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Beyond What Is Written: Sexuality, Gender, and Spirituality in *The Color Purple*

Více, než je psáno: Sexualita, gender a duchovno v *Barvě nachu*

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Declaration

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V Praze dne 5. ledna 2025 Lucie Malcová

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 course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma).

Prague, January 5, 2025 Lucie Malcová

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Abstrakt

Tato práce zkoumá román Alice Walker *The Color Purple* (*Barva nachu*) a jeho filmové adaptace—Spielbergův film z roku 1985 a muzikálovou verzi režiséra Blitze Bazawuleho z roku 2023—z hlediska sexuality, genderu a duchovna. S využitím teorií feministických, queer a filmových adaptací tato studie zkoumá, jak jsou intersekcionální kritika systematického útlaku a zobrazení osobního sebeuvědomění z románu reinterpretovány ve vizuálních médiích. Analýza se zabývá tím, jak sociokulturní a temporální kontexty ovlivňují tyto adaptace, což vede jak k posílení, tak k oslabení témat románu.

První kapitola se zaměřuje na zobrazení sexuality, konkrétně na vývoj Celie od zažívání sexuálního násilí a útlaku k získání autonomie a prozkoumání queer identity skrze její vztah se Shug Avery. Zatímco román explicitně zobrazuje queer lásku, což bylo ve své době revoluční, Spielbergova adaptace tento prvek výrazně potlačuje, což odráží společenská omezení 80. let. Naproti tomu adaptace Bazawuleho se snaží toto téma zdůraznit, avšak často upřednostňuje vizuální efekt a hudební prvky na úkor emocionální hloubky, která je patrná v příběhu románu. Druhá kapitola zkoumá genderovou dynamiku, zdůrazňuje kritiku patriarchálních struktur a nuance v zobrazování ženského odporu a mužské transformace. Celie, Sofia a Shug vzdorují tradičním genderovým rolím, zatímco Albert a Harpo se potýkají s jejich maskulinitou. Obě filmové adaptace tyto dynamiky zjednodušují—Spielberg zmírňuje kritiku toxické maskulinity, zatímco Bazawule zdůrazňuje ženskou odolnost, ale méně rozvíjí mužské perspektivy. Třetí kapitola zkoumá spiritualitu jako klíčový prvek transformace Celie, zasazený do historického kontextu role černošských církví. Román podporuje osobní a inkluzivní spiritualitu, zatímco adaptace využívají hudbu a vizuální prvky k vyobrazení duchovní cesty Celie. Bazawuleho muzikál zdůrazňuje kolektivní identitu skrze tradice gospelu, ale odklání se od románové kritiky institucionalizovaného náboženství.

Tato práce zdůrazňuje výzvy a kompromisy spojené s adaptací společensky významných textů pro širší publikum. I když obě adaptace zvyšují kulturní význam *Barvy nachu*, často zjednodušují komplexní propojení románu s tématy queer identity, genderu a duchovna, což odráží sociopolitické priority jejich dob. Poukázáním na tyto rozdíly studie ilustruje širší složitosti spojené s transformováním příběhů zaměřených na marginalizované hlasy napříč médii a kulturními kontexty.

Klíčová slova

Barva nachu, Alice Walker, sexualita, genderové role, náboženství, filmové adaptace, Afro-americká literatura

Abstract

This thesis critically examines Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and its cinematic adaptations—Steven Spielberg's 1985 film and Blitz Bazawule's 2023 musical—through the lenses of sexuality, gender, and spirituality. Employing feminist, queer, and movie adaptation theories, the study explores how the novel's intersectional critique of systemic oppression and its portrayal of personal empowerment are reinterpreted in visual media. The analysis considers how sociocultural and temporal contexts shape these adaptations, resulting in both amplification and dilution of the novel's themes.

The first chapter focuses on the representation of sexuality, particularly Celie's evolution from enduring sexual violence and repression to reclaiming her autonomy and exploring queer identity through her relationship with Shug Avery. The novel's explicit portrayal of queer love, groundbreaking for its time, is significantly muted in Spielberg's adaptation, reflecting societal constraints of the 1980s. In contrast, Bazawule's adaptation attempts to foreground this theme but often prioritizes visual spectacle and musical elements over the emotional depth found in Walker's narrative. The second chapter examines gender dynamics, emphasizing the novel's critique of patriarchal power structures and its nuanced exploration of both female resistance and male transformation. Celie, Sofia, and Shug defy traditional gender roles, while Albert and Harpo navigate their struggles with masculinity. Both film adaptations simplify these dynamics, with Spielberg softening the critique of toxic masculinity and Bazawule highlighting female empowerment but underdeveloping male perspectives. The third chapter investigates spirituality, contextualizing Celie's transformation within the Black church's dual role as a site of empowerment and patriarchal constraint. The novel advocates for a personal and inclusive spirituality, while the adaptations employ music and visual elements to depict Celie's spiritual journey. Bazawule's musical emphasizes collective identity through gospel traditions but shifts focus from the novel's critique of institutionalized religion.

This thesis underscores the challenges and compromises inherent in adapting socially significant texts for mainstream audiences. While both adaptations increase *The Color Purple*'s cultural visibility, they often simplify its complex engagement with queerness, gender, and spirituality, reflecting the sociopolitical priorities of their respective eras. By highlighting these differences, the study illustrates the broader complexities of translating narratives centered on marginalized voices across mediums and cultural contexts.

Key Words

The Color Purple, Alice Walker, sexuality, gender roles, religion, movie adaptations, African-American literature

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Introduction

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is an intricate exploration of intersecting themes such as race, gender, sexuality, and identity. Set in the American South during the early 20th century, the novel presents its protagonist, Celie, as a lens through which societal structures and personal transformation are examined. Walker's depiction of Celie's journey, from subjugation to self-discovery, encapsulates broader conversations about systemic oppression and individual empowerment. The novel's portrayal of Black womanhood, queerness, and the oppressive dynamics of gender roles has elicited both acclaim and critique, making it a touchstone in literary studies. Moreover, the translation of these complex themes into film adaptations has yielded divergent interpretations, with significant implications for how these narratives are received by contemporary audiences.

This thesis examines the representation of sexuality, gender, and spirituality in *The Color Purple* and its two film adaptations, Steven Spielberg's 1985 version and Samuel Bazawule's 2023 musical rendition. While the novel's treatment of these themes was groundbreaking in the 1980s, the adaptations reflect the sociopolitical and cultural constraints of their respective eras. Through an analysis of key aspects of the narrative—including Celie's sexual awakening, the evolving portrayals of masculinity, and the interplay between spirituality and self-expression—this work interrogates how *The Color Purple* continues to challenge and redefine conventional narratives.

The first chapter delves into the central theme of sexuality in *The Color Purple*, with a focus on Celie's evolution from enduring sexual violence and repression to embracing her autonomy and queer identity. Through her relationship with Shug Avery, Celie experiences a profound sexual and emotional awakening, a journey that Walker situated within the broader

context of Black queer representation in the 1980s. This chapter examines the novel's treatment of female desire and its challenge to heteronormative expectations, situating these elements within the cultural backdrop of female sexual representation and womanism, a movement distinct from mainstream feminism in its focus on women of colour. The chapter also evaluates how these themes are adapted—or diluted—in the two film adaptations.

The second chapter focuses on gender roles and the dynamics of power within *The Color Purple*. It explores how Walker critiques patriarchal structures through the experiences of her characters, particularly Celie, Shug Avery, and Sofia. Celie's journey from subservience to self-determination is emblematic of the novel's broader commentary on the limitations and possibilities of gender. This chapter also examines how the novel portrays masculinity, particularly through the characters of Albert and Harpo, who grapple with societal pressures and internalized norms of dominance and control. Their eventual transformations challenge traditional notions of masculinity, offering a vision of egalitarian relationships built on mutual respect. The chapter compares these nuanced portrayals with the film adaptations, which often simplify or soften the critique of gendered oppression.

The final chapter examines spirituality as a critical dimension of Celie's transformation. It situates the novel's spiritual journey within the historical context of the Black church in the early 20th-century United States, emphasizing its dual role as both a site of community empowerment and a perpetuator of patriarchal norms. It also considers how the adaptations visualize Celie's spiritual evolution, with Bazawule's musical employing gospel and other African American musical traditions to explore themes of liberation and self-expression. The

chapter assesses whether these adaptations retain the novel's critique of institutionalized religion and its advocacy for a more personal and inclusive spirituality.

The thesis employs an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on feminist, queer, and critical race theories to analyse the novel and its adaptations. By integrating literary analysis with film studies, the work explores how *The Color Purple* engages with and disrupts conventional narratives about identity, power, and representation. Secondary sources, including historical analyses and critical commentaries, contextualize the primary texts, offering insights into the cultural and societal factors that shape their production and reception.

By addressing themes of sexuality, gender, and spirituality, the thesis contributes to broader conversations about the complexities of translating deeply layered narratives into new mediums. The comparative analysis of Walker's novel and its cinematic adaptations underscores the challenges and opportunities inherent in adapting culturally significant texts, particularly those that centre on marginalized voices. Through its examination of The Color Purple and its adaptations, the thesis not only highlights the novel's enduring relevance but also illuminates how creative reinterpretations can both amplify and diminish its themes. By situating these narratives within their respective cultural contexts, the work offers a deeper understanding of how societal priorities and artistic choices intersect in the construction of identity and representation.

Chapter 1: Sexuality in The Color Purple

1.1 Historical Context

The Color Purple is set in the early 20th century, during a time when issues surrounding Black sexuality, particularly for women, were deeply influenced by both racial oppression and societal norms. For Black women, their sexual autonomy was often denied or suppressed, and their bodies were viewed through the lenses of racialized violence and hypersexualization; the prevailing stereotype of the "Jezebel" characterised Black women as sexually promiscuous. This period also saw the clash of strict ideals about femininity, which emphasized chastity and submission for women, with the attempts at sexual liberation most famously represented by the "flapper" culture. However, Black female sexuality, much like same-sex attraction, was still seen as taboo. In this context, Celie's journey of sexual awakening mirrors the larger struggles of Black women to reclaim their sexuality in a society that sought to control and silence them. Walker's portrayal of female sexual desire offers a portrayal of Black female sensuality and autonomy that was largely absent from mainstream discourse.

