." (236) It even contributes to her having the capacity to eventually forgive him.

To Albert, Shug is the love of his life. To Celie, she is an idol, a goddess to be worshipped – "I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying." (47) – as well as a catalyst for the awakening of Celie's sexuality and her overall transformation. Shug, her lifestyle, and approach to life make Celie see that there is much more a woman can be than an abused, enslaved, and silenced housewife. Despite all the other female characters that had come before Shug and participated over time in Celie's transformation, as she was becoming more and more aware of the fact things can be different, it is Shug Avery, her influence, and most importantly her love that finalize it. She gives Celie the strength to do what Nettie and Sofia ("You ought to bash Mr ——— open, she say. Think bout heaven later." (40)) had advised her to do – to fight for herself. Shug helps her to take the first step to being independent and establishing better future. Shug's statement – "Celie is coming with us." – (180) is the initial impulse to the story's climax when the protagonist at last speaks her mind for the very first time and leaves her husband. Since that moment Celie starts to create her own life: "It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation." (180) Thanks to Shug, she is able to start her own business and become financially self-sufficient. In return, Celie provides her with the opportunity to set herself free from the ego that had been burdening Shug in the past. Prior to Celie, she could not let go of Albert and their affair. As Shug confesses to Celie:

I treated you [Celie] so mean. Like you was a servant. And all because Albert married you. And I didn't even want him for a husband. I never really wanted Albert for a husband. But just to choose me, you know...
(112)

She envied and punished every woman that married him in spite of the fact she herself did not want to be married to Albert. In a way, Celie helps her to mature and to see what she could not see before. Celie allows Shug to reconsider her vision of Albert and what the two shared. Later in the story, in one of their peaceful moments, Albert tells Celie, “Shug spoke right up for you, Celie. She say Albert, you been mistreating somebody I love. So as far as you concern, I’m gone.” (245) Shug Avery is a strong independent woman and nothing from her personal life seems to affect her on a deeper level, yet she herself does struggle with her parent’s disapproval of her lifestyle, and more importantly of her sexual promiscuity.

In *The Color Purple*, the reader learns that Shug did not receive much love from her mother, and her relationship with both her mother and her father was rather complicated. They disowned her because of her way of life. When Shug falls sick, the rumors say that she has “some kind of nasty woman disease” (42), meaning a sexually transmitted illness. Her parents refuse to take care of her because it confirmed what they already thought of her: “Her mammy say, She told her so. Her pappy say, Tramp.” (42) However, it is Shug’s alienation with her father that Spielberg decided to pay attention to and he develops this rather secondary plot line more than it originally is in the novel. In that sense, Spielberg’s depiction of this ‘father-daughter’ relationship differs from Walker’s original version because as she writes, the father “does not really exist in the novel in such a blown way.”⁹⁶

In the film, the parent physically appears multiple times and it is clear that Shug longs for his attention and the father has no interest in seeing her nor talking to her. Shug suffers from the lack of love and rejection coming from her father. In the bathing scene early in the film, Shug Avery asks Celie: “Your pa love you? My pa loved me. (she says, proud) My pa still loves me... ..except he don't know it. He don't know it. (says, crying).”⁹⁷ Later in the adaptation, Shug gets married and, according to Wallace, “the film hints she’s done so to please her father.”⁹⁸ When she attempts to share the news with him, he runs away from her, never giving Shug a chance to approach him. It is not until the very end of the movie that the two reconcile. This scene in particular is discussed in more detail in subchapter 3.3. In the novel, Walker does not elaborate on this relationship much. The reader never meets Shug Avery’s father.

⁹⁶Walker, introduction, xiv.

⁹⁷Spielberg, *The Color Purple*, 0:56:10-0:56:30.

⁹⁸Wallace, “Blues for Mr Spielberg,” 73.

3.2.3 Sofia Butler

Sofia Butler, Harpo's wife, is the one woman in Celie's environment whose life situation is similar to Celie's (for example in comparison to Shug Avery's), yet still completely different. Sofia actively defies any kind of oppression, and refuses to yield to her husband. As Walker recollects, Oprah Winfrey, who plays the character of Sofia in Spielberg's adaptation, embodies Sofia's spirit in a remarkable way.⁹⁹ In both the novel and the movie, the character represents one of the first womanists.¹⁰⁰ Sofia is self-assertive, just like Shug Avery, not letting anyone, and especially men, to belittle her: "Naw suh. She say. I ain't in no trouble. Big, though." (31) So much so that when a white woman asks her to be her maid she responds resolutely: "Hell no." (81) Because of her daring behavior she is put in prison; nevertheless, it shows how firmly Sofia believes in her independence and worth, willing to fight for it no matter what it takes.

Sofia is a stout female who holds the upper hand in the family. She is independent and physically strong. In addition, Sofia's and Harpo's gender roles are to a certain extent reversed: "She tells Harpo, Hold the baby." (34) "I look out cross the yard. I see Sofia dragging a ladder and then lean it up gainst the house. She wearing a old pair of Harpo pants. [...] She clam up the ladder to the roof, begin to hammer in nails." (58) Towards the end of the story, Celie opens her store and she hires Sofia, which means that she earns money, while Harpo stays at home and takes care of their children. At first, Harpo does whatever he can to secure his position as a man. He attempts to apply his father's method to "make Sofia mind" (35) and beat her but she fights him back ruthlessly.

