


Sisterhood and Strength: An In-Depth Analysis of *Fried Green Tomatoes (At The Whistle Stop Cafe)* and *The Color Purple*

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Amanda L. Littke

Thesis Advisor: Maude Jennings

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Maude M. Jennings, Ph.D." The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

Friday, April 20, 2007

Expected Date of Graduation: May 5, 2007

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for

Maude, mentor and friend,

My Family, for giving me the room to follow my dreams,

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and *Matt*, for balancing me.

Abstract

In my senior honors project, I created a comparative character analysis of the women in *Fried Green Tomatoes (At The Whistle Stop Cafe)* and *The Color Purple*. Through this analysis, I implemented my background in Women's and Gender Studies, African-American Studies, Film Studies, and English, to provide an all-encompassing essay. My primary sources included both the texts and film versions of these novels.

Fried Green Tomatoes (At The Whistle Stop Cafe) is a story of family, change, and the power of love implemented to overcome all obstacles. Centered around the happenstance friendship between Ninny and Evelyn, the tale weaves between the present and days gone by to include the relationship shared between Idgie and Ruth. A collection of memories from various viewpoints in the American south, Flagg's stories-within-stories approach richly describes the courage women often have to muster in the midst of patriarchy.

The Color Purple focuses on the unbreakable love between sisters and the strength to overcome oppression. Centered around sisters Nettie and Celie, the circle of sisterhood eventually extends to other female characters, including Shug and Sofia. Walker's narrative is a collection of thoughts, ideas, and letters, which describe the struggle of one woman's triumph over brutality, learning to accept love as a means of salvation.

In both the films and novels *Fried Green Tomatoes* by Fannie Flagg and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, themes of sisterhood and the sharing of strength are exemplified, transcending race, time, and patriarchal oppression in the American south. In *Fried Green Tomatoes*, the dichotomy seen between the characters of Idgie (and her representation through Mrs. Cleo Threadgoode) and Ruth are duplicated in *The Color Purple* through the characters of Nettie and Celie. In addition to these twosomes, triads are created by the addition of the characters, Evelyn and Shug, in each novel and film, respectively. The relationships between these paralleling

triads work interchangeably and with peripheral characters to further encompass several issues specific to Women's and Gender Studies, including domestic abuse, body image issues, expected gender roles, women's sexuality, lesbian issues, race relations, and international women's relations.

The theme of domestic abuse is a major premise in both works. As in most domestic violence situations, the abuse described is not only physical, but also psychological, sexual, and verbal. The pattern of domestic abuse is also coupled with themes of childhood sexual abuse and incest in *The Color Purple*, as well as themes of rape and infidelity in *Fried Green Tomatoes*.

The domestic abuse in both works, from the standpoint of the abuser, has largely to do with being a product of one's environment. Abusers Frank Bennett, "Mr. _____" (Albert), and Harpo all had upbringings which allowed them to believe that beating their wives was perfectly natural and that maintaining dominance, at any cost, was vital to the male in any relationship. These characteristics are classic symptoms of abusers in cases of domestic violence. Frank Bennett, a prime example, had a very unstable childhood. His father viciously abused Frank because of his affinity for his mother. This abuse, coupled with Frank's viewing of his mother's infidelity, left him cold and fueled in him a blind hatred for all women, including Ruth (Flagg 174). Like Frank's father, "Mr. _____'s" father was also abusive, and instilled in him disdain and disrespect for all women, save Shug, a

woman whom he revered despite his father's influence. It only follows suit that Harpo would, under the oppressive influence of "Mr. _____," grow up to demonstrate confusion about his relationships with women. It must be noted, however, that Harpo has his doubts when it comes to using force on Sofia, unlike "Mr. _____," who doles out punishments as *he* sees fit.

The domestic abuse in both works, from the viewpoint of the victims, largely has to do with believing that the punishment inflicted is deserved. All of the varied abused women mature believing that their abuse is deserved punishment for their own inadequacies. These, too, are classic characteristics of domestic violence victims. Although Ruth is shocked on their wedding night when she is first raped by Frank, the "man who had courted her like a gentleman and charmed her mother," his abuse eventually becomes a natural part of her life (Flagg 175). The psychological impact of his abuse is witnessed as she begins to internalize her guilt. As seen specifically in the novel, Ruth believes that the ritual rapes and beatings from Frank are deserved because, despite her deeply hidden desires, he could discern that he is not the one she loves above all else. Ruth goes on to describe that Frank "felt the love inside she had for Idgie... he must have known and that's why he despised her." Ruth even goes so far as to "pray to God and beg Him to take such thoughts out of her head" and, as seen specifically in the film, she recalls thanking God for the little strength she has left after Frank's beatings (Flagg 194-5). In

other words, Ruth feels guilt for loving Idgie and has conditioned herself to take the blame for her failing marriage, receiving Frank's beatings without question as a means of survival.