1.2 The Portrayal of Sexuality in the Novel

Sexuality is one of the central themes in *The Color Purple*, most noticeably occurring in the narrative of Celie, as sexual orientation, bodily autonomy, and sensuality play an important role in her journey from oppression to self-liberation. Her development from a person experiencing a multitude of forms of sexual oppression and violence to a woman capable of enjoying and controlling her own sexuality represents the sexual empowerment of all women, as "[the] specific systems of oppression that operate in Celie's life symbolize the more or less

subtle operations of patriarchal power in the lives of women everywhere."[1] The publication of *The Color Purple* corresponds to the "backlash era" of feminism—a period of strong cultural and political pushback against the gains made by second-wave feminism, whose primary concerns included reproductive rights, sexual and domestic violence, and intersectionality. Alice Walker contributed immensely to the feminist movement, although she preferred to call herself a womanist, most notably through her essays and short stories, in one of which the term "womanism" was coined.[2] Feminism focuses on achieving gender equality, often emphasizing issues like women's rights and gender-based oppression, historically prioritising the experiences of white, middle-class women. Womanism, on the other hand, centres the experiences of Black women and other women of colour, addressing the interconnected oppressions of race, gender, class, and culture.

It is not only in Celie's story that Walker explores the concept of sexuality. Queerness of people of colour, female sexual desire and enjoyment, or male sexual behaviour, are uniquely portrayed in this novel, overlapping in many instances. Walker brings the aforementioned themes and much more to the attention of the reader, challenging the traditional image of who a Black woman should be and how she should express herself. Her representation of queer love between two Black women, without fetishizing their dynamic, was groundbreaking for the Black community in the 1980s and it continues to be a motif still quite underrepresented, both in literature and in other forms of media. However, it ought to be mentioned that Walker was heavily criticised for the contents of the novel, both by male Black writers for displaying homosexuality in her work, which was at the time thought to be disempowering to the

[1] Linda Abbandonato, "'A View from 'Elsewhere'": Subversive Sexuality and the Rewriting of the Heroine's Story in *The Color Purple*," *PMLA* 106, no. 5 (October 1991): 1110, https://doi.org/10.2307/462683.
[2] Kaz Weida, "Womanism," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed September 15, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/womanism.

empowerment of the Black community by some of its members due to the fear of a possible connection between queerness and sexual deviance,[3] and literary critics for the negative representation of the male characters in the story, also fearing a reinforcement of the stereotypical portrayals of Black men as violent and animalistic. One of the few female critics who voiced her opinion on this issue, Trudier Harris, concludes that *The Color Purple* "gives validity to all the white racist's notions of pathology in Black communities."[4]

Female sexuality is tightly woven into the narrative, particularly through the character of Celie and her dynamics with other characters. Trapped in a cycle of sexual trauma and abuse, both from her father figure Alphonso and her husband, Celie distances herself from sexual desire in any form, objectifying herself in the process. However, mainly as a result of her relationship with Shug Avery, Celie blooms, allowing herself to discover her sensual side and grow confident in her identity as a strong woman. Through this transformation, Walker puts emphasis on the significance of sexual autonomy as a source of confidence and strength, challenging societal norms that have historically marginalised women's desires.

Celie's sexual experiences mirror her general circumstances throughout the whole novel. The first letters, through which her story becomes unveiled, focus on the sexual abuse she endures from her father figure, which even results in two pregnancies. To begin Celie's story with a description of such despicable events, the repulsion of which is only heightened by the age of the narrator and her obvious innocence, forces us to confront the lack of agency Celie has. This is further alluded to through Alphonso taking the children he fathers with her away, robbing her of the motherhood forced onto her and drastically shaping her identity in the

[3] Christopher S. Lewis, "Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," *Rocky Mountain Review*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Fall 2012): 158, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41763555..
[4] Trudier Harris, "On *The Color Purple*, Stereotypes, and Silence," *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Winter, 1984): 157, https://doi.org/10.2307/2904291.

process. The dehumanisation she endures causes her to objectify herself, instilling in her a sense of worthlessness and conditioning her to accept such treatment from others. As explained by Christopher S. Lewis in his article regarding female sexuality in *The Color Purple*, Celie's passivity may be explained by her "adherence to the salvific wish" leading her to internalise that "'good girl' behavior can spare her from the sexual violation of men."[5] Candice M. Jenkins describes this phenomenon as "an aspiration [. . .] to save or rescue the black community from white racist accusations of sexual and domestic pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety" and its focus on "maintaining a protective illusion of black sexual and familial sobriety."[6]

Her marriage to Albert strips her of any remains of agency she had, as her autonomy is completely disregarded and her sole role in life becomes servitude to the head of the house and his children. There is no place in her life for enjoyment, let alone sexual desire, which she distances herself from fully. Although it would be unsubstantiated to claim that her negative experiences with men affected Celie's sexuality, specifically that they made her lack attraction towards men, one could argue that the lack of a loving relationship, most notably after being separated from her sister Nettie, hindered her ability to explore her desires sooner in life.

It is only after Shug appears that Celie is introduced to a completely new approach to not only sexuality, but to life. At first, Celie views Shug as a glamorous, almost unattainable figure, directly describing her fascination in her sixth letter: "The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. [. . .] An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery. She be dress to kill, whirling an laughing."[7] There is an immediate attraction expressed in Celie's

[5] Lewis, "Cultivating," 161.
[6] Lewis, "Cultivating," 160.
[7] Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017), 8.

words, mostly towards her beauty. Shug is not only seen as attractive by Celie, but she is also almost idolised; in her own words, Celie would "just be thankful to lay eyes on her."[8] Despite Shug's initial indifference towards her, the two grow closer as they spend more time together during Shug's recovery from an illness, later becoming intimate, both emotionally and physically. This dynamic grants Celie the love and tenderness she had never experienced before, beside the strictly familial bond with her sister, contrasting with her previous sexual encounters. Shug presents Celie with "an alternative to being subjected to masculinist and dominative ideas of sex,"[9] helping her realise that it can be something beautiful rather than a painful duty.

Perhaps the most pivotal moment, often described as a sexual awakening, is the two women sharing a conversation regarding their sexual experiences with Mr., which leads to Shug realising how inexperienced and oblivious Celie is regarding her body. Celie, with the aid and encouragement from Shug, analyses her anatomy and discovers the concept of pleasuring oneself sexually. Lewis assesses this as positioning "Celie's woman-directed masturbation and vulnerability as the means through which her burgeoning self-awareness and self-love are experienced,"[10] further concluding that, through the romantic and sexual relationship between Celie and Shug, Walker creates a symbol for black female sexual expression—a black homosexual woman.

Although problematic in many ways, Walker's portrayal of Black queer women was groundbreaking. As has been mentioned already, there was a clear lack of such voices in the 1980s, when *The Color Purple* was written, partially due to the norms in Black literature at the

[8] Walker, *The Color Purple*, 26.
[9] Lewis, "Cultivating," 162.
[10] Lewis, "Cultivating," 163.

time affected by the societal pressure to conform. According to Lewis, “Black lesbian and lesbian-allied writers brought attention to the fact that sexualized shame often dictates what is representable in African American literature. Their exploration of what are usually considered shameful issues complicated the calls for black pride.”[11] However, to omit such themes from literature does not erase them in real life; queer black women exist whether or not one writes about them, and they deserve representation as much as any other societal group. The creation of such representation by Alice Walker in her novel was indeed controversial, yet wanted by many. Walker’s *The Color Purple* “re-conceptualizes experience with and acknowledgement of violation and vulnerability as a source of power and strength rather than shame within black communities,”[12] fighting both against the homophobia and racism experienced by the Black community and the attempts to be silenced as a writer by that same community.

1.3 The Portrayal of Sexuality in the Movie Adaptations

What was a clear representation of queer women in the novel, perhaps drawing from Walker’s own urgency for non-heterosexual representation, became quite blurry in the cinematic universe, creating a sense of ambiguity around the originally lesbian relationship; perhaps it serves to make the films more palatable for heterosexual audiences, as Whitt claims in his article discussing the treatment of queer female relationships in American film. Released in 1985, the first movie adaptation of the novel faced a conundrum: to show the true nature of Celie's relationship with Shug or to not endanger the possible earnings of the movie by not steering away from what was at the time a controversial topic. The filmmakers chose a third option—an “apparitional lesbian.” While the nature of Celie and Shug’s relationship remains somewhat sexually charged, its expressions are “left ambiguous enough for audiences to

[11] Lewis, "Cultivating," 159.
[12] Lewis, "Cultivating," 165.

interpret them in whatever ways they choose."[13] What is interesting is that Celie's attraction is still clearly represented in the movie, staying true to the books; the viewers are shown with little change her sexual arousal aimed at Shug. However, it is left unreciprocated, its climax reduced to a kiss. Any other expressions of a romantic connection between the two women are left between the lines, along with the lesbian. As Terry Castle presents it: "The lesbian is never with us [. . .], but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins."[14] The lesbian is left for the queer viewers to be searched for, hiding behind glances and wordplay.