Eventually, when tired of the constant need to assert her equal position in her own home, Sofia takes the children and decides to leave to live with her sisters. As Watkins writes, Sofia's "rebellious spirit leads her [...] to desert her overbearing husband."¹⁰¹ Celie's reaction ("He your husband, I say. Got to stay with him. Else, what you gon do?" (62)) is relevant because at that point she cannot imagine doing something as brave. At the beginning, Celie is jealous of Sofia's courage and ability to fight her husband, which results in her advising Harpo to beat his wife: "I say it cause I'm a fool, I say. I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't. [...] Fight, I say." (39) Sofia's departure is an example of her unconscious influence on the formation of Celie's new identity. In the novel, this alliance based on Sofia's sympathy for Celie ("You feels sorry for me, don't you? She think a minute.

⁹⁹Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 30.

¹⁰⁰Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 54.

¹⁰¹Watkins, "Some Letters Went to God."

Yes ma'am, she say slow, I do." (39)) and Celie's admiration for Sofia is emphasized by the image of the two women sewing a quilt after Sofia forgives Celie for betraying her: "Let's make quilt pieces out of these messed up curtains, she say. And I run git my pattern book. I sleeps like a baby now." (41) In the novel, the symbol of the quilt, possibly interpreted as reconciliation, truce, or union, appears more than once, yet it was not used in Spielberg's adaptation.

As observed by Celie, when Sofia and Harpo are coming to Mister's house to announce their engagement they look as if marching. It is apparent that since the very beginning Sofia is the leader: "I see 'em coming way off up the road. They be just marching, hand in hand, like going to war. She in front a little." (30-31) In the adaptation, Sofia's dominance is highlighted even more, for the couple is not coming hand in hand. She is way ahead and Harpo is begging her to slow down but she does not listen. In fact, this is the first time the reader and the viewer meet Sofia's character and, therefore, it may be perceived as foreshadowing not only the character's nature but also the revolutionary role she is going to play in both the novel and the film adaptation, as far as women and their position in a household and patriarchal society is concerned. As Lauren Berlant writes, Sofia is the woman that "refuses to accede to both the patriarchal and the racist demand that the black woman demonstrates her abjection to her oppressors."¹⁰²

3.2.4 Albert Johnson (also known as Mister)

Similarly to Celie, her husband, Albert Johnson, is a dynamic character that undergoes a massive transformation. From a brutal, bitter, and abusive man who does not care much for neither his children nor his wife, he changes into a human being that connects with other human beings, Celie specifically, and finally is capable of feeling for them: "I'm real sorry she left you, Celie. I remember how I felt when she left me." (246) In comparison to the cinematic portrayal of Albert, in the novel, the character is originally of a small figure. This seems as a rather irrelevant minor detail, but, in fact, it represents a symbol of great significance, carrying a message about patriarchy. Spielberg's intention when casting Glover as Mister appears to be, among other things, using the size of his body to highlight Mister's strength, and therefore dominance, as a man. However, in her introductory letter to *The Color Purple's* 30th anniversary edition, Walker draws the reader's attention to the fact that the

¹⁰²Lauren Berlant, "Race, Gender, and Nation in *The Color Purple*," *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1988): 843, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343674>.

reason why she decided to make the character of Albert small was “to show how, under patriarchy, size does not matter when it comes to terrorizing and dominating women.”¹⁰³

Albert’s father made one of the most significant decisions of his life for him (“I didn’t want her. I wanted Shug. But my daddy was the boss. He give me the wife he wanted me to have.” (245)) and that not only cost him his happiness, but also, to a certain extent, formed him as an individual. As the character himself confesses to his wife, it is the reason behind his cruel behavior towards her: “I told Shug it was true that I beat you cause you was you and not her.” (245) Nevertheless, thanks to the relationship he later has with both Shug and Celie, and for that matter also thanks to witnessing the bond that the two females share together, Albert is awakened to love and the source of it:¹⁰⁴

Then the old devil put his arms around me and just 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. (246)

In one of her essays, Walker reflects on Mister as a misunderstood character. She writes, “I deeply love [Albert] – not, obviously, for his meanness, oppression of women, and general early boorishness, but because he went deeply enough into himself to find the courage to change. To grow.”¹⁰⁵ This growth of the character is captured in both the literary work and its film interpretation, yet the two versions differ in various aspects. In the original material, a crucial part of the transformation is him recognizing and embracing his feminine side, which is emphasized by the symbol of sewing. This aspect is omitted from the film completely, despite the author’s intention to keep it. She writes, “[in my script] I have kept Albert’s awakening to the fact that *it is attention to the details of tenderness* that supports and encourages life, which he learns under the guidance of a child.”¹⁰⁶

In the literary work, as the story progresses, Albert and Celie become closer, both suffering from loneliness, abandoned by the same person they love: “Mr —— seem to be the only one to understand my feeling.” (235) “He ain’t Shug, but he begin to be somebody I can talk to.” (250) Unlike in the adaptation, later in the novel, the two characters enjoy several conversations and those conversations are one of Albert’s chances to redeem himself. For the first time, he genuinely wants to learn more about Celie and her life. It is through this new and unique connection of theirs that Albert is reintroduced to his tender side. During one of their shared moments, Celie helps him to learn how to sew again, sewing being an activity he

¹⁰³Walker, introduction, xiv.

¹⁰⁴Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 52.

¹⁰⁵Walker, *Living by the Word*, 80.

¹⁰⁶Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 36.

used to do with his mother and enjoyed, but stopped doing because of being mocked by others: “Now us sit sewing and talking and smoking our pipes.” (247) Furthermore, another important symbol incorporated in the novel, related to the character of Mister, and omitted in Spielberg’s adaptation is the one of sea shells.