Like Ruth, Celie believes that she deserves to be beaten, and that it is normal for husbands to beat their wives to make them mind, "like children" (Walker 42). Because she was repeatedly abused and raped throughout her childhood by her assumed father, Alphonso (she finds later in the novel that he is actually her stepfather), she finds normalcy and eventually comes to expect the continued abuse, both physical and verbal, that she receives from "Mr. _____" to keep her under his control. In one striking scene in the film, "Mr. _____" touches a seemingly icy cold glass of lemonade, and contemptuously comments that it is "Not cold enough," whereby Celie scampers off to remedy the situation, proving that she is conditioned to following his commanding verbal attacks (*The Color Purple* np). Reminiscent of Ruth's never-ending faith, Celie also continues to pray through the abuse, believing that the beatings and verbal assaults from "Mr. _____" are part of this impermanent life while "Heaven last all ways" (Walker 47). In other words, despite her beatings, her eventual salvation and an otherworldly life in Heaven is much more important. Like Ruth, she has developed her own survival techniques, as she has conditioned herself either to feel sick or "to feel nothing at all" whenever she feels the urge to fight back, thereby perpetuating her abuse (Walker 47).

Several other factors contribute to the themes of domestic violence in both works. The age-old, patriarchal notion of selling young girls into marriage like chattel is especially prevalent in the bartering over Celie between Alphonso and "Mr. _____," and only perpetuates situations where young girls may be sexually and physically abused by domineering male figures. Another factor is the systematic choosing of victims. Frank exemplifies this predator persona through the methodical choosing of his victims, hand-picking both black and poor local girls, as well as weaker, more subdued women, such as Ruth. In other words, he chooses his victims while recognizing in them that they have neither the means nor the fortitude to speak out against him. In addition, none of these men hesitate to cover up the fact that they participate in these acts of violence against the women in their lives, which maintains the secrecy of these dark truths.

Fortunately, sharing strength to fight back against abuse is also a significant theme in both works. Recurring characters with strong, feminine personalities flow intermittently throughout the works, giving the respective victims influence to fight back against their aggressors.

Ruth finds the strength to overcome Frank through her memories of Idgie's strength and audacity against patriarchal oppression. "Idgie would suddenly come to mind" (Flagg 194) during the depths of Ruth's deepest sorrows, giving her the strength to carry on and, eventually, leave Frank for good. Although there is later

speculation that Ruth is bribed by Idgie to leave Frank "with promises of money and liquor" (Flagg 340), these speculations are put to rest when Ninny tells Evelyn that she respects "Ruth for having the courage to walk away like that" and claims that Ruth is "a lot stronger than Idgie in many ways" (Flagg 191). Ruth's memoirs also confirm that her choice to leave Frank is of her own free will. She likens her feelings of newfound strength to "a kite that some child had released to the heavens" (Flagg 195). Ruth's strength is also seen specifically in the film, when a small, yet clearly visible smile creeps across her face upon gaining the knowledge of Frank's murder. It is in this moment that she knows she will never again be his victim. These recollections exemplify how Idgie's strength is passed on to Ruth and then is enhanced by Ruth's own inner strength.

Much like the strength Idgie provides for Ruth, several women share their strength with Celie. In a memorable line in both the film and the novel, Nettie lovingly advises Celie, saying, "Don't let them run over you... You got to let them know who got the upper hand... You got to fight" (Walker 25). Although she is speaking about "Mr. _____'s" children, Celie places this comment in a broader context, which allows her, for the first time, to explore the notion of fighting back. Sofia also provides strength for Celie, as Celie becomes curious about this "big strong girl" (Walker 41). Celie witnesses Sofia standing toe-to-toe with Harpo, as she observes them "fighting like two mens" (Walker 44). Celie