The song "Miss Celie's Blues" is a perfect example of this. Shug, singing a song to Celie as a show of appreciation, calls her "sister" in the song, identifying their dynamic as sisterhood rather than partnership. It ought to be noted that the terms "sister" and "brother" are often used outside of a familial context, pointing rather to a different kind of bond; one of the definitions of the word "sister" in the *Cambridge Dictionary* is this: "a woman who shares an interest with you, especially that of improving women's rights."[15] One could therefore conclude that Shug calling Celie sister refers to the closeness of their bond rather than denoting their relationship as purely sisterhood. No matter the exact interpretation, the word choice still affords the filmmakers enough ambiguity to not serve as a direct representation of queer women. The gay audience is left only with shy glances and wordplay. Whitt further highlights the disappearance

[13] Jan Whitt, "What Happened to Celie and Idgie?: 'Apparitional Lesbians' in American Film," *Studies in Popular Culture* 27, no. 3 (April 2005): 45, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23414996.
[14] Whitt, "What Happened," 44.
[15]Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. "Sister," accessed September 18, 2024, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sister.

of sexual attraction being showcased after the shared kiss, noting that "[the] sexual attraction fades into Celie`s identification with Shug and a desire to be less alone."[16]

The first movie adaptation served a similar purpose as the novel in its aim to represent Black Americans in arts. As Karina Longworth, an American film critic, author, and journalist, describes the development of the "Black film" of the 20th century in her podcast *You Must Remember This*, "the 1980s saw a decline in Hollywood films featuring mostly black casts and black heroes. In 1974 [. . .] 7% of the films released by the major studios told stories primarily about black people. That number had dropped to 2.5% by 1981."[17] She further explains this decline similarly to how Lewis interprets the criticism of the novel itself, assigning the "blame" to a fear of controversy: "Perhaps wary of [. . .] controversies, on the big screen Hollywood steered clear of tackling the black experience, historically or in the present. [. . .] Black movie stars like Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy were frequently paired with white co-stars in movies that were set in largely white worlds."[18] This lack of Black representation naturally extends to the sub-group of black queer women. When their narratives were made into a film, the storylines often resembled each other heavily, as the "images emerging in the 1980s and into the 1990s present the defiant, politicized sexuality of the openly homosexual man or woman who fights back, who claims his or her identity as both Black and gay, and who attempts to create meaningful relationships, often in the face of many dilemmas."[19] This description not only

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[16] Whitt, "What Happened," 53.
[17] Karina Longworth, "Splash Mountain (Six Degrees of Song of the South, Episode 6)" *You Must Remember This* (podcast), (November 25, 2019), 8:50, https://www.youmustrememberthispodcast.com/episodes/2019/11/19/splash-mountain-six-degrees-of-song-of-the-south-episode-6.
[18] Longworth, "Splash Mountain," 10:10 https://www.youmustrememberthispodcast.com/episodes/2019/11/19/splash-mountain-six-degrees-of-song-of-the-south-episode-6.
[19] Bill Stanford Pincheon, "BLACK AND QUEER VISUAL CULTURE: An Annotated Filmography and Reference Guide." *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 156, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41167046.

resembles the plot of *The Color Purple* almost perfectly, but the general trend of 1980s Black cinema would explain the changes Spielberg made to his version of the story, focusing more on the journey of finding one's identity and shifting the attention to racial representation rather than diving deeper into the development of Celie and Shug's relationship.

Walker confirms the lack of truthfulness to the novel regarding the queerness, admitting that her version of the book was not filmed, although she has accepted this. [20] According to the writer, even the kiss was a component she had to fight for in order for it to be included at all.[21] The reasoning for the backlash Walker faced by the filmmakers and the black community, even editorials in black newspapers, returns us to the novel's general conflict with the Black Arts Movement. A homosexual relationship between two women, although not shown in a vulgar manner, was uncomfortable to many from the movement due to the status of such a relationship in society at the time, which, Walker claims, was "considered analogous with drug addiction and violence."[22]

When comparing the 1985 *The Color Purple* movie adaptation with the 2023 version, directed by a Ghanaian filmmaker Blitz Bazawule, one notices how little actually changes when it comes to the amount of representation on screen; the same scenes mentioned in the previous paragraph serve as a great example of this. The kissing scene, happening at the cinema in the 2023 version, does show more passion between the two women, both through the singing number "What About Love?" and the kiss itself. However, compared to the 1985 version, it appears to lack certain closeness and gentleness, which is exactly the contrast between the male and female affection Celie experienced highlighted in the book—the latter movie comes off as

[20] Alice Walker, *The Same River* Twice (London, Great Britain: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), 35.
[21] Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 219.
[22] Walker, *The Same River Twice*, 219.

focusing more on the sexuality of the kiss rather than the romantic bond, especially considering the direct hint that the two shared a bed later that night. On the other hand, the 2023 movie succeeds to represent the true nature of the relationship more in the "Miss Celie's Blues" scene. In this version, Shug playfully touches Celie, teases her with a feather, and sits on her lap, all while looking at her and dancing quite sensually, seemingly relaying the message to Celie that she sees the beauty and sensuality in her, which is what she deserves to see too; there is little space to doubt the sexual undertone of the song, which is what the 1985 version lacks—Spielberg's version does indeed rather come off as a woman trying to lift up her friend and grow her confidence, completely platonically.

The newer adaptation, while seen as more progressive by many, fails to live up to the expectations of a "queer movie." As Gloria Oladipo puts it in her review of the movie for *The Guardian*, "Bazawule's adaptation is a more overt expression of sapphic relationships than Spielberg's [. . .] but feels so devoid of genuine love between the two women." [23] She further criticises the lack of depth of the relationship itself, as many details (such as the momentary breakup or Shug's fling with a young boy) are omitted, allocating more screen time to Celie's abuse than to her love life. She especially highlights the change regarding Celie's business of selling pants and, of course, wearing them. In the movie, it is yet again robbed of its queer undertones, when, according to Olapido's reading of the book, it is a clear case of queer resistance to the tyranny she endured.[24] This reading, and the importance of clothing in *The Color Purple* are discussed in an article written by M. Teresa Tavormina, who specifies that

[23] Gloria Oladipo, "The latest adaptation of *The Color Purple* fails its lead character," *The Guardian*, January 2, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2024/jan/02/the-color-purple-movie-musical-alice-walker.
[24] Oladipo, "The latest adaptation." January 2, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2024/jan/02/the-color-purple-movie-musical-alice-walker.

"[Celie's] pants are designed for individuals, not in terms of sexual or other stereotypes but of the wearer's own particular needs,"[25] supporting the importance of the pants as a symbol of breaking the conventional ideas of what a black woman should look and behave like.

The second adaptation delves more into the sexual nature of the two women, yet it still appears to adhere to similar trends, prioritising the racial identity and the religious development of both Celie and Shug over portraying their bond accurately. This could arguably be even more underlined by the choice to make this adaptation a musical, taking inspiration from the 2005 Broadway production. Many of the main music genres we associate with the US have been influenced, in many cases even developed directly from, African American music. The 2023 *The Color Purple* used these music styles typically associated with African American culture, such as gospel, jazz, or R&B, to allow for a deeper insight into the societal aspects of the narrative. It ought to be said that this choice did create an opportunity for the character of Celie to express her emotions and desires quite overtly through music, such as the bathtub scene in which Celie dances on a record player and proclaims her sexual awakening through the song "Dear God - Shug". However, one could argue that the characteristics typical for musicals, for example the emotional dramatization and the reduction of many important scenes to a single upbeat musical number, cost *The Color Purple* the much necessary complexity of Celie's sexuality, as well as softening the impact of displaying the societal issues, most importantly racism and abuse, that the novel bravely explored against all advice from fellow writers and members of the Black community.

The differences between the 1985 and 2023 adaptations of *The Color Purple* primarily lie in their treatment of Celie and Shug's relationship, as well as the prioritised themes they

[25] M. Teresa Tavormina, "Dressing the Spirit: Clothworking and Language in *The Color Purple*,"*The Journal of Narrative Technique* 16, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 221. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30225154.

present. Spielberg's 1985 version creates an ambiguity surrounding the two women's romantic bond, aligning with the societal constraints of its time and leaving Celie's queer identity largely implied and her relationship with Shug unfulfilled, hidden in glances and coded language. This restraint prioritizes Celie's self-discovery and racial identity over any overt depiction of queerness, following the trend of Black cinema in the 1980s to avoid controversy. The 2023 adaptation, while attempting to introduce a more direct portrayal of Celie and Shug's sexual relationship, still misses the emotional tenderness and depth found in Walker's novel, focusing instead on the sensuality of their connection. This shift, coupled with the choice to present the story as a musical, underscores cultural and racial identity through African American music traditions like gospel and jazz, yet sacrifices the nuances of Celie's character. Both films, in their own ways, reflect the societal and artistic priorities of their respective eras, ultimately leaving the novel's full exploration of queerness and intersectionality only partially realized.

In conclusion, *The Color Purple* examines sexuality, race, and identity through Celie's progression from oppression to self-liberation, offering a nuanced portrayal of Black womanhood. The novel addresses themes of queer love, female desire, and autonomy with complexity, presenting narratives that were both innovative and contentious within the context of its time. While the book provides a layered exploration of Black queer identity, the film adaptations have not fully captured this depth. Spielberg's 1985 version reflects the cultural limitations of its time, leaving Celie's queerness largely implied, while the 2023 adaptation incorporates more explicit elements of her sexual identity but sacrifices depth in favour of creating a spectacle. Both films highlight the struggle to balance authentic representation with the cultural and artistic demands of their eras, prioritizing racial identity and broader societal

themes over the intimate and revolutionary aspects of Celie's journey; both underscore the challenges of translating Walker's intricate narrative to the screen.

Chapter 2: Gender in *The Color Purple*

2.1 Historical Context

In *The Color Purple*, Walker brings attention to the gender roles that have historically defined and limited the identities of African American women in early 20th-century U.S. and often continue to do so to this day. The novel explores the expectations of submission, traditions, and domesticity imposed on female characters, with most of the focus being on Celie. These expectations reflect deeply rooted patriarchal norms that marginalise women's voices, constraining their autonomy and self-expression. However, as Celie forms relationships with strong, independent women like Shug Avery and Sofia, she begins to question these roles, leading to her own transformation of the concept of what a woman could and should be.

By highlighting both compliance with and defiance of traditional gender roles, Walker not only critiques these social constraints but also illustrates the power of female solidarity and resistance, revealing gender as a construct that can be resisted and reimagined. In her own words, Walker's mission as a writer was "exposing misogyny and the domination that women endure in the world wherever they are."[26] However, many criticise the manner in which Walker

[26] Alice Walker, "Alice Walker Interview: Joining the Civil Rights Movement & Writing *The Color Purple*," interviewed by Chris Durrance, *Life Stories*, Kunhardt Productions & McGee Media, April 14, 2023, audio, 01:02:39, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVB3jM3bGSY.

demonstrates these social issues, mainly pertaining to her treatment and portrayal of male character, as noted previously.