In the original story, Albert collects shells. As the author writes, he becomes a “man who comes to treasure the fragility and beauty of seashells without having ever seen the sea,”¹⁰⁷ which suggests how major the transformation of his nature was. He spreads the shells everywhere around his house and that again implies the omnipresence of Albert’s new-found gentleness. When Celie comes to visit, he shows her the seashell collection and, as the protagonist writes, “he don’t say that much while you’re looking, but he hold each one like it just arrive.” (229) It is these shells that convince Celie to come into the house which represented pain for her. As she says: “Matter of fact, that’s how he got me up to the house again.” (229) In the novel, this passage may symbolize the act of forgiveness. Metaphorically speaking, Albert offers Celie his tenderness to, again, fix his past behavior as well as to redeem his soul, and she, by coming upstairs, accepts it. This moment is the turning point since which the two characters gradually create a friendship and grow closer. From Spielberg’s standpoint, Albert is not provided with such opportunities. In her memoir, Walker explains why, saying, “I still regret that Mister was not as ‘forgiven’ by Steven [Spielberg] as he was by me.”¹⁰⁸ In *The Color Purple* (film), Celie and Albert never develop a friendship.

In the adaptation, the two do not engage in any conversations. As the original movie script, written by the writer herself, suggests, Walker’s idea for the film was to have Albert and Celie find their way to each other, which happens eventually in the novel and represents one of the powerful messages in *The Color Purple*. The author enabled the male antagonist to evolve, and to be more invested in Celie’s life despite his mistreatment of the woman, and most importantly, Walker allowed him to earn to be forgiven. To demonstrate, the scene in which Celie learns that Nettie’s ship was sunk was initially supposed to be an emotional moment shared by her and Albert, as he comforts Celie in her sorrow:

Celie: (*drops to the ground. ALBERT reads the telegram. Drops down beside her and takes her in his arms.*)¹⁰⁹

However, the script was rewritten by Menno Meyjes, and the scene was not included in the film adaptation at all. In spite of the fact that Walker herself approved of Meyjes’ script,¹¹⁰ it

¹⁰⁷Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 52.

¹⁰⁸Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 41.

¹⁰⁹Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 131.

¹¹⁰Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 186.

seems that the main purpose of her *The Color Purple* was, on one hand, to address the issues listed above and open the conversation but on the other hand, the intention is also to provide the opportunity for change and improvement, which does not necessarily appear to be the case of the film. In addition, it also again puts the accusation that Walker wrote the book to merely “expose” and humiliate Black men into question.

In the novel, not only Albert, but also Harpo evolved, in the end accepting and loving his wife for who she is. In subchapter 3.2.3, the reversed gender roles of the two characters and Harpo’s desire to tame Sofia are mentioned. As the story progresses, Harpo comes to terms with his place in the family and the fact he married a woman of strong character: “I ast Harpo do he mind if Sofia work. What I’m gon mind for? he say. It seem to make her happy. And I can take care of anything come up at home.” (254) Guo Deyan writes,

after the struggle with the overwhelmingly powerful patriarchal culture, both black men and women bring themselves to a redefinition of self in the family and in the society. They discover their ability to love and to be loved and learn to embrace the selfhood, sisterhood and brotherhood.¹¹¹

In Spielberg’s *The Color Purple* (film), this does not appear to be the primary goal, considering the analysis of the director’s approach to the character provided above. The cinematic version deals with the first half of the novel and does not elaborate on the second one much. When making an adaptation, it is common for the film maker to narrow the amount of content included in the film; nevertheless, in *The Color Purple* (film) the overall perspective was shifted and, as Linda Hutcheon points out fittingly, “shifts in the focalization or point of view of the adapted story may lead to major differences.”¹¹² In this case, it means focusing on violence and harm more than on progress and improvement, the latter being what Walker originally aimed to arrive at, it seems. This may then also be viewed as one of the stimuli concerning the controversy discussed in subchapter 3.1.

3.3 Scenes

This chapter examines in more detail a mere selection of sequences in Spielberg’s *The Color Purple* (film), comparing those with the original passages in Walker’s novel. Some scenes have been covered already in previous chapters, incorporated in the study when relevant and useful to the particular discussion. To a certain extent, this chapter elaborates on the topic introduced in subchapter 3.2.4, meaning the change of the focal point in the second

¹¹¹Guo Deyan, “A Modern Allegory of *The Color Purple*,” *Canadian Social Studies* 1, no.1 (May 2005): 88, <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/viewFile/91/93>.

¹¹²Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 11.

half of the adaptation. This fact represents the cornerstone that the following analysis revolves around, as it influences the director's interpretation greatly.

Firstly, the presentation of Albert's evolution in both media is examined, discussing in each the difference in the portrayal of the character's life as well as his position in the community as the story progresses. In this case, the final scene is of primary focus. The study then pays attention to the discrepancies in the depiction of Celie's life after she breaks free from Mister, one of them being the partial, yet substantial omission of parts which emphasize the protagonist as a reborn and independent woman. This claim is linked to and justified by the debate on the shift in focus mentioned above. One of the scenes used to indicate this transition of Celie's is the train scene, a journey representing the female's rebirth and second chance in life. One of the details mentioned in relation to this particular sequence is Celie throwing chocolate coins to a little Black girl that she imagines to be her sister Nettie. Lastly, the chapter deals with the marginalization of God's presence in the film, looking at the discussion about the concept of God, which may be perceived as one of the key passages in the literary work, yet is rather peripheral in Spielberg's film adaptation.

