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FILM FINDING THE SACRED AMONG THE PROFANE: THE COLOR PURPLE / SEAN WOODARD

Film (/2017-posts/category/Film)





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In my previous entry for this column, I briefly diverted from the horror genre to write on *The Shawshank Redemption* (<https://www.drunkmonkeys.us/2017-posts/2019/10/16/film-finding-the-sacred-among-the-profane-the-shawshank-redemption-sean-woodard>), given it was based on a Stephen King novel. My reasoning stems from an observation I noticed in my columns on *Shawshank* and *The Passion of the Christ* (<https://www.drunkmonkeys.us/2017-posts/2019/4/1/film-finding-the-sacred-among-the-profane-the-passion-of-the-christ-sean-woodard>)—that “horror” may manifest itself and affect people in different ways on a more realistic plane that the horror genre may not fully address. This time, I would similarly like to explore *The Color Purple* and reiterate its religious themes.

Earlier this month, I had the opportunity to view Steven Spielberg’s adaptation of the Alice Walker novel for the first time. Better late than never. It had a profound emotional effect on me and I was surprised I’d not seen the film sooner. Being Spielberg’s first foray into “serious” filmmaking, the film is not perfect, but that does not make the emotional connection less powerful.

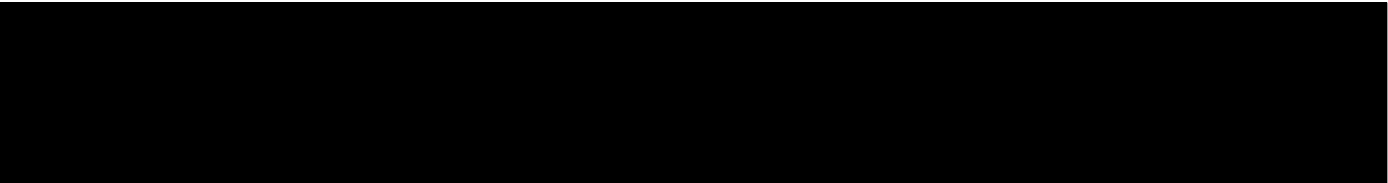
The late Roger Ebert summed this up well in his “Great Movies” (<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-the-color-purple-1985>) series: “Returning to ‘The Color Purple’ after almost 20 years, I can see its flaws more easily than when I named it the best film of 1985, but I can also understand why it moved me so deeply, and why the greatness of some films depends not on their perfection or logic, but on their heart.”

While watching *The Color Purple*, I noticed how the episodic structure of its narrative sometimes made the story meander at points and feel less cohesive. However, even the most distracting scenes add our understanding of the main character Celie (Whoopi Goldberg) and her relationship with the characters she interacts with. Most importantly is how she and others overcome the horrific challenges that affect them: racism, sexism, rejection, separation from family.

Central to Celie's character is her separation she experiences from the children she births. Celie's opening voice over provides context that she became pregnant from her father raping her. Upon bonding with one baby after childbirth in an opening sequence, the child is pulled from her hands and carried from the house out into the snow. As she goes through life, she wonders whether the children died or were adopted. In one scene in the general store, she meets a young woman whose adopted baby shares the name she gave her daughter, Olivia. At first she is smitten by the infant, but then finds herself unable to give the child back to her mother after holding her for a while because the name brings up the grief she feels.

On top of the grief she feels for her children, she is also separated from her sister, Nettie. Celie is married off to Mister Johnson (Danny Glover), an abusive patriarch whose philosophy about a woman's place in the home he borrows from his father: the way to make a woman perform her wifely duties is to beat her. At one point, Nettie comes to live with them to escape her father's advances. Unfortunately Mister Johnson, who wanted to originally marry Nettie, attempts to have his way with her; when she refuses his sexual advances, he kicks her off his land. He also prevents Celie from reading any of Nettie's letters by hiding them away. Over the course of the story, Celie wonders if her sister has forgotten her or has died, given she's never received a letter from her. However, she holds onto the hope that she'll be reunited one day.

In addition to holding onto hope, Celie is also introduced to two characters that embody spiritual themes in the film. The first is Sofia (Oprah Winfrey), a strong-willed woman who marries Mister Johnson's son, Harpo. She battles oppression and sexism to maintain her dignity. In one scene, she offends a white woman named Miss Millie, who asks her if she would like to be her maid, by saying, "Hell no." She then punches her husband and is jailed. Once released, she is conscripted into assisting the people she offended. They prevent Sofia from seeing her family, except for fifteen minutes during one Christmas. One day when she visits the general store, Celie appears and helps Sofia shop for Miss Millie. This incident is later recalled by Sofia in the climactic dinner scene. Sofia tells Celie that that event reminded her that there is a God. That act of kindness helped her carry on, despite the abuse she endured.





The second person through whom religious themes are presented is Shug Avery. The object of Mister Johnson's object of affection, she is ironically the person from whom Celie learns to love herself. She teaches Celie to appreciate her smile, know what it is like to be kissed, and stand up for herself by asserting her authority as a woman.

Shug understand how Celie feels because she, herself, has been rejected by her own father. Her father is the pastor of the nearby church. On one visit to the area, Shug enters the church and tries to converse with her father about her memories of being in church and singing in the choir. He continues to sweep as she talks, ignoring her.

He rejects her because he feels she revels in the type of sin she tells his parishioners to avoid: gambling, promiscuity, drink, blues music. Toward the end of the film, the sounds of the choir drown out the blues she sings nearby at Harpo's bar. But Shug leads everyone to the church, singing the hymn loudly until they burst through the doors. With everyone there, she approaches her father. Tears in her eyes, she reminds him that even sinners have souls. They embrace in this moving moment of reconciliation.



While there are other instances of religious themes imbued by characters—including Mister Johnson’s change of heart and decision to help reunite Celie and Nettie—the two presented above surrounding Sofia and Shug Avery stand out for how empowering they are for the characters. They lead to not only realizations of self-worth, but also actions that set them upon paths to work toward their best interests. Despite any doubt film critics may have had in Spielberg’s abilities to helm a drama based on a celebrated literary work, these themes shine through and inform the characters’ story, so that the emotion moments feel earned and impactful.



Sean Woodard is a graduate of Point Loma Nazarene University and Chapman University. Focusing on a wide variety of interests, Sean's fiction, film criticism, and other writings have been featured in *NonBinary Review*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Horrorbuzz*, *Cultured Vultures*, *The Cost of Paper*, and *Los Angeles Magazine*, among other publications. He serves as the Film Editor for *Drunk Monkeys* and as a co-producer of the faith and spirituality podcast, *Ordinary Grace* (<http://ordinarygrace.org/>). A native of Visalia, CA, he now resides and teaches in Orange County.

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