has never seen a woman stand up to a man, much less match his strength. When Celie confronts Sofia about fighting back, Sofia responds, "All my life I had to fight... a girl child ain't safe in a family of men" (Walker 46). Although Celie never envisions herself fighting back like Sofia, she can relate to Sofia's past. Sofia's influence inspires her and shows her that fighting back is possible, and in some cases, absolutely necessary. Reminiscent of Sofia standing up to Harpo, Shug stands up to "Mr. _____," even furthering Celie's growth toward becoming strong enough to fight back. When Shug calls him by his name, Albert, Celie finds surprising strength. Up until this point, Celie calls Albert "Mr. _____" instead of by his real name, which impresses upon the reader just how small and insignificant she feels in relation to him, as well as the unwritten status he assumes over her. In one liberating moment of the film, Celie first vocalizes the word, "Albert," while smiling to herself, foreshadowing that the monster she lives with every day can, and one day will be, overcome.

As a result of years of abuse and negative male influences, many of the leading women in both works suffer from severe body image distortion. Other additional factors also influence the way these women feel about themselves, including society's prevailing preference of white over black, of slimness over being overweight, and of young over old. These preferences give not only these characters negative body images, but reiterate the negative messages portrayed to women every day all over the world. Again,

strong female characters come through to bring light to these leading ladies, providing alter-egos and role models, as well as giving them strength to find their own beauty.

Evelyn, distressed and jaded about her life in middle-age, has all but given up hope on becoming thin and beautiful. Like many women who are dissatisfied with their bodies, she has employed tactics from starving herself to overindulging on food to numb the pain of everyday life, thereby abusing her body in an attempt to maintain the forced image society has been selling to her over the course of her lifetime. Even her husband, Ed, is no help, as he looks disdainfully at whatever she eats, mockingly asking, "Is that on your diet?" (Flagg 40). All around her are various women's groups and networks, which she seeks out in an effort to find solace and sisterhood. Instead, she is left feeling alone and downtrodden, as she does not fit in with a stay-at-home women's group, called "The Complete Woman," which focuses on women finding happiness through keeping the men in their lives content (Flagg 42). Nor does she fit in with the Women's Libbers at the Community Center, as she is the only one to attend their meetings "in full makeup, wearing pantyhose and earrings" (Flagg 43). Like a common conundrum faced by many women exploring the notion of feminism, she feels she cannot have her proverbial "cake and eat it, too," as she feels she cannot be a feminist while wearing high heels and makeup. She also feels the pull of middle-age, as she expresses in the film that she is "too young to be old and too old to be young" (*Fried*

Green Tomatoes np). In one poignant part of the novel, she further describes her situation as she feels "too bored for Tupperware parties and too scared to look at her own vagina" (Flagg 43). Because Evelyn cannot find anyone to relate to, she feels isolated and "stuck right in the middle," until she meets Mrs. Cleo (Ninny) Threadgoode (Flagg 67).

Ninny, and her accounts of the strength shared between Idgie and Ruth, provides an alter-ego for Evelyn, whom she affectionately calls "TOWANDA THE AVENGER!" (Flagg 238). Towanda has a myriad of daily philanthropic activities, from appointing "Jerry Falwell... responsible for the raising of all illegitimate children" to "poking child molesters with electric cattle prods until their hair stood on end" to ordering "all the leading men to act opposite women of their own age, not twenty-year-old girls with perfect bodies" (Flagg 238-9). These daily activities reflect the problems Evelyn sees as a result of the patriarchal society in which she lives. Before she can find her own strength, Evelyn must rely on the strength of Towanda, which also provides a valuable lesson that even feminists of today must learn. Although her daydreams of Towanda include positive reformations for society, she eventually begins to visualize a reverse patriarchy, with Towanda being supreme ruler. She soon learns that a woman misdirecting her power and executing her control poorly, like Towanda, is not an answer to the problems caused by patriarchy and, in actuality, is no better than patriarchy itself.