As noted above, some scenes had to be excluded from the analysis provided, such as those set in Africa. This choice had been made in belief that an issue of such complexity, both historically and culturally speaking, is suitable for a separate study, which would not fit in this BA thesis in order to be explored sufficiently. According to Walker, the African scenes are those not done well,¹¹³ and that only deepens the potential desire to approach these parts of the film separately. Another scene not included in the analysis, yet worth mentioning, as an interesting historical detail overlooked by the film production, is the one of Sofia coming home on Christmas to see her children and family for the first time in five years, being brought by her mistress, Miz Millie, by car. Sofia has been teaching Miz Millie to drive, which means she can sit in the front seat next to her master lady. In the novel, when done teaching, Shug wants to remain sitting in the front and is reminded by the white lady that she can no longer do so because she is Black:

[...] she say, Sofia, with a little laugh, This *is* the South. She clear her throat, laugh some more. Look where you sitting, she say. [...] Have you ever seen a white person and a colored sitting side by side in a car, when one of 'em wasn't showing the other one how to drive it or clean it? I got out the car, opened the back door and clammed in. (97)

¹¹³Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 158.

In the film, the two women are both sitting in the front seat when approaching the house,¹¹⁴ which could be perceived as an error, considering the fact that at that time (circa 1930s) the Jim Crow Laws were still in effect.

3.3.1 Inclusion vs. Exclusion of Albert ("Mister")

Speaking of focalization, one of the main differences between the novel and the film adaptation is the shift of the focal point from Celie to Albert towards the end of Spielberg's *The Color Purple* (film). Unlike in the film, in the case of the literary work, the story is provided from Celie's perspective till the very end of the novel. Walker claims, in Susan Dworkin's "The Strange and Wonderful Story of the Making of *The Color Purple* (film)," "He [Danny Glover] was in almost every scene, in almost every shot, and sometimes I would worry that it was going to become his story — Mister's story, not Celie's."¹¹⁵

On one hand, in the film, Albert's character is presented as an outcast due to the lack of forgiveness on the director's part, as suggested above. On the other hand, towards the end of the adaptation, the cinematic interpretation shows Mister as a drunk to be pitied and makes the audience have sympathy for him. As Terry states, "the portrayal of 'Pa' and 'Mister' in the film is one which in many respects is more sympathetic than that in the novel."¹¹⁶ The writer comments on this fact in one of her essays, saying,

a book and movie that urged us to look at the oppression of women and children by men became the opportunity by which many black men draw attention to themselves— [...] to claim that inasmuch as a "negative" picture of them was presented to the world, they were, in fact, the ones *being* oppressed.¹¹⁷

Celie's leaving is supposed to be the key moment in the woman's life as it marks the beginning of her metaphorical rebirth, the new phase in her life in which she is independent of men, yet since this move, in the film, the story is presented from the man's point of view. In this sense, the director's idea for *The Color Purple* (film) seems torn. Mister is excluded from the community, which is, among other examples, illustrated by his presence in the background, watching the sisters' reunion in the final scene from afar rather than from the porch along with others as in the novel. However, Celie's experience and accomplishments are overshadowed by Mister's situation which is a result of her departure. Either consciously,

¹¹⁴Spielberg, *The Color Purple*, 1:30:35-1:30:47.

¹¹⁵Dworkin, "The Strange and Wonderful Story of the Making of *The Color Purple* (film)," reprinted in Alice Walker's *The Same River Twice*, 180.

¹¹⁶Terry, "Signifying *The Color Purple*," 66.

¹¹⁷Walker, *Living by the Word*, 79.

or subconsciously, this makes the viewer feel as if what happened to Mister is the woman's fault because she abandoned him.

As far as the closing scene is concerned, Walker's original version evokes a sense of equality: "Me and him and Shug sitting out on the porch after dinner." (259) This image refers back to the writer's desire to use the work as a progressive image of an African American family who has undergone a transformation as a whole. As Walker writes in *The Same River Twice*, "the feeling of the people is *circle*, not hierarchy."¹¹⁸ From Spielberg's point of view, Albert is pushed in the back as an onlooker when Celie's sister and her children come. He stands in the field of purple flowers, watching the car to arrive with a regretful smile on his face. Albert does not approach and greet the visitors. On the contrary, he walks away, finally giving the sisters space. The character going in the opposite direction of the house and the rest of the community may symbolize his recognition of the crimes he had committed in the past as well as his propitiation. In the novel, he is involved in the passage, directly and not merely peripherally. Spielberg does follow Walker's plot line and allows Albert to bring Celie and Nettie back together, giving him an opportunity for redemption but there is no forgiveness nor invitation for him to join the reunion and the happy family, as there is in the original material.

In the film adaptation, visually, Albert's horse plays an important role with a symbolic meaning. He is always riding the horse, never walking next to it, which evokes a sense of dominance and his power to subjugate, women specifically. In fact, in one of the early scenes with this character involved, the image of him riding the horse to Pa's house for a permission to marry his step-daughter foreshadows his control. The progression in Albert's development means change in his position to the animal also. In addition to what has been discussed above in relation to the closing sequence, at the end of the film, when Albert, alone, surrounded by the purple wildflowers only, watches everything from afar and finally does not interfere in any way, for the first time, he walks the horse, treating the animal as an equal. This may be viewed as a reflection of his transformed attitude towards females as well as him letting go of being in charge by force. This symbol is not elaborated on in the novel; therefore, it may be classified as one of the tools of the cinematic medium to convey vividly one of Albert's characteristics.

¹¹⁸Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 143.

3.3.2 Depiction of Celie as a Free Woman

As discussed in the preceding subchapter, in the second half of the work, or more precisely the final quarter, as that is approximately the amount of time that the director dedicated to this part of the story, Steven Spielberg decided to switch the perspective from Celie's to Albert's, and it has been done so at the expense of the more detailed portrayal of Celie's life after she leaves her oppressive husband. Unlike the film, the literary work does elaborate on this stage of her evolution in more detail. For example, in the film adaptation, the cohabitation of Celie and Shug in Memphis is not included at all. The adaptation shows the house that Celie inherits from her biological father from a distance only and not more than once nor does it show the shop where she eventually runs her own business. The cinematic version of the story does not revolve around these elements which represent the protagonist's self-sufficiency and freedom much, yet there are several scenes which are concerned with these newly acquired attributes of Celie's, for example the sequence on a train.