This chapter will primarily explore how Walker's novel portrays and subverts conventional gender roles, examining the ways in which multiple characters' position regarding their gender identity is conveyed in the novel; this will then be compared with the treatment of gender and social stereotypes in the movie adaptations. The role of men and toxic masculinity in the novel will be discussed in a separate subchapter, as it is a topic often criticised in both the novel and the movies. Lastly, power in different relationship dynamics will be separately analysed in relation to gender and race.

2.2 The Portrayal of Gender in the Novel

One of the main themes represented in *The Color Purple*, gender roles and their subsequent transformation, is showcased through several characters in the novel. The most noteworthy ones, mainly due to the amount of information Walker gives her readers regarding their personalities and development, are Celie, Sofia, Shug Avery, Harpo and Albert. Each of the listed characters embodies different aspects of traditional gender expectations, allowing Walker to both portray and challenge these roles through different points of view. Focusing only on these primary characters allows for deeper exploration of the novel's central themes without becoming distracted by secondary narratives; for this reason, characters like Squeak or Nettie are not included. These characters, while significant and at times relevant for the topic of this chapter, serve mostly to illuminate and support the development of these themes in

relation to the main characters, or, in other cases, have fully developed narratives with a vastly different focus.

Celie initially fulfils the prescribed role of the submissive, obedient woman nearly perfectly. Subjected to abuse by both her father and later her husband, she is taught that her value lies in her service to men, mirroring the harsh realities faced by many Black women of her time, who were expected to endure suffering without complaint. However, this submission is challenged by showing Celie's eventual transformation, possible primarily through developing meaningful relationships with strong, defiant women like Shug Avery and Sophia. Especially her famous line, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here,"[27] displays her newly found strength, as it marks one of the few moments Celie actively stands up to Albert, and a sense of self-worth, both of which Sofia and Shug's friendships help her cultivate. It could be argued that the importance of female friendships was precisely what Walker sought to bring attention to, likely drawing from her own life experiences. In an interview for PBS's "Makers: Women Who Make America," Walker mentions her sisters as being great storytellers, noting a specific "pink panties" story, from which the characters of Celie and Shug originate—the plain wife and the other woman. But what Walker points out specifically is the uniqueness of bond between the two women: "I love this story because it shows how the women were able to bond at a level that I don't think, you know, my grandfather would have understood."[28]

Her shift from someone following the preconceived standard of a family oriented God-fearing woman to one with ownership over her own life is supported by the change of the addressee of her letters. According to Martha J. Cutter, the addressee of Celie's letters directly

[27] Walker, *The Color Purple*, 187.
[28] Walker, "Interview: Joining the Civil Rights," 51:00.

reflects her current stance toward men. As she gains Shug's friendship, arguably her first strictly positive female bond without a familial connection, and the ability to prioritise herself, she "stops writing to God—whom she perceives as 'just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful and lowdown' (175) —and starts writing to Nettie."[29]

Celie's emancipation materialises itself when she learns how to make pants—a trade she develops with the encouragement and financial support of Shug Avery, who sees her creative potential. By selling her pants, Celie not only earns money but also finds a new sense of purpose and pride, at first sharing it with all of those close to her, pointing again to the importance of such bonds. Her new business allows her to become self-reliant, breaking away from the need for financial control from men. She further shares her success with others in her community, chiefly by employing Sofia and establishing her shop as "friendly" towards Black customers. She mentions both in a letter to Nettie: "I hired Sofia to clerk in our store. Kept the white man Alphonso got to run it, but put Sofia in there to wait on colored cause they never had nobody in a store to wait on 'em before and nobody in a store to treat 'em nice."[30] The standard of the 1930s and 1940s regarding Black female employment rates, during which the later part of the novel takes place, tallied only 8% of Black women as employed in manufacturing, and even then most occupied the positions rejected by white female workers, 20% of those working in dressmaking.[31] Therefore to have her own business in dressmaking was an incredibly privileged position. There is unfortunately little exact data regarding the percentage of Black female business owners, although it is highly likely that this number was in single digits, notably in the South. In conclusion, Celie defies traditional gender expectations of her time in multiple ways:

[29] Martha J. Cutter, "Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker's Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple,*" *MELUS* 25, no. 3/4 (2000): 169, https://doi.org/10.2307/468241.
[30] Walker, *The Color Purple*, 254.
[31] Teresa L. Amott and Julie A. Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 167.

by standing up to Albert's abuse, gaining financial independence, and finding gratification outside of the traditional roles of wife and homemaker.

Sofia, in contrast to Celie, refuses to submit to the traditional feminine role already from the beginning, which is apparent from Celie's initial description of her. Meeting Harpo's father for the first time and being confronted by him quite aggressively, instead of showing any fear or de-escalating the situation, Sophia "laugh. She glance at She say, What I need to marry Harpo for? He still living here with you. What food and clothes he git, you buy."[32] She is outspoken, strong, and unafraid to physically defend herself against domination, both in her relationships and in life. Her marriage to Harpo shows constant battles for power, with Sofia challenging Harpo's quite unsuccessful attempts to control her—when Harpo tries to make Sofia listen to him or submit, she fights back, both verbally and physically, signalling her refusal to accept the traditional gender role Harpo seeks to impose on her. Sofia's character is used to demonstrate the resistance to gender norms. However, such defiance comes at a cost; her refusal to be a "traditional" black woman not only causes friction in her marriage, propelled by Harpo's own gender-related struggles regarding his masculinity, but also leads to legal punishment when she defies the authority of the mayor's wife. Both situations listed will be further analysed in a later section of this chapter. Through Sofia, Walker highlights both the strength required to resist gender roles and the societal backlash against women, especially Black women, who defy said expectations.

Shug Avery represents a rejection of traditional gender norms, much like Sofia. Yet, there is a significant difference between the specific angle the two characters portray in relation to gender expectations. Unlike Sofia's physical strength and resistance to male control, Shug's

[32]Walker, *The Color Purple*, 32.

defiance lies in her independence from conventional relationships, her career as a blues singer, and her refusal to be restricted by domestic roles. Her career itself was a radical choice: during the early 20th century, women, especially Black women, were rarely seen in similar roles. Indeed, their occupations were mostly in agriculture and private domestic service, as 44% of Black women worked in the former and the same percentage worked in the latter.[33] In the 1920s, blues and jazz did see a rise in influential female performers who challenged social norms, such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Billie Holiday. According to Angela Davis in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Black women were "sought after—and often exploited by—burgeoning recording companies."[34] This only lasted for a decade, after which the industry began focusing on the exploitation of Black male singers instead. Davis goes on to add that the music these once beloved singers created was categorised as "low" culture. They defied society with their independent lifestyles and songs that often touched on sexual themes, working–class Black life, and social issues,[35] much like Shug does in the novel. Unfortunately, this caused the rest of the music industry not to take them seriously.

Shug's attitude toward sexuality is another critical way in which she defies conventional expectations. Unlike Celie, who has been conditioned to see sex as something purely transactional and painful, Shug views it as a source of personal freedom and pleasure. She openly pursues romantic and sexual relationships, disregarding social judgments. Her open defiance of what is "proper," and her unapologetic embrace of her own sexual desires make her

[33] Amott and Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work*, 157.
[34] Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), xii, https://www.academia.edu/28751843/Angela_Davis_Blues_legacies_and_black_feminism.
[35] Davis, *Blues*, xiii, https://www.academia.edu/28751843/Angela_Davis_Blues_legacies_and_black_feminism.

a role model for Celie, yet, at the same time, an object of judgement for many women in the local community, as her freedom is often misinterpreted as recklessness or moral weakness.

In conclusion, *The Color Purple* portrays the transformation of gender roles through the lives of Celie, Sofia, and Shug, each of whom embodies a different approach to resistance against societal expectations. Celie's evolution from a submissive, abused woman to an empowered, self-sufficient individual highlights the power of female relationships and the potential for personal growth. Sofia's defiance of patriarchal control challenges traditional gender norms, though it comes at a heavy personal cost. Meanwhile, Shug's independence, both sexually and professionally, presents an alternative model of defiance, one that emphasizes autonomy and freedom over conformity. Through these characters, Walker offers a critique of both personal and societal expectations placed upon women, particularly Black women, in the early 20th-century US.

2.3 The Portrayal of Gender in the Movie Adaptations

Celie in Spielberg's adaptation is portrayed as a quiet and submissive figure, whose development unfortunately lacks impact, particularly through the film's emotional subtlety and lack of visualising the abuse she had suffered. Spielberg's approach focuses on Celie's internal growth with seemingly as little negativity towards men as possible. This approach severely underplays the novel's depiction of her strength and self-realisation, particularly in finding her voice. In contrast, Bazawule's adaptation, thanks to the inherent boldness of musicals and the style of music they utilise, presents Celie as a more visibly assertive character, whose transformation is portrayed through loud musical performances, offering a different, yet still language-based, alternative to the epistolary character of the novel, aligning more closely with

Walker's original depiction, where Celie's journey is marked by vocal resistance and the reclamation of her narrative voice.

In the 1985 adaptation, Spielberg presents Sofia as a strong independent character, yet her resistance is softened through the film's lens, which captures her defiance in a more subdued, sometimes humorously framed way, giving the impression that her strength is something to laugh at instead of respect. Oprah Winfrey's portrayal captures Sofia's strength but with limited focus on her resistance to racialized servitude, such as her imposed role in Miss Millie's household. The 2023 adaptation amplifies these dynamics, portraying Sofia as more explicitly resistant to her "mammy" role within the mayor's household, even adding musical numbers that underline her frustration and defiance of her imposed racial and gendered stereotypes through the powerful "Hell No" song, unafraid to show an angry Black woman while simultaneously not falling into a stereotypical portrayal of this emotion. This newer portrayal leans into Walker's critique of the "Black mammy" stereotype, showing Sofia's interactions with Eleanor Jane and Millie as a deeply conflicted dynamic of forced servitude rather than voluntary subservience, an angle less emphasised in the 1985 film.