On the contrary, Ninny proves to be an unlikely, but far more suitable companion and role model for Evelyn. While she is conservative, much like Evelyn, about issues like sexuality, she also represents the might of Idgie - all that is strong and good in the world. As a result of her time spent with Ninny, Evelyn is provided a constructive and empowering voice in an otherwise lonely world. This combination of positive attributes shows Evelyn that she can, indeed, "have her cake and eat it, too." Ninny encourages her to make something of herself, regardless of her clothing being a size sixteen. Ninny knows how to make the best of any situation, and to find the good in anyone. In one moment where Evelyn is feeling particularly bad about herself and her larger size, Ninny suggests that she take control of her own destiny and go into business for herself, to give her a goal as well as something to make her feel better about her appearance. Because she has good, clear skin, Ninny suggests that she work for Mary Kay, a very woman-friendly corporation, and even pushes Evelyn to strive for the signature bonus of the pink Cadillac. As she sells Mary Kay cosmetics, she begins to feel better and better about herself, and

[t]he more Mrs. Threadgoode talked about it and the more she thought about it, the less Towanda ran rampant in her mind, beating up on the world, and she began to see herself as thin and happy - behind the wheel of a pink Cadillac (Flagg 359).

In the film, Evelyn thanks Ninny by saying,

You're the reason I get up in the morning. And that Mary Kay's havin' such a good year. And I don't look like some blob from a horror movie. Well, with a little help from Idgie and Ruth... (*Fried Green Tomatoes* np),

thus proving that the sisterhood offered by Ninny and her memories of Idgie and Ruth was a source of inspiration for Evelyn to get her life back on track.

Celie's negative body image, fashioned after Walker's own experiences, reflects Walker's own issues with body image distortion. When Walker was a child, she had a debilitating accident, which left her blinded in one eye and made her self-conscious thereafter about its cloudy appearance. From the time Celie was a young girl, her stepfather had told her that she had "the ugliest smile this side of creation," which left an indelible print on how she viewed herself (*The Color Purple* np). Once regarded as ugly by her stepfather, "Mr. _____" carries on this trend by complimenting Nettie and ignoring Celie, even though Celie is his wife. In an essential part of the film, Shug extends Celie's negative self-perceptions by exemplifying another problem caused by patriarchy: women being conditioned to hate other women. Upon seeing Celie for the first time, she exclaims, "You sho is ugly!" (*The Color Purple* np). Instead of finding sisterhood in Shug, she finds just another person to tell her just how ugly she is. Celie thinks of this comment later in the novel when Shug leaves her for a man. She looks at herself in the mirror, and all the years of being told she was ugly come flooding back to her as she says, "Nothing special here for nobody to love" (Walker 229).

During her childhood, Nettie makes Celie feel beautiful by

lavishing love and compliments on her whenever she gets the chance. Nettie ignores "Mr. _____'s" misplaced compliments, and instead forwards them to Celie. Celie recollects her sister's caring and kindness by maintaining that after all of these compliments, she gets to "feeling pretty cute" about her appearance (Walker 26). Moreover, in the film, two scenes overlap, showing both Nettie and Shug uncovering Celie's mouth when she attempts to hide the big, beautiful smile that has been ridiculed over the course of her lifetime. Shug is another key player in the transformation of how Celie feels about her image. After confessing her jealousy of Celie's marriage to "Mr. _____," Shug apologizes for calling Celie ugly. She then proceeds to make love to Celie, awakening her sexuality and making her feel desirable in her own skin. In addition to awakening Celie sexually, Shug also awakens Celie to the prospect of her own business. Shug creates a pants-making project to divert Celie's attention away from thoughts of killing "Mr. _____" and instead toward bettering herself. Echoing Evelyn taking control of her own destiny by becoming self-employed, Celie too empowers herself by becoming self-employed. She also finally achieves the courage to leave "Mr. _____'s" house and "enter into the Creation" with Shug (Walker 181). As she leaves, "Mr. _____" attempts one final blow by demeaning her and declaring, "Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam... you nothing at all" (Walker 187). By this time, Celie is undaunted by "Mr. _____'s" crude comments, thus she replies triumphantly with

"I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook... But I'm here" in a self-proclamation of her worth (Walker 187).

In addition to Evelyn and Celie, several other leading and peripheral characters in both works have negative images of their bodies, all centered around skin color. Flagg writes from both sides of the pigmentation spectrum, both black and white. Included in her text are society's mixed messages to women of color. While "passing for a white was an unpardonable sin" (Flagg 296), advertisements in the local newspaper boast of products that allow users to trade "tight, scalp-clinging twisty curls" for "gloriously beautiful, straight silky hair," and promise users "lighter, more beautiful skin in 5 days" (Flagg 305). Echoing Flagg's sentiment, time and time again, Shug is contemptuously referred to by the dark, rich color of her skin. "Mr. _____'s" sisters claim that she is "black as... [a] shoe," while "Mr. _____'s" father, "Old Mr. _____," makes claims in the film that Shug is "black as tar, nappy-headed" (Walker 28 and *The Color Purple* np, respectively). Although she appears confident, Shug has been affected by these sentiments, as she applies "yellow powder caked up on her face" to make her skin appear lighter (Walker 50). Conversely, Squeak, Harpo's second love, is also heavily concerned with her lighter skin color, as she pleadingly asks Harpo, "[D]o you really love me, or just my color?" (Walker 95).