This part of the film in particular implies both literally and figuratively that the once submissive and oppressed woman is now free and on her way to her independence from men. It also illustrates the already mentioned transition from the protagonist's point of view to the one of her husband's. While Celie is standing in the back of the train, watching the railway go by, the audience witnesses a smooth change of the setting. It is a good example of what was discussed in subchapter 2.2.2 and 2.2.3 with regards to the techniques of film makers which differ from those of writers. The camera focuses on the railway as the image dissolves¹¹⁹ and then transforms into a close-up of a tire of Albert's tractor. That way the audience is being shifted into the future and since that point watches the rest of the story from Albert's perspective. It is at this very moment that the viewer is introduced to his management of not only the property, but also his own life without Celie.

Demonstrated visually by for instance the window shutter falling off, or the bullet holes in his mailbox, it is clear that Albert's life is miserable. Prior to Celie's departure, she put a curse on Albert to vent her emotions and to make him pay for what he has done to her:

I curse you, I say. Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble. [...] Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice. [...] The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot, I say. [...] Anything you do to me, already done to you. (187)

¹¹⁹Film terminology: "also called a lap dissolve = a gradual transition from one image to another, with the first image beginning to disappear as the second image gradually appears" more information via: <https://masterclass.com/articles/what-is-a-dissolve-in-filmmaking-how-to-know-when-to-use-a-dissolve-transition#how-to-make-a-dissolve>.

This curse is incorporated in both the novel and the film; nevertheless, in the film, there is more emphasis put on it. The visuals are helping to enhance the toll it has taken on Albert and his daily happenings. In the adaptation, Albert seems to believe Celie's words and it feels like he is seriously scared for his life, which makes him take Nettie's final letter that he finds and help her and the rest of Celie's family to come home so that the curse could be broken and he would find peace. In the novel, the only source of information is Sofia who tells Celie:

Sofia say after I left, Mr —— live like a pig. Shut up in the house so much it stunk. [...] He couldn't sleep, she say. At night he thought he heard bats outside the door. Other things rattling in the chimney. But the worst part was having to listen to his own heart. (202-203)

Because in the literary work the narrative is from Celie's perspective, the reader does not get detailed information on how Albert was doing when living alone.

Additionally, coming back to the scene in the train included in the film, this particular sequence not only symbolizes the woman's journey to freedom and better future, but also may be perceived as a foreshadowing of the happy reunion with her sister, as she imagines the girl Celie sees running after the train to be Nettie. Celie, throwing the chocolate coins to her may then foreshadow her ability to finally provide for both of them and that way to take care of her little sister in the future, as Celie once promised: "But I'll take care of you. With God help." (5) "Oh Nettie, us have a house! A house big enough for us and our children, for your husband and Shug. Now you can come home cause you have a home to come to!" (222)

As implied already in this BA thesis, sewing is an important symbol in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. The activity brings estranged individuals together, serves as a coping mechanism, helps them to heal old wounds and to let go of dispute. Celie's unisex "folkspants" (193) may represent rejection of gender stereotypes as well as a source of living, and therefore autonomy, even though she cannot see it herself at first, possibly because it is such a natural thing for her to do: "I say, You know, I love doing this, but I got to git out and make a living pretty soon. Look like this just holding me back. Shug laugh. [...] You making your living Celie, she say. Girl, you on your way." (193) In the film adaptation, the symbol is not as pervasive. The fact that Celie owns a small business and makes pants is presented in one scene only at the very end.

The writer was not impressed by such an omission. She even found it degrading the symbol and more importantly the woman's effort. Walker writes, "the handling of Celie's genius for making trousers is unsatisfactory. I felt badly for her (for her character but also for real women on whom such a character might be based) that her creations become an object

of amusement rather than appreciation.”¹²⁰ In the novel, a great number of people come to her asking for the pants because they recognize and value the quality of Celie’s work. In the film, in the scene taking place in Celie’s store which is rather short, Harpo tries the pants on doubting it is unisex, and Sofia laughs at him, asking, “where you planning on wearing them britches?”¹²¹ He responds, “nowheres,” shaking his head, looking ashamed, which as Walker noted is quite unfortunate considering the original symbolical message.

3.3.3 The Concept of God

The concept of God, or more precisely the redefinition of the concept of God is one of the prominent themes in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. As Jeannine Thyreen puts it, “*The Color Purple* redefines God, moving it from a patriarchal notion toward an understanding that the Spirit must be claimed within one’s self and the Divine recognized in nature and in the world.”¹²² Despite Spielberg’s choice to include this part rather briefly in the film adaptation, Celie’s discussion with Shug on this subject represents one of the key moments in the novel. Walker says,

The Color Purple really is a book about learning to believe in your own god, or goddess, or divinity, or whatever is sacred to you. [...] That is why, at the end, Celie understands that if God is anything, God is everything. [...] That is what this book is primarily about. It’s about understanding that people may well need to have religions in order to further their social programs and their political agendas or even their spiritual desires, but essentially what is divine is in front of you all the time.¹²³

In the literary work, the focus is clearly shifted from the traditional Christian image of God, that being a white male to whom one shall come in order to find redemption and peace, to a kind of abstract entity, a spirit, found not only in everything that the world is made of, but most importantly in people themselves. As Shug tells Celie: “Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me.” (174) In the novel, it is clear that Celie’s attitude to life is changing rapidly based on her evolved understanding of religion and spirituality.