While Shug is portrayed as assertive and unconventional, Spielberg's adaptation softens some of her more radical elements which serve an important role in the novel. The movie largely presents her as a muse, charming those around her with her beauty, but lacks the depth of her role as a critique of societal gender norms. Her relationship with Celie is portrayed with some restraint in the film, as analysed in the previous chapter. Spielberg's choice to avoid showing the full romance of their connection tones down Shug's role as a figure who challenges the heteronormative expectations of the time and in modern society. In Bazawule's adaptation, however, Shug's career and sensuality are foregrounded, with the character given more space

to express her sexuality and independence, aligning more closely with Walker's original intention. He presents Shug as fully embracing her sexual autonomy, positioning her as a character who challenges both traditional gender roles and the patriarchal structures governing sexual and romantic relationships. This version of Shug more accurately reflects the radical independence central to her character in the novel, serving as a clear representation of gender defiance. Unlike Spielberg's portrayal, which restricts Shug's boldness, Bazawule highlights her resistance to heteronormative expectations, offering a more nuanced depiction of Shug and emphasizing her role as a character who asserts her own agency against societal judgement.

In sum, Bazawule puts more emphasis on the female characters as active participants in shaping their own narratives, a portrayal that aligns more closely with the themes central to Walker's novel. In contrast, Spielberg's version, while still impactful upon its release, often downplays the social and racial complexities that underscore each woman's journey, choosing instead to focus on more universally palatable themes of personal growth and redemption or on the stories of the male characters.

2.4 Masculinity in *The Color Purple*: Historical context

In the early 20th century, African American men were constrained by systemic racism, economic marginalisation, and the struggle for identity, all the while the expectations to adhere to the standards of a patriarchal society were pushed onto them. Particularly slavery had a profound effect on the transformation of Black masculinity; the societal expectation for men to embody strength, both physical and economical, was complicated for Black men by the lack of economic opportunities and continuous marginalization. As articulated by Pierre, Mahalik, and Woodland, this has further continued to affect Black men in the 1980s and 1990s, showing that Walker's narrative was not only relevant to the era of the novel's story, but the time of its

publishing as well: “African American men are expected to conform to the dominant culture's gender role expectations—success, competition, and aggression—as well as culturally specific requirements of the African American community that may often conflict.”[36]

This conflict is only intensified by the economic landscape of Black men. Many were constrained to low-paying jobs with little opportunity for advancement due to the prevailing racial segregation and discrimination. This economic marginalisation created a situation where “there are basically two ways men prove their ‘manhood’ under capitalism—economic earning power or physical strength.”[37] However, with the aforementioned limited access to higher-paid jobs, Black men often had to navigate a complex relationship between their identities as providers and the assertion of masculinity through physicality and dominance, yet simultaneously being denied the power to do so. The distress of being discriminated against and suffering physical and verbal violence, while at the same time being stripped of the newly-found concept of masculinity, can manifest in various ways, including internalised anger and frustration, leading to simulating the same behaviour in their household.[38] In an interview, Walker describes seeing similar, although not as violent, development in her father’s demeanour: “[U]ntil her fifth child, they didn't have gender roles [. . .] but at some point the bitterness of oppression crept into his heart and he became someone who wanted to enforce

[36] Martin R. Pierre, James R. Mahalik and Malcolm H. Woodland, “The Effects of Racism, African Self-Consciousness and Psychological Functioning on Black Masculinity: A Historical and Social Adaptation Framework,” *Journal of African American Men* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 20, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41819424.
[37] Ula Y. Taylor, “MAKING WAVES: THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF BLACK FEMINISM,” *The Black Scholar* 28, no. 2, (SUMMER 1998): 25, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41069774.
[38] Pierre, Mahalik and Woodland, “The Effects of Racism,” 21.

gender roles because he couldn't do anything about racism."[39] This reality for many Black men, her own family members included, is reflected by Walker in her novel.

2.5 The Portrayal of Masculinity in the Novel

The Color Purple provides readers with an intricate exploration of the previously mentioned factors affecting Black masculinity, illustrating how societal pressures shape individual behaviours and, consequently, relationships. In the novel, characters, notably Albert and Harpo, demonstrate the complexities of Black manhood within the context of oppression and African American culture. These two characters are the focus of this section because their actions and transformations are most closely tied to the novel's themes of redemption and gender dynamics. Other male characters, such as Mister's father and Grady, are less relevant to these themes—Mister's father reinforces patriarchal norms without any significant development, while Grady functions more as a narrative foil than an exploration of masculinity in depth.

Toxic masculinity, defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a "form of masculinity, typically characterized as arising from excessive adherence to conventional or stereotyped expectations of the behaviours, qualities, and attitudes appropriate to men and boys,"[40] is a critical theme in both Walker's novel and the movie versions, albeit portrayed differently in each. In the novel, Walker delves into the psychological distress that often drives men to adopt harmful behaviours, as mentioned in the historical context of masculinity. This internal conflict often results in what is in modern sociology referred to as "cool pose" behaviours, which "often interfere with authentic heterosexual relationships" and "impede men's attempts to develop

[39] Walker, "Interview: Joining the Civil Rights," 27:43.
[40] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Toxic masculinity," accessed November 3, 2024, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/toxic-masculinity_n?tl=true&tab=meaning_and_use.

open, expressive emotional relationships with women. [. . .] [N]ot being able to regulate the cool pose behaviors, Black males often have difficulty disclosing or expressing feelings in a meaningful way."[41]

Walker's portrayal of Albert, and therefore her portrayal of the complexity of masculinity, mainly appears in the form of the damaging effects of toxic masculinity on the women around him, where his need to assert dominance over Celie is rooted in his own experiences of powerlessness in a racially biased society. Mister's character is emblematic of the general struggles faced by many Black men who, internalising their frustrations, eventually turn to abusive behaviours, perpetuating the cycle of violence. Celie's biological father's death is a crucial moment that reflects the cyclical nature of violence and the societal pressures faced by Black men. His murder, driven by jealousy and racial resentment, illustrates how Black men, even when successful, are often subjected to violence and exploitation by a racially biased society that sees their success as a threat. His success in business challenged the oppressive system, and his death by lynching served as a harsh reminder of how Black men are frequently denied agency and power. In this context, his murder can be seen as a reflection of the broader struggles faced by Black men like Albert, who, after internalizing the powerlessness imposed on them by a racist society, resorted to abusive behaviours to assert control and reclaim power. Walker brings to attention the ease with which the expectations imposed on Black men can lead to an identity crisis, making men like Albert consider it easiest to resort to violence as a means of reclaiming power in a society that consistently diminishes their worth.

It ought to be noted that this use of violent behaviour as a front does not only stem from the pressure of the wider society. Rather, Walker hints at the almost hereditary factor of such

[41] Pierre, Mahalik and Woodland, "The Effects of Racism," 27.

characteristics, as the men mimic their own fathers' actions. In one of Celie's letters, the father of Albert visits their home, confronting his son over his relationship with Shug Avery. This meeting reveals the father's critical, traditional views, particularly about Albert's association with Shug, whom he deems immoral and improper. His disapproval reflects the social expectations of the time, chiefly family and community values. Yet it also reveals that Albert once wanted to marry Shug Avery, but, likely due to pressure from his family, chose not to. This scene's significance lies in its unearthing of the generational tension between Albert and his father, mirrored earlier in the novel by the same father-son dispute between Albert and his son, Harpo. The passivity of the man in the position of a son in each conflict, both regarding the women they seek to have a long-term relationship with, is also present and described in an identical manner. The elder men's domineering and judgmental nature offers a possible explanation of some of the internalised values that shape Albert's, and momentarily Harpo's, own problematic behaviour.

Another similarity between the development of masculinity of the two men, Albert and Harpo, is their redemption, as it stems from a sort of feminisation. Initially, Harpo is portrayed as submissive to Sophia, aiding her with the care of their child without protesting. Celie admits in one of her letters that his marriage to Sophia is seemingly a happy one, perhaps causing Celie to promote the idea of using brute force against her in order for her to submit to her husband, likely out of envy. Harpo, taking the advice and being pressured to conform to the image of the dominant man, does attempt to beat Sophia multiple times throughout their marriage, each ending with her beating him instead. The sudden switch from a loving partner happy in their dynamic, although unusual for the era, eventually leads to the demise of a once healthy partnership. The pair reconcile near the end of the novel, yet it occurs only after significant personal growth of both of them, mainly Harpo coming to understand masculinity and finding

respect for Sofia's independence and strength; when they reunite, their relationship becomes more equal and less defined by traditional gender roles, allowing them to reconnect as friends and partners in a more genuine way.

It could be argued that Harpo accepted a side of himself which, at the time, would be classified as feminine. Although to claim empathy and submissiveness to be inherently female would itself be prejudicial, the standard of the time during which *The Color Purple* takes place would certainly fit such classification. The degree, or rather the directness, of feminisation is more prominent in Albert's development. After Celie leaves him for Shug and he experiences solitude, Albert begins to reconsider his values in life. Left to take care of himself and his home, he is forced to perform the daily domestic tasks that Celie once carried out for him. This period of self-reliance leads him to develop skills in traditionally feminine domains like cooking, cleaning, and sewing, shifting how he perceives the separation of the domestic roles. His transformation is described at the end of the novel by Celie, noticing that "when you talk to him now he really listen, and one time, out of nowhere in the conversation us was having, he said Celie, I'm satisfied this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. It feel like a new experience."[42] The two of them also engage in sewing together, with Albert excitedly creating patterns for shirts to match Celie's pants, after Albert admits to enjoying the activity as a child: "When I was growing up [. . .] I use to try to sew along with mama cause that's what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me. But you know, I liked it."[43] His admission is not only unusual due to the feminine nature of the sewing he describes as liking, but it is one of the first times he divulges such personal and emotional information to Celie, marking the moment he finally sees her as an equal. In many ways, Albert's transformation parallels Celie's own

[42] Walker, *The Color Purple*, 236.
[43] Walker, *The Color Purple*, 247.

journey toward empowerment, with each character challenging the conventional roles they were assigned. Through this evolution, Alice Walker highlights the idea that self-acceptance and harmonious relationships come from embracing a balance of traditionally "masculine" and "feminine" qualities.