In a surprise role reversal, Celie gives pure love and strength to Shug, expressing her adoration for every aspect of her,

including her skin. As Celie begins to show Shug all the love she has inside for her, Shug, paralleling Celie after Nettie's compliments, gets to "feeling pretty cute" (Walker 26). Nettie also sends her affinity for the beauty of dark skin from across seas, describing African skin as "so black the eye is simply dazzled, and then there is the shining that seems to come, really, from moonlight, it is so luminous, but their skin glows even in the sun" (Walker 131). Once Shug is empowered, Squeak is, in turn, empowered by Shug not to only sing, but to sing about being of mixed heritage. She expresses the mixed messages mirrored in Flagg's text, as she sings, "They calls me yellow/ like yellow be my name" (Walker 97).

In addition to the issues surrounding body image, maintaining expected gender roles is a core theme in both works, including a focus on the division of labor and expectations of women as child bearers, wives, and mothers. Attached to this main theme is also the theme of stepping outside the lines drawn by gender. Included in this latter theme is evidence of gender role switching and androgyny, both of which are demonstrated in the actions of leading ladies in both texts.

Evelyn has spent her entire life pursuing the good girl image. She "always acted like a lady, never raised her voice, always deferred to everybody and everything. She had assumed that somewhere down the line there would be a reward for that; a prize" (Flagg 42). But for Evelyn, maintaining her femininity has

afforded her no prizes. She describes her situation to Ninny, recalling, "[w]omen's lib came too late for me... I was already married with two children when I found out that I didn't have to get married. I thought you had to" (Flagg 67). She tries to be a dutiful wife, but she never enjoys her sexual relationship with Ed, as "every time she would start to relax, the bad-girl image would pop into her head" (Flagg 41). She also fulfills society's expectation of her as a child bearer by "raising the required two children - 'a boy for him and a girl for me'" (Flagg 40). She attempts to be a good mother, but cannot relate to her children and thus loses contact and closeness with them. Because she has followed all the rules expected of her gender, she feels saddened and disappointed that her life has not turned out the way she once expected it would. When she first expresses the anger she feels, she thinks, "[f]or the first time in her life, she wished she were a man... [s]he wanted a man's strength" (Flagg 237). She feels that if she were to possess the strength of a man, she would be better able to fight against the seemingly endless patriarchal oppression she faces daily.

As she calls upon the strength of the women of Whistle Stop, she soon realizes that she does not have to be a man to possess the strength of a man. She is instead shown a number of examples of how these women, especially Idgie, have stepped outside prescribed gender roles to combat patriarchy. Idgie is a forerunner in the battle against patriarchy, as she has rebelled against arcane

notions of femininity from birth and she is well known for her androgynous appearance. In one shocking example, Idgie plays with expected gender roles, as men in the community assume that Railroad Bill is a black man. Because of their ignorance and assumptions, she is able to hide behind racial and gender stereotypes to conceal the mystery that she is Railroad Bill, a local humanitarian who, during the Great Depression, threw supplies off government trains to the poor people of the community. In the famous trial scene, where other women would have cowered at the assertion of male authority, Idgie refuses to budge. Instead of kowtowing to a lawyer who interrogates, badgers, and then attempts to humiliate her, she refuses to back down and responds by the same token, calling him a "gump-faced, blowed-up, baboon-assed bastard" (Flagg 341). This shows the lawyer and everyone else present that she will, by no means, be intimidated.

Like Evelyn, Celie strives to be a dutiful wife, even if that means having to go through her daily responsibilities and activities mechanically. Knowing that it is her duty as a wife to serve "Mr. _____" and his family, she is treated like a slave and is described by many as solely a "[g]ood housekeeper, good with children, good cook" (Walker 28). "Mr. _____" perpetuates the gender stereotypes of the division of labor in his household, as is evident when Harpo is asked to help Celie with her chores. He responds simply but definitively with, "Women work. I'm a man" (Walker 29). Mirroring his father, who "never wash a dish in his

life," Harpo continues to perpetuate expected gender roles (Walker 63). As Harpo grows older, Sofia reports that he "love cooking and cleaning and doing little things round the house" (Walker 63). The reader soon finds that Harpo, like his father, has been conditioned to look disapprovingly at the prospect of participating in work that is deemed for women.