¹²⁰Walker, introduction, xv.

¹²¹Spielberg, *The Color Purple*, 2:16:38-2:16:46.

¹²²Jeannine Thyreen, “Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*: Redefining God and (Re)Claiming the Spirit Within,” *Christianity and Literature* 49, no. 1 (Autumn 1999): 50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44313596>.

¹²³Ferris, “I Know What the Earth Says,” 8.

As implied above, this evolution happens because of the only person Celie ever loved romantically, and the fact Shug Avery is going to change Celie's perspective on this matter is foreshadowed in the early stage of their relationship: "I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying." (47) She makes Celie realize that to believe in God means to experience oneself, the earthly life, nature and all that the three have to offer fully. One's responsibility is to be present, aware and open, not merely waiting for the afterlife to come, which is what Celie was originally doing: "This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways." (40) In Walker's *The Color Purple*, to the protagonist, the discussion is enlightening and eye-opening: "Us talk and talk bout God, but I'm still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make." (177) Her gradual acceptance of the new notion is demonstrated in the closing letter which opens with: "Dear God, dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God." (259) When she thanks for her sister and children to be back home, Celie addresses not only God, but also the whole world around her, which proves that the shift in her consciousness is complete. In the original version, it is apparent that the protagonist is undergoing a spiritual awakening, which is not as clear in the cinematic adaptation.¹²⁴

In Spielberg's film, the scene in which Celie and Shug Avery discuss this topic is not as developed. The conversation is not as detailed, and if there is any profound change happening in the consciousness of the main character as an outcome, it is not portrayed in the cinematic version. The sequence is rather short and does not seem to be of much importance. Apart from Shug's well-known statement ("I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (177)), the only message kept from the original dialogue is: "Everything want to be loved. Us sing and dance, make faces and give flower bouquets, trying to be loved. You ever notice that trees do everything to git attention we do, except walk?" (177) These lines do address the profound significance and power of the natural world, yet neither this claim nor the overall scene refer to it as the source equal to the notion of God as a white old man. Walker says, in *The Color Purple*, "nature, and a bearded, long-haired white man in the sky, have changed places."¹²⁵ In the case of *The Color Purple* (film), the viewer may fail to comprehend this original intention, being, as stated by Thyreen, to abandon "a fixed, patriarchal notion of God for one that is more free, recognizing the Divine in all of creation and claiming the Spirit within the individual."¹²⁶ The scene is

¹²⁴Walker, introduction, xv.

¹²⁵Walker, introduction, xv.

¹²⁶Thyreen, "Redefining God," 65.

included towards the end, prior to the final scene, as a brief mention only rather than a statement of certain value. In fact, it seems that, to a certain extent, Spielberg's interpretation of the question of religion is almost completely reversed.

Despite the writer's attempt and goal to shift the understanding of God by expanding its presence outside church buildings, the director appears to be doing the exact opposite. Not only does he not stress Walker's innovative perception on this matter, but also, consciously or subconsciously, orients it back inside the local church building, both figuratively and literally. This is illustrated by Shug Avery who, once she returns to her hometown, keeps coming back there to see her father. Spielberg puts emphasis on Shug's father who, in the film adaptation, is a preacher with very firm Christian beliefs and conventional values. In relation to this, another prominent theme, used in both the film and the novel, yet interpreted differently in each, arises: the theme of redemption.

Shug's constant need for her dad's approval makes her, as Delores S. Williams puts it, "relinquish her moral freedom before the harsh authority of the judgmental male god her father represents in this world."¹²⁷ She marries a man, even though she is bisexual and seems to love Celie, and settles down for a little while to convince him that she has changed and now lives a more respectable life, in spite of the fact that such a conventional living is not what Shug truly wants. This persistent desire to make herself worthy of her father's love is not present in the original story at all. In the film, as presented by the director, the idea seems to be that it is only when the woman accepts the male's authority fully that she can be redeemed and find her inner peace. Williams clarifies the reason behind such a discrepancy in Walker's and Spielberg's creation, saying,

the difference in the treatment of redemption by Walker's book and Spielberg's movie results from the different method each uses to bring contemporary feminist issues into relation with black culture. Walker subjects black culture to the authority of feminist issues. Spielberg's movie subjects feminist issues to the authority of black culture.¹²⁸

Therefore, Shug's salvation is inevitably connected to the traditional notion of male God, demonstrated by her father being put in that position. This, again, is contrary to Walker's belief, as it is the opposite of female liberation. In the novel, the two female characters, Shug and Celie, free themselves, to a certain extent, by recognizing and maintaining their spiritual freedom. As Williams points out fittingly,

¹²⁷Delores S. Williams, "Commentary: Examining Two Shades of 'Purple,'" *Los Angeles Times*, published March 15, 1986, accessed May 15, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-03-15-ca-21103-story.html>.