When placed within the broader context of other male characters in *The Color Purple*, Albert and Harpo appear as more complex and multidimensional in the novel's treatment of Black masculinity. While figures like Alphonso and Albert's father embody more traditional and harmful forms of masculinity, marked by violence, control, and emotional repression, Albert and Harpo represent the potential for transformation. Both characters struggle with internalized toxic masculinity, but their growth through self-reflection, vulnerability, and empathy allows them to redefine themselves. By contrasting these male characters, Walker presents a more nuanced exploration of Black masculinity, illustrating how it is shaped by both societal expectations and personal experiences. The male characters all serve to highlight different sides of masculinity, from the toxic and controlling to the vulnerable and evolving.

The Color Purple presents a complex depiction of Black masculinity, illustrating how societal pressures and historical contexts influence male behaviour and relationships. Through the discussed characters, the novel delves into the damage caused by toxic masculinity, showing how internalized ideals of dominance and emotional distance contribute to destructive behaviour. However, both Albert and Harpo's journeys reflect the possibility of transformation. Their growth—shaped by vulnerability, self-reflection, and gaining a new understanding of gender roles—demonstrates how individuals can challenge societal norms. In contrast to figures like Alphonso and Albert's father, whose rigid, patriarchal masculinity perpetuates violence and control, Albert and Harpo's redemption highlights the potential for a more balanced and

gentle form of manhood. Walker, by exploring these varied portrayals of Black masculinity, suggests that true self-acceptance and healthier relationships emerge when traditionally "masculine" and "feminine" traits are allowed to coexist, emphasizing the need for a more fluid and inclusive understanding of gender.

2.6 The Portrayal of Masculinity in the Movie Adaptations

The transition from Walker's novel to Spielberg's film adaptation of *The Color Purple* presents a significant shift in the portrayal of Black masculinity. Many critics argue that Spielberg's rendering softens the novel's critique of male dominance and fails to capture the depth of Walker's original message explained in the passage above. According to Carol M. Cole's analysis of the Spielberg adaptation "most reviewers complained that the level of sentimentality in Spielberg's rendering diluted the effect of the novel's strong statements about relationships between the sexes and between the races."[44] In the movie, this sentimentality often manifests in a portrayal of Black men that is less confrontational and more sympathetic, which can detract from the harsh realities of toxic masculinity and its implications for both men and women. Albert's behaviour is no longer directly violent. His cruelty is primarily suggested through his harsh treatment and emotional manipulation of Celie, but scenes of him hitting or physically assaulting her are not shown directly on screen. The lack of explicit physical abuse contributes to a portrayal of Albert that many considered less threatening and more sympathetic

[44] Carol M. Dole, "The Return of the Father in Spielberg's *The Color Purple,*" *Literature/Film Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1996): 12. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43796692.

compared to the novel, appearing at times even as almost comical compared to the original character.

By softening his portrayal, Spielberg shifts some of the focus away from the violence inherent in Celie's marriage, perhaps as an attempt to make the character's redemption arc in the film more palatable to audiences and to avoid similar criticism Walker had received for, what many argued to be, a stereotypical portrayal of the dangerous Black man. If that was indeed the reason, Spielberg did not succeed fully, as critics such as Gerald Early scrutinise the director for vilifying the black man, while simultaneously "denying that the film presents a problem open to any implication of a social or political solution" in its softened portrayal of Black men.[45]

To specify the difference in the portrayal of Albert's negative traits, one does not need to search further than Albert's father. Instead of being a possible source of Albert's misogyny, as hinted at in the book, Spielberg's version minimises the actual violence, choosing instead to fully shift the blame to the father. Dole brings to attention the change in the presence of the father, claiming that:

> [The] influence of this character is magnified. The film emphasizes the near-castrating power of Mister's father by its staging of [the father's visit] from the novel: the father slams his foot onto a bench between the spread legs of his seated son. Moreover, the film adds two scenes that underscore the father's negative influence on Mister. [. . .] The

[45] Gerard Early, "*The Color Purple* as Everybody's Protest Art," *The Antioch Review* 44, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 269. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4611610?seq=9.

film's vilification of Mister's father thus removes part of Mister's responsibility for his mistreatment of his wife.[46]

This alteration not only weakens the narrative's critique of patriarchy, as it erases the highlighted extent of the toxic masculinity, but also inadvertently shifts the focus away from the root causes of Mister's behaviour, making him a more sympathetic character rather than a complex figure shaped by systemic issues of race and gender. The directorial choice to focus on Albert's suffering after Celie leaves also plays into the sympathetic portrayal, as the viewers are forced to see him reach rock bottom, eliciting in many viewers empathy—chiefly those who did not read the novel—where Walker seemingly sought to give her readers, and Celie, a moment of gratification.

Additionally, the film introduces a subplot involving Shug's relationship with her father. This addition distracts from the complex development of Shug's feelings towards Celie and herself, shifting the narrative focus to be male oriented in what was originally strictly female. The choice to create a fictitious conflict and reconciliation between Shug and her father while simultaneously erasing the subplot of Shug's short-lived romance with a young boy, motivated by Shug's desire to feel young and in control again as evident from her pleading "I got to have it Celie. I'm too weak a woman not to"[47] with Celie, appears to embody "the return in the film of the patriarchal structures that Walker's novel works to undermine,"[48] as Carol M. Dole puts it. The effect of this subplot is likely not to explore the relationships between fathers and

[46] Dole, "The Return," 13.
[47] Walker, *The Color Purple*, 226.
[48] Dole, "The Return," 15.

daughters but instead to emphasise the longing for paternal approval, reinforcing the traditional family dynamics that limit female agency and which Walker directly criticises.

When it comes to the portrayal of the opposite end of the masculinity spectrum, such as the submissiveness of Harpo, the Spielberg movie hardly does the novel justice. A young boy representing the notion that a man can be confident and comfortable in a submissive, nurturing position towards his wife, Harpo's presence shifts from a positive character, whose negative traits are his fear of his father and generational trauma, to the comedic relief. Again, the scene of Sophia meeting Albert serves as a perfect example of this unsavoury change. Sophia's strength is ridiculed by choosing for her first appearance to be her marching towards Albert's house in an arguably caricatural manner, amplified by the sound of a piano and trumpets in the background, with Harpo trailing behind her and, once they arrive to the inside, smiling uncontrollably. There is an obvious difference from the novel's descriptions of the same scene, such as "[they] be just marching, hand in hand, like going to war. She in front a little," or "Harpo sitting there with his head down and his hands tween his knees."[49] With one scene, the movie managed to both mock the arguably only physically strong and dominant woman in the story and significantly decrease the magnitude of Harpo's fear of his father.

The viewers do not get to see Albert's feminine side either, as there is no emotional growth shown on screen; Albert suffers after Celie's departure and helps Nettie and Celie's children get back safely, which is seemingly all of the transformation required for the viewers to forgive his misogynistic, abusive behaviour. The understanding of Celie's importance and his own realisation of the societal pressure and expectations he succumbed to is lacking in its entirety. The only nod to the novel's original storyline one can identify is Albert wearing silver

[49] Walker, *The Color Purple*, 31.

pants made by Celie, which also carries with it a humorous air of Albert giving in to Celie's new hobby rather than finding a common understanding in sewing and the love for Shug he and Celie share.

Although the 2023 movie by Bazawule offers a slightly more nuanced portrayal of male characters, managing to avoid the criticism connected to the controversial vilification of "the Black man", most of the points made above regarding Spielberg's rendition also apply to the musical. Reviewed by Aisha Harris for NPR, the writer notes that the "instances of domestic violence in which a character is hit are staged broadly—or rather, as if the actors are on an actual live performance stage. [. . .] The presumably unintentional effect is to literally knock the wind out of the abuse, to defang it so it doesn't feel quite so real."[50] Indeed, the violence and abuse is shown as shocking events, instead of the nearly daily occurrences as described in the novel, Shug's journey is hijacked by her father's presence, and the repressed femininity in the male characters is never explored.

While Bazawule's adaptation makes some strides in offering a more complex representation of masculinity, it still fails to fully capture the toxic masculinity and its evolution as presented in Walker's novel. Unlike Spielberg's adaptation, Bazawule emphasizes the emotionality of the situation the men find themselves in through the use of musical elements that convey their turmoil. However, this approach often prioritizes sentimentality over nuanced exploration of the issue. For example, Albert's redemption arc is depicted through his visible suffering and his efforts to reconcile with Celie, but the internal transformation and acknowledging his wrongdoings are barely explored. His growth is portrayed as more of a

[50] Aisha Harris, "The new *Color Purple* exudes joy, but dances past some deeper complexities," *National Public Radio*, December 19, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/12/19/1219323296/the-color-purple-review.

narrative convenience than the result of meaningful self-reflection, leaving the audience with a simplified understanding of his character's complexity.

Similarly, Harpo's journey in the 2023 film is largely overshadowed by comedic undertones that downplay his struggles with inherited notions of masculinity. While Bazawule avoids outright ridicule, as seen in Spielberg's version, Harpo's character still lacks the depth that Walker gives him, particularly his early willingness to embrace nontraditional gender roles. His attempts to assert dominance over Sofia are depicted with a lighter tone, diluting the gravity of their impact on their relationship and perpetuating the idea of his struggles as trivial or merely a source of tension rather than a reflection of broader societal pressures. Bazawule's portrayal also diverges in its treatment of Shug Avery's story, leaning into the father-daughter reconciliation, and therefore also shifting Shug's story into one with a man's acceptance as a goal.

Both adaptations of *The Color Purple* significantly alter the novel's critique of Black masculinity and patriarchy, opting for portrayals that soften its more confrontational or controversial elements. These changes manifest in a sentimental rendering of male characters, reducing the harsh realities of toxic masculinity and undermining the critique present in the novel. Albert's abusive behaviour, central to the novel's exploration of male dominance, is portrayed with less direct violence and more emotional manipulation, making his character appear less threatening, allowing for more empathy towards him. This shift is reinforced by the emphasis on his father's influence, which redirects blame and weakens the broader critique of patriarchal structures.