Supplementing these rare male characters that occasionally step outside gender boundaries are females that also refuse to bow to gender constraints, namely Shug and Sofia. "Mr. _____" talks about Shug in regards to conformity when he asserts,

Shug act more manly than most men... she upright, honest. Speak her mind and the devil take the hindmost... You know Shug will fight... Just like Sofia. She bound to live her life and be herself no matter what (Walker 236).

Harpo reiterates this sentiment when he describes Sofia's headstrong ways, claiming that she believes her "way as good as anybody else's" (Walker 196). "Mr. _____" sums up the strength and defiance of both Shug and Sofia when he states, "Sofia and Shug not like men... but they not like women either... They hold they own... And it's different" (Walker 236). In other words, by not conforming to gender stereotypes, both Shug and Sofia have gained the respect of even the most patriarchal of men.

These women function to provide Celie with the strength to eventually cross these gender lines herself. At this time in the American south, black women were not afforded the right to vote, and women-owned, independent clothing establishments were rare.

Nevertheless, Celie is determined to start her own business, answering to nobody and living life on her own terms for the first time. Her desire for nonconformity to gender norms is reflected in her androgynous clothing, suitable for either a male or a female. "Mr. _____" expresses his continued struggle with the idea of androgyny when he declares "Men and women not suppose to wear the same thing... Men spose to wear the pants" (Walker 238). Celie responds effectively with "You ought to tell that to the mens in Africa," which gives him a world perspective on gender relations and immediately ceases his objections to Celie's assertions (Walker 238).

In the same vein of society's expectations of gender roles are society's expectations of women in the sexual realm. While men are often times praised for an open sexuality, women are not allowed to be sexual without the backlash of being labeled promiscuous. This perception is evident through the actions of the women in both works who choose to be sexually liberated. Going against the grain of what society deems morally correct, these women choose to live their lives on their own terms, and feel free to empower themselves in any way they choose, including through their sexuality.

It is particularly interesting that Flagg chooses to name the town whore in her novel *Eva Bates*. Her name, *Eva*, is reminiscent of the Bible's *Eve*. When many think of *Eve*, they think of original sin and of forbidden fruits. Likewise, the character of *Eva* symbolically represents the sinfully delicious parts of life that

are supposedly forbidden, especially for women. To further clarify this connection, Flagg sardonically writes that many men have "had the pleasure of knowing Eva *in the biblical sense*" (Flagg 209). Despite being seen as promiscuous, Eva refuses to give in to patriarchal notions of women's sexuality. She may not have known "about a lot of things, but she knew about love," choosing to be monogamous only when she falls deeply in love, as she did with Idgie's brother, Buddy (Flagg 98). Flagg expands upon this idea by writing, "It was true that she had slept with whomever she pleased; but no matter what anybody thought or said, when she loved you, she was strictly a one-man woman" (Flagg 95).

Paralleling Eva, Shug is also seen as a whore. "Mr. _____'s" father claims that Shug, because of her sexual appetite, has "the nasty woman disease" (Walker 58). In other words, he links her free-love mentality to being a diseased prostitute. Furthermore, even the town preacher speaks his mind against Shug, referring to her in dishonorable terms, such as "slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner," further expressing the male consensus on female sexuality (Walker 49). It must be noted, however, that although she is more expressive than other women about her sexuality, she practices the safest sex possible at the time. In teaching Celie about the ways of sexual intercourse, she makes reference to her birth control and contraceptive method of choice: a "sponge" (Walker 78).

In contrast to the negative responses to women's sexuality,

both works also portray the beauty of love through lesbian relationships. These relationships not only function as close friendships, but also offer a deeper connection, centered around love and sensuality.