¹²⁸Williams, "Examining Two Shades of 'Purple.'"

the characterization of the liberating relation between Shug and Celie leads to Walker's larger message about the terms of redemption. That message is that women's liberation also leads to men's redemption. Celie's new self-affirming independence causes the redemption of her husband, Mr—— who, in the past, brutalized Celie. [...] Through the friendly conversations between Mr—— and Celie near the end of the book, Walker shows that his salvation has also necessitated a change in his consciousness. In a positive sense, he has changed his mind about male-female relationships, about love and sexuality.¹²⁹

From the writer's point of view, redemption is found in the change of a mindset which then potentially leads to personal freedom and peace. The final scene in which Shug and her father finally reconcile and embrace each other may put Shug's free spirit into question, as Spielberg decides to make the character surrender and finally submit to the pressure of male domination. Nevertheless, Walker's reaction to this sequence was quite positive. She writes,

the intent in the film, which isn't a bad idea, is to show how, in African American culture, the blues and spirituals come together; graphically depicted by Shug Avery leading her band and all the revelers from the Juke Joint into the middle of the Sunday service.¹³⁰

On one hand, the writer may not approve of the misconception created by the film around this topic in relation to Celie and her personal journey to enlightenment¹³¹ but, on the other hand, she also does not mind the additional value that the director incorporated in the story. As implied by Walker, no matter how preoccupied the film seems to be with the negatives, this particular scene¹³² serves as a glimmer of hope in the darkness that Spielberg emphasized because, in the end, he allows these two worlds to unite.

¹²⁹Williams, "Examining Two Shades of 'Purple.'"

¹³⁰Walker, introduction, xiv-xv.

¹³¹ Walker, introduction, xv.

¹³²Spielberg, *The Color Purple*, 2:18:13-22:22:55

Conclusion

In many ways, Alice Walker's work challenges the United States' perception of the Black community by providing a realistic and raw portrayal of African American families. The writer works with not only the theme of racism, but also of sexism, which is pervasive in the novel analyzed in this BA thesis. In her prose and poetry, Walker incorporates the legacy and sorrows of Black ancestors, and by doing so, in *The Color Purple* specifically, she confronts Black people, opening a conversation which provoked great dissatisfaction and disapproval. To this reaction, the author responds, "our shame is deep. For shame is the result of soul injury. [...] Art is the mirror, perhaps the only one, in which we can see our true collective face. We must honor its sacred function. We must let art help us."¹³³ The novel was labeled as controversial and banned from several libraries across the USA. Walker adds, "I belong to a people so wounded by betrayal, so hurt by misplacing their trust, that to offer us a gift of love is often to risk one's life, and certainly one's name and reputation."¹³⁴ Walker participated in the Civil Rights Movement to defend the rights of all African Americans in the USA; nevertheless, she soon readjusted her focus on the struggles of Black females who have been continuously mistreated not only by the white supremacy, but also by the Black patriarchy. *The Color Purple* tells a story which, as stated in chapter 3.1, is almost identical to those of many African American women, whose experience has finally been shared through Celie's own.

This BA thesis compares Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* with Steven Spielberg's film adaptation of the same name, released three years after the literary work was published. To contextualize the interest of the thesis, in chapter 1, the author's life and her career path are explored. Chapter 2 is then concerned with the concept of the film adaptation and its brief, yet comprehensive introduction. In chapter 3, the two works of art are analyzed in detail. The analysis includes a commentary on the controversy, the examination of the characters as portrayed in both the novel and the cinematic interpretation, and the study of specific scenes, discussing three themes prominent in the story: the presentation of Albert and the difference between Walker's and Spielberg's approach to him, the depiction of Celie's freedom, and the integration of God and spirituality in both versions. The analysis is based on my personal observations which are supported by a great number of appropriate secondary sources, consisting of academic and critical essays, books, articles, interviews with the writer, the director as well as the cast, and other informative and valuable material. The main source of

¹³³Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 13.

¹³⁴Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 13.

inspiration was the writer herself. Not only her memoir *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult*, written as Walker's reflection on the period when the film was being made, but also her illuminating collections of essays, such as *Living by the Word*, or *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* served as the foundation to my research.

Throughout the writing process, several decisions had to be made, such as omitting the character of Nettie as well as the scenes set in Africa. To justify this choice, despite Nettie being one of the two most important people in Celie's life, for the most part, she is not physically present. The selection of characters studied in this thesis is based on the significance of their impact on Celie and her personal evolution. Even though Nettie influenced her sister in various ways prior to her departure, in the novel, the time period in which they did spend time together is relatively short, and other characters such as Shug Avery, Sofia, or Albert had a more profound influence on Celie, for they created the environment that the main character grew up in. In addition, in spite of the fact that Celie is generally recognized as the protagonist of *The Color Purple*, the book, to a certain extent, tells the story of Nettie's life as well. Through her letters to her sister, the reader follows Nettie's experience of travelling to and living in Africa with her missionary family. That way, Walker incorporates two different worlds. To focus on both plot lines and provide a sufficient and proper analysis of each at the same time may not lead to a satisfying result; therefore, I believe it to be desirable and useful to leave the latter for a separate and more thorough research.

The Color Purple (film) may be classified, based on Loius Gianetti's typology (provided in 2.2.2), as a faithful adaptation. Apart from some discrepancies, which are going to be summarized later in this conclusion, Spielberg's interpretation of Walker's original story is mostly corresponding, having preserved all key ideas, themes, characters, and symbols that the writer incorporated in her literary work. However, what also may have, and did, initiate the discussion about whether the film is, or is not truly faithful to the novel, is the way the director worked with those elements. To understand Spielberg's choices and techniques used to depict certain parts of the novel, the subchapter 2.2.2 examines the question of fidelity, exploring the level of correspondence necessary in order to make a high-quality film adaptation, presenting both pro and con arguments in reference to this matter. One of the notions proposed is that the goal of a cinematic adaptation is not to imitate or replicate, but to interpret and transform with the means and creative tools that the film, as a completely different medium from the one of a novel, has an access to in its own creative field. It is inevitable and rather impossible to not produce an extra quality, as a result of the film maker's

input, when filming a movie which is not based on an original story. The type, which would be called a literal adaptation, is applicable and attainable primarily in the case of stage plays,¹³⁵ as stated by Gianetti. Initially, Walker herself was not impressed by the final product.¹³⁶ Nevertheless, later she grew to like the film, admitting in her memoir, the second time watching *The Color Purple* (film),

I was finally able to see *it*, and let go of the scenes were *not* there. [...] I still felt a lot of the soul of the people — and that was lovely. It is just the opposite of reading a book. Reading a book is a solitary pleasure. [...] But watching a movie is better with lots of people — unless of course it's a dreadful, embarrassing film. Which I'm happy to say "Purple" is not.¹³⁷

The writer adds, in an interview hosted by Charlie Rose,

I think that Quincy and Steven were under a great deal of pressure, and that they were really trying to do it right, you see. [...] To make a film that would not embarrass black people.¹³⁸

Other participants, as for instance the leading actress Whoopi Goldberg, also proclaims the adaptation to be a good one¹³⁹ when reflecting on the public's reaction.