The adaptations reduce the complexity of other male characters as well, such as Harpo, whose struggles with masculinity are diminished through comedic framing. His role as a figure

of nontraditional masculinity is overshadowed by lighter tones that trivialize his inner conflict. These portrayals downplay the societal pressures and generational trauma that shape male behaviour, offering a more palatable but less profound representation of the novel's themes. Key female characters are also affected by this shift in focus. Shug's storyline is reoriented toward reconciliation with her father, sidelining her journey of self-discovery and the dynamics of her relationship with Celie. These changes reintroduce patriarchal structures into her plotline, as narratives of male approval take precedence over the novel's emphasis on female solidarity and agency. Ultimately, these adaptations prioritize sentimentality and redemption arcs that lack depth over the novel's incisive critique of gendered violence and systemic oppression. The lack of nuance in the film adaptations' versions of masculinity unfortunately risks perpetuating the same stereotypes Walker criticised, failing to address the underlying issues that contribute to the cycle of violence and emotional distress among Black men, instead settling for a superficial rendering of the characters lacking depth.

2.7 Power in Gender Dynamics

Alongside underscoring the societal issues discussed in the previous sections, *The Color Purple* presents its readers with an exploration of gendered power dynamics, focusing on how patriarchal structures can both dominate and silence women. The novel begins with Celie's writing reflecting the enforced silence and powerlessness. Celie's voice is initially suppressed, aligning her with the archetypal silent, oppressed woman, whose agency and voice has been forcibly taken from her, much like the Greek story of Philomena. Martha J. Cutter focuses on this comparison, specifically on how Walker subverts the silencing, changing her version of Philomena's (Celie's) fate. Walker intensifies the theme of silencing by structuring the novel in an epistolary format, choosing Celie's letters as a private verbal outlet where she can express

her traumas and evolve. The importance of Celie having this language-based outlet lies in the consequences of women being silenced. Putting into perspective alongside *The Bluest Eye*'s Pecola Breedlove, Cutter explains the dynamic of the domineering man and the abused woman, as well as the fallout of such relationships, concluding that "men, potential rapists, assume presence, language, and reason as their particular province. Women, potential victims, fall prey to absence, silence, and madness."[51] Much like what we see happen to both Philomena and Pecola Breedlove in their perspective stories, the common denominator between the three women's stories reveals itself to be sexual assault and their subsequent inability to voice their truth.

Celie's transformation away from the same fate begins as she meets women who empower her to reclaim her voice and ultimately her power. The arrival of Shug Avery, who embodies independence and confidence, propels Celie's shift from suffering in silence to becoming an empowered narrator of her own story. Shug's presence contrasts sharply with Celie's earlier silence and introduces her to a less traditional model of womanhood that is bold and liberated. Walker uses Shug's influence to break the cycle of silence and submission in Celie's life, facilitating a re-envisioning of the passive victim of sexual abuse into an active subject who speaks, questions, and resists; in Celie's case it is mostly directly used against Albert, but the general resistance is certainly also against the societal expectations. This transformation illustrates Celie's movement "away from an existence as a victim in a patriarchal plot toward a linguistic and narratological presence as the author/subject of her own story."[52]

Walker's narrative also offers a possibility of a society where the oppressive cycle of toxic male dominance and violence is broken and reformed. In the novel's latter stages, when

[51] Cutter, "Philomela Speaks," 162.
[52] Cutter, "Philomela Speaks," 163.

Albert renounces toxic masculinity and embraces more "feminine" activities like sewing, discussed in the previous section of this thesis, Walker creates a new order of male-female relationships built on mutual respect, equality, and the blurring of the line between the two genders. Celie's growth from silence to self-expression demonstrates Walker's vision for a world where women, no longer silenced by violence, can become loud and proud, where "the rapist has been transformed and included in a new social order where he can engage in 'feminine' activities and be part of 'feminine' language," and where "society can move toward a more equitable relationship between the sexes."[53]

Often a point of heavy criticism aimed at the novel and the movies, *The Color Purple*'s ending scene, one of reunion and unconditional forgiveness, reflects this exact rhetoric. While it is highly unrealistic, Walker has never claimed for it to be true to life. Much like other aspects of the novel, the ending is inspired by her own life, both consciously and subconsciously. Throughout the book *The Same River Twice*, Walker expresses the sentiment of togetherness, acceptance, and fighting life's hardships with love and authenticity, most notably in passages describing her relationship with her mother and her deteriorating health, or in her gentle descriptions of her grandfather, represented by Albert, while managing to criticise the negative aspects of Black men he embodies throughout the novel. Walker learned to accept the negative aspects of her existence and not to internalise the anger, much like the Black men she speaks about in Celie's story, in order to find true contentment. The novel only portrays a more exaggerated vision of what one should seek, trying to seek optimism, not claiming it to be easily

[53] Cutter, "Philomela Speaks," 175.

possible to achieve. Perhaps that is the message of the ending scene—hope and healing give us more power in life, not anger and conflict.

Chapter 3: Religion and Spirituality in *The Color Purple*

3.1 Historical Context

Religion was central to African American life in the early 20th century, as "predominantly Black churches of the 19th and 20th centuries played important roles in Black society outside the sphere of religion, [offering] job-training programs, insurance cooperatives, circulating libraries and athletic clubs."[54] The Black church, especially in the South, served as a source of community, political mobilization, and civil rights advocacy during the era of Jim Crow. It provided a space for self-expression and unity in the face of systemic racism. Music also played a crucial role in African American religious life, with spirituals and gospel songs being popular genres of secular music, strengthening community bonds and spiritual resolve. James R. Goff Jr. describes the social impact of music on the Black community as such: "From the spirituals that emerged in the slave experience and endured in the nation's black communities to the popular congregational songs that heightened the urban revival movement, Americans came to express their deepest theological and social beliefs in their music."[55] It ought to be mentioned that the Black church also reinforced patriarchal norms, with men

[54] Besheer Mohamed, Kiana Cox, Jeff Diamant and Claire Gecewicz, "Faith Among Black Americans," *Pew Research Center*, accessed November 20, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/02/16/faith-among-black-americans/.
[55] James R. Goff Jr.,"The Rise of Southern Gospel Music," *Church History* 67, no. 4 (1998): 744. https://doi.org/10.2307/3169850.

holding leadership positions and women relegated to secondary roles. Moreover, Christianity itself was sometimes used to justify the subjugation of Black people and women.

3.2 Religion and Spirituality in the Novel

In the opening letters of *The Color Purple*, Celie's religious voice is shaped by her harsh, abusive environment. Celie writes her letters to God as a form of confession, a space where she can voice her pain and suffering in a world where her voice is otherwise silenced. She writes to God as a distant, powerful figure, much like the men in her life. The tone of her letters reflects both deep submission to and fear of this God, as she writes: "Dear God, ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me."[56] Celie's words reflect a deep sense of powerlessness. God, in her eyes, is not a loving, nurturing figure but one who is distant, punitive, and unyielding—just like the patriarchal figures she experiences in her everyday life, such as her father and later Albert.

Celie's initial conception of God mirrors the patriarchal, hierarchical religious structures that dominate her community. She is taught that God is a figure who demands obedience and submission, reinforcing the gendered power dynamics that have followed her throughout her life. Early on, she almost appears to believe that her suffering is a result of divine punishment. Her letters, filled with shame and fear, reflect an internalized view of God as a distant, authoritarian figure.

The spiritual transformation of Celie, along with her sexual discovery, begins with the arrival of Shug Avery, with Shug challenging Celie's beliefs about God, religion, and herself. Shug rejects the traditional religious authority that Celie has been raised with, offering to her

[56] Walker, *The Color Purple*, 3.

an alternative spiritual view that is radically different from Celie's early understanding. Shug does not believe in the "traditional" God of Celie's letters. Instead, she teaches Celie that God is not a male figure with power over her life, but is inside every living being, including Celie herself. She tells Celie that "God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think."[57]

Shug's philosophy of God as a spiritual force that exists within everyone represents a shift in Celie's understanding of religion. Rather than being an external, controlling figure, God is reimagined as a nurturing, all-encompassing presence that connects all living things. As Shug urges Celie to notice the colour purple in a field, suggesting that this beauty is a sign of God's presence, she notes the following: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it."[58] This famous statement encapsulates the revelation in Celie's understanding of spirituality; rather than seeing the world through the lens of suffering and punishment, Celie begins to see it as a place where divine beauty is present in all things, from nature to people. This understanding of God is grounded in the natural world, in love, and in the divine within humanity.

The same point of view is even reflected in a later statement made by Walker available on her website, in which she discussed her experience with organised religion: "All people deserve to worship a God who also worships them. A God that made them, and likes them. That is why Nature, Mother Earth, is such a good choice. [. . .] Nature would never advise us to do

[57] Walker, *The Color Purple*, 176.
[58] Walker, *The Color Purple*, 177.

anything but be ourselves."[59] In both texts, Walker critiques traditional religion's patriarchal limitations while offering a vision of spirituality that embraces freedom and self-empowerment through nature. Jerannine Thyreen highlights this in her analysis of religion in *The Color Purple*, noting that the novel "redefines God, moving 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."[60] Shug's influence is what helps Celie to see her own worth and to claim the Spirit within herself, breaking free from the psychological and spiritual prison that has confined her.