Because Celie has been mistreated by men all her life, she could be considered a lesbian of circumstance. Her contempt for and fear of male presence is evident in the way she refers to all men through versions of the title "Mr. ____" or by pronouns such as "him." She further describes her lack of erotic feelings toward men when she professes, "Most times mens look pretty much alike to me" (Walker 23). She often times wonders what is "wrong" with her sexuality, but her lesbianism is clarified for her through her sexual interaction with Shug. When she meets Shug, she feels sexually driven for the first time, which confuses her. She expresses her confusion in testifying, "First time I got full sight of Shug Avery long black body... I thought I had turned into a man" (Walker 53). After she makes love to Shug, her confusion is gone, as she articulates that her closeness with Shug "feel like heaven is what it feel like, not like sleeping with 'Mr. ____' at all" (Walker 110). It is ironic to note that while most believe that "womens love just by accident," "Mr. ____" is the only person to fully understand her situation when she comes out to him near the end of the novel (Walker 230).

While Celie's lesbianism is seen as a phase to be grown out of, there is evidence to maintain that Idgie's family is fully

supportive of her relationship with Ruth. In one outstanding scene in the novel, Idgie's parents tell Ruth that they "couldn't be happier for our little girl to have such a sweet companion," indicating their innocent and unknowing acceptance of the relationship she has with Idgie (Flagg 199). It is also interesting to note the differences in how lesbian issues are portrayed in the film versus in the novel. The only time that Idgie's sexual orientation is suggested in the film is when Ruth advocates that she find a man and settle down, to which she lovingly looks at Ruth and responds, "I'm as settled as I ever hope to be" (*Fried Green Tomatoes* np). Although her lesbianism is deeply shrouded in the film, it is made quite clear in the lines of Flagg's text, which makes readers wonder if this is a reference to Flagg's own sexual orientation.

Although race is not a factor in the similarities between the ways these women interact with one another, it would be incomplete to not discuss matters of race. Because *Fried Green Tomatoes* is a novel that includes various viewpoints, weaving between both sides of the tracks, black and white, several race issues ensue. Within these issues are strong females who refuse to back down to patriarchy and racism.

Idgie is most prominent in the fight against racism. When community members complain about her selling food to blacks, she refuses to discriminate against her customers, even at the imminent threat of the Klan. Instead, she pokes fun at racism, claiming "a

bunch of grown men getting liquored up and putting sheets on their heads is pretty damn funny" (Flagg 54). She also puts her own life at stake to save George from going to jail for the murder of Frank Bennett. She describes the racial inequalities of the time in terms of the American justice system in alleging that

The odds of a white woman's getting off were much higher than his; especially if his alibi depended on the words of another Negro. She was not going to let Big George go to jail if her life depended on it; and it very well might (Flagg 341).

Regardless of racist societal institutions, she manages to save both herself and George from the hangman's noose.

Along with the outlying theme of race relations is the theme of international women's relations, centered around Africa, as is seen in *The Color Purple*. Included in this theme are two hot topics in Women's and Gender Studies: ritual mutilation and education for women. Within these hot-button issues are women who combat patriarchy across seas, empowering their sisters on the other side of the world.

According to the Olinka tribe, "A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something" (Walker 144). In other words, the Olinka mirror patriarchy seen in the United States, where a woman's only place is in the home, serving her husband and her family. Additionally, "[t]he Olinka do not believe girls should be educated" (Walker 144). Both Nettie and Olivia work to combat both of these issues, offering education as an alternative for Olinka women to empower themselves. One girl they

help in particular is Tashi, who wants nothing more than to please her father, the chief of the Olinka people. Unfortunately, "she has tried to please her father, never quite realizing that, as a girl, she never could," due to the patriarchy evident in her tribe (Walker 153). After participating in both ritual scarification and female circumcision rites in an attempt to preserve her culture, Tashi finally realizes that an education and a life in America will afford her the freedom she will never be allowed to have in her tribal life. The movement to end the atrocity of female genital mutilation (FGM) is further touched upon through the character of Doris Baines, a white missionary who speaks of African women studying to become doctors and put an end to FGM.

In an unforgettable scene in *The Color Purple*, Shug sings to Celie, "I'm somethin'... I hope you think that you're somethin' too" (*The Color Purple* np). In this simple verse, she describes that believing in the power that resides in oneself is crucial to overcoming adversity. Through the sharing of sisterhood and strength, the women in both *Fried Green Tomatoes (At The Whistle Stop Cafe)* and *The Color Purple* are able to find their own worth and to find comfort in their own skins, whether black or white. Moreover, in learning to accept love from others, they learn to love themselves and in taking control of their own destinies, they exemplify the ultimate power and strength of sisterhood.

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