One of the main differences between the literary work and its cinematic version is in their focus. As suggested in subchapter 3.2.4 and then explored further in subchapter 3.3.1, unlike the novel which presents the story through Celie's perspective only, in the film adaptation, towards the end, the focalization is shifted and centered more around Albert. Shug Avery finding Nettie's letters is the turning point as well as the catalyst for the protagonist's departure. In the novel, Celie leaving her husband is the key event in her life and a new beginning which allows her to start living on her own terms. Walker provides a vivid description of Celie's life as a free and independent Black woman, which does not happen in Spielberg's interpretation. In the film, the moment the protagonist leaves is the moment since when the happenings are to be shown through Albert's perspective. Instead of following the steps of the woman and her journey to self-sufficiency, Spielberg chooses to elaborate on Mister and his struggles when without Celie. Furthermore, in the adaptation, once separated, these two characters have a very little chance to interact. In Walker's *The Color Purple*, Albert

¹³⁵Gianetti, *Understanding Movies*, 402.

¹³⁶Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 21.

¹³⁷Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 163.

¹³⁸"Alice Walker Interview (1996)," Youtube video, 13:00-13:12, posted by Manufacturing Intellect, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cLfCNwC5fw&t=723s>.

¹³⁹"Whoopi Goldberg on Controversy over *The Color Purple* TelevisionAcademy.com/Interviews," Youtube video, 2:05-2:12, posted by Foundation INTERVIEWS, February 17, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hlh4uaLyJMI>.

engages in multiple conversations with Celie, which gives him an opportunity to open his mind and heart, and that way to redeem himself and become a part of the community. In the film, he is rather excluded, humbled, giving Celie space. Albert's only opportunity to ask for forgiveness and show that he wants to change for the better is when he brings her sister Nettie and the children back home.

Another major difference between the two works of art is in the depiction of Shug and Celie's relationship. As stated in this BA thesis (3.2.1), in the novel, there is a physical attraction between the two women and it is apparent that Celie is lesbian and Shug bisexual. In the cinematic interpretation, their closeness is presented as of rather spiritual nature, resulting from Shug's sympathy for Celie and her situation. Walker comments on this fact, saying, "it [the film] is far more conventional than the novel, especially in terms of religion vs. spirituality, and Shug and Celie's relationship."¹⁴⁰ The reason behind this is clarified by Goldberg, who says, "people were mad that we didn't make the book exactly, but you know, that was 1984, nobody was going to let me and Shug make out. One kiss is all you get. He [Spielberg] could not have made the movie the book then. He just couldn't have."¹⁴¹ In addition, as far as the spirituality and presentation of God are concerned, this represents another profound discrepancy that can be found between Walker's and Spielberg's visions. As discussed in subchapter 3.3.3, one of the literary work's aims was to introduce a new understanding of the concept of God, replacing what may be labeled as the traditional image by the idea of the Spirit present in everything and everyone, bound by no particular gender or race. In the novel, this plays an important part in Celie's personal development and is rather omitted in *The Color Purple* (film).

Lastly, it is necessary to mention symbols because Spielberg decided to introduce some which are not used in the novel. It has already been stated that the director did preserve the key symbols, that being Celie making pants and the song called "Miss Celie's Blues" ("Sister"). On the other hand, he did not include, for example, Albert's collection of sea shells nor the symbolical sewing and quilting, both being quite prevalent in the book. As a visual product, the movie relies heavily on visual effects and images which serve as a hint for the audience. It is one of the tools which the filmmaker uses as a means of expression, a wordless act of communicating the meaning behind a specific scene. In the case of Spielberg's film, it is, for instance, the purple flowers, flower petals, and flower fields constantly present throughout the adaptation, or Albert's horse, chocolate coins, as well as the girls' playing a

¹⁴⁰Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 163.

¹⁴¹"Whoopi Goldberg on Controversy over *The Color Purple*" 1:18-2:06

pat-a-cake, while reciting a unique text of their own which expresses their strong bond and deep love for each other. The final symbol worth mentioning is the one of a mailbox, which, again, is not incorporated in Walker's novel but plays a significant role in the film. To Spielberg, it is as important as the leading characters.¹⁴² The director says, "that mailbox was empty like Celie's heart for so many years."¹⁴³ In the film, this feature encapsulates the life situation the protagonist finds herself in, and certainly, its meaning is relevant for the literary work as well. Waiting for her sister's letters to come, the mailbox, figuratively speaking, since it eventually does contain the very last one which finally brings Nettie and the children home, holds the ultimate message that where there is emptiness there can also be hope.

¹⁴²"*The Color Purple* / The Making of *The Color Purple* / Warner Bros. Entertainment," Youtube video, posted by Warner Bros. Entertainment, March 2021, 42:16-42:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfVlK58Zm-g>.

¹⁴³"*The Color Purple* / The Making of *The Color Purple*," 42:18-42:25.

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