3.3 Music and Spirituality in *The Color Purple*

Music plays a vital role in the spiritual and emotional lives of the characters in *The Color Purple*. Drawing from the African American religious music tradition, music serves as a medium for emotional release, resilience, and connection to the divine. As Judith Weisenfeld concludes in her analysis of African American religious history, "African American religious music served as a central part of black religious culture."[61] Similarly, blues and gospel in the novel transcend the limitations of formal religious worship, allowing characters like Shug to connect with others on a deeply spiritual level. This is again supported by Walker's own memories of her youth in the Church, as she recounts that she felt a deep loving connection to others through the shared experience of music: "I liked singing with others still do and I was,

[59] Alice Walker, "The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven is That You Have Been Driven Out of Your Mind by Alice Walker (1997 Reprint)," *Alice Walker's Garden*, accessed November 29, 2024, https://alicewalkersgarden.com/1997/04/the-only-reason-you-want-to-go-to-heaven-is-that-you-have-been-driven-out-of-your-mind-by-alice-walker-1997-reprint/.
[60] Jeannine Thyreen, "Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: Redefining God and (Re)Claiming the Spirit Within," *Christianity and Literature* 49, no. 1 (1999): 59. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44313596.
[61] Judith Weisenfeld, "Religion in African American History." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History,* accessed 29 November, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.24.

even as a small child, humbled by the sincerity in the voices of everyone. After we sang any kind of song together, there was nobody in the congregation I didn't love."[62]

3.4 Religion and Spirituality in the Movie Adaptations

The spiritual themes of *The Color Purple* are adapted and reinterpreted in both Spielberg's 1985 film and Bazawule's 2023 musical. Each version offers its own perspective on Celie's spiritual journey, with varying emphases on her transformation and the role of faith, nature, and music in her story.

In Spielberg's 1985 adaptation, Celie's relationship with God is present but understated, reflecting a focus on her personal growth and relationships rather than an explicit engagement with her evolving spirituality. The film includes her opening letters to God, establishing Celie's initial perception of God as a distant and dominant figure. However, as the narrative progresses, the transformation of Celie's spirituality is less pronounced than in the novel. While Shug's philosophy of God as an internal, nurturing force is briefly introduced, it lacks the depth and prominence seen in the book. Moments such as Shug's discussion of the divine found in nature, symbolized by the colour purple, are present but simplified. Spielberg's visual approach, including the use of natural landscapes and intimate close-ups, gestures at this shift in Celie's spiritual understanding but does not fully explore it. Music in the 1985 adaptation plays a secondary but meaningful role in reinforcing spiritual and emotional connections. The music, similar to gospel, created by Quincy Jones complements the religious undertones of the story, helping evoke a sense of community and emotionality. An added scene of Shug's reconciliation with her father in church further emphasizes the spiritual themes of the story. This moment, unique to the film, illustrates Shug's journey of forgiveness and the possibility of healing even

[62] Walker, "The Only Reason."

the most broken relationships. The church setting, alongside the gospel music, underscores the significance of this reconciliation, offering a visual and emotional climax that deepens the film's exploration of redemption and the power of faith. However, the film largely separates spirituality from organized religion, lacking in the exploration of either.

Bazawule's 2023 musical adaptation places greater emphasis on spirituality through its integration of music and its visual presentation. Drawing heavily on African American religious traditions such as gospel, R&B, and jazz, the adaptation uses music as a direct expression of Celie's emotional and spiritual evolution. This integration of music transforms spiritual moments from quiet introspection into powerful numbers, reminiscent of a choir singing during a lively church service, aligning the adaptation with the heightened emotional tone of the Broadway musical it is based on. The 2023 version also visually amplifies Shug's alternative spiritual philosophy. Scenes that emphasize nature and vibrant depictions of African American cultural traditions, including dance and ritual, underscore Shug's belief. The portrayal of music as a spiritual medium is particularly evident in Shug's performances, where her songs bridge the gap between popular music, typical for musicals, and music often used for religious purposes. However, this emphasis on musical numbers sometimes overshadows the more subtle aspects of Celie's spirituality.

Both adaptations engage with the spiritual themes of *The Color Purple*, but they approach them differently. Spielberg's film prioritizes personal resilience and relational dynamics over

Celie's spiritual growth, while Bazawule's musical uses music and visual flair to celebrate spirituality, though sometimes at the expense of narrative depth.

Conclusion

This thesis has analysed how *The Color Purple* has been adapted into two films—Spielberg's 1985 version and Bazawule's 2023 musical—and how these adaptations diverge from Alice Walker's original novel. The research highlights that while Walker's novel centres on Celie's journey through intersecting themes of sexuality, gender, and spirituality, the adaptations reflect different priorities.

Adaptations of novels into films and musicals represent more than a simple retelling; they reimagine stories within new frameworks, reshaping narratives to fit different kinds of media. This transformation often brings with it significant changes in how themes are expressed, how characters are developed, and how audiences consume the material. The process of adaptation involves complex decisions about what to retain, modify, or remove from the source material. Claire Seymour discusses these challenges in "Theatrical Adaptations and Musical Realisations," emphasizing the difficulty of balancing narrative integrity with the demands of new formats.[63] For instance, a movie adaptation can face the constraints of runtime and audience criticism, leading to the omission or softening of certain plotlines, much like we observed regarding both Spielberg's and Bazawule's approach to the portrayal of male violence or the nature of the queer relationship.

Spielberg's 1985 film simplifies the novel's exploration of queerness, opting for ambiguity in Celie and Shug's relationship to avoid alienating mainstream audiences. This

[63] Claire Seymour, "Theatrical Adaptations and Musical Realisations," *The Hardy Society Journal* 2, no. 3 (Autumn 2006) 43–44, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45273614.

choice reflects the sociopolitical climate of the 1980s, where explicit portrayals of queer relationships were considered commercially risky. Similarly, the film softens depictions of male dominance and violence, reducing their severity and shifting focus toward narratives of redemption, which align with Spielberg's preference for emotionally accessible storytelling. Adaptations are also shaped by their reception and cultural context. Hutcheon notes that "the way the story is received can change rapidly even without changes in cultural settings or temporal updates."[64] Because of that, Spielberg's 1985 adaptation, criticized at the time for its portrayal of Black men and avoidance of queer themes, remains as a valuable source in discussions of representation in Hollywood.

Meanwhile, the 2023 adaptation reflects contemporary efforts to showcase intersectional narratives, even as it faces criticism for simplifying complex relationships in favour of creating a show. As Marjo Vallittu explains: "When the author or the director changes the genre, something is bound to change in the context of reception."[65] Drawing from its roots in the Broadway musical, the adaptation uses music to express themes of resilience and identity. However, musical adaptations in particular present unique challenges and opportunities when it comes to adapting literature. As Seymour highlights, the incorporation of music transforms the narrative's pace and emotional tone: "Because it takes so much longer to sing words than to read (or even speak) them, how can one balance the load-bearing responsibilities of the verbal text and musical score [. . .] and results in a satisfactory musico-dramatic structure?"[66] Musical

[64] Marjo Vallittu, "Context in Film Adaptations," *Reading Today* (London: UCL Press, 2018): 159, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20krxjt.
[65] Vallittu, "Context," 159.

[66] Seymour, "Theatrical Adaptations," 43.

numbers have the potential to reformulate complex emotions into powerful, concise moments that resonate deeply with audiences, but this can sometimes compress the narrative's subtlety.

Brian McFarlane's addition to the adaptation theory of Linda Hutcheon also provides a valuable framework for analysing the interplay of different codes in the adaptations of *The Color Purple*, identifying the linguistic, visual, and cultural codes as essential to understanding how stories are reinterpreted.[67] Regarding the language code, the 1985 film captures the Southern vernacular of the novel, preserving its cultural authenticity. However, while some elements of Southern African American vernacular are retained in the dialogue, the grammar and syntax are altered to ensure clarity and accessibility for a broader audience, aligning with the demands of film as a medium, where visual and auditory storytelling take precedence over linguistic nuance, for the inclusion of which Walker was praised. The adaptation also shifts much of the descriptive segments from Celie's letters into visual cues and character interactions. Meanwhile, the 2023 musical adaptation uses a more modernized linguistic style compared to the novel and blends African American vernacular with the lyricism of gospel, jazz, and R&B, creating more emotionality, reflecting its evolution through the Broadway musical lens and its adaptation for contemporary audiences. Both adaptations leverage visual storytelling to deepen the resonance of their themes—the visual code. Spielberg's film relies on intimate close-ups and pastoral landscapes to emphasize Celie's isolation and growth. The 2023 version, however, employs vibrant costumes and choreographed sequences to celebrate African American culture and solidarity, reflecting its focus on collective joy and resilience.

Non-linguistic sound codes (such as music, sound effects, and silence) play a crucial role in conveying emotion and atmosphere in both movie adaptations. In Spielberg's 1985 film,

[67] Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 29, https://archive.org/details/noveltofilmintro0000mcfa/page/28/mode/2up?view=theater.

music serves to amplify emotionality in the viewer, from sombre, reflective melodies during her moments of isolation to more uplifting themes as she gains empowerment. In the 2023 musical, music takes a more prominent role: the integration of musical numbers intensifies not only the feelings of the viewers, but also the portrayal of the characters' emotions. The cultural context of these adaptations greatly shapes their reception, which is part of the cultural code of adaptations. The importance of social and historical context in staging adaptations should not be forgotten, as cultural authenticity can serve to enhance the narrative. The 2023 film's emphasis on African American musical traditions reflects this cultural connection, aligning with the rise of discussion of cultural appropriation in the 21st century and the importance of giving credit to Black Americans for originating many popular trends and styles, music genres included. As Sidney Madden proclaims, "every genre that is born from America has Black roots associated with it."[68]

The changes in both adaptations stem from their efforts to balance the novel's challenging themes with the demands of the film industry and audience expectations. Spielberg's adaptation aligns with the conservatism of its time, emphasizing universal themes of personal growth and racial identity over queerness or systemic critiques of patriarchy. Bazawule's version reflects a more contemporary sensibility, engaging with intersectionality and African American cultural traditions, but still navigates commercial pressures to simplify certain narrative elements. Ultimately, both adaptations highlight the inherent challenges of translating a novel as multifaceted as *The Color Purple* into film. While the novel offers a layered critique of societal norms, the films adapt these themes through the lens of their respective eras, reshaping the narrative to fit cultural and artistic priorities. This thesis

[68] Sidney Madden, "The soundtrack of history: How Black music has shaped American culture through time," interview by Maya Eaglin, *NBC NEWS*, February 1, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/soundtrack-history-how-black-music-has-shaped-american-culture-through-n1258474.

concludes that the adaptations, though distinct in their approaches, reflect the evolving discourse around race, gender, and identity in media, underscoring the complexities of adapting such an innovative novel.

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