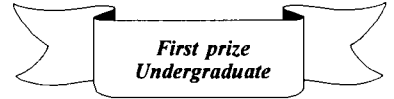


# Making Connections: The Uses and Meanings of Needle Arts in *The Color Purple* and *The Mountain and the Valley*

1992 National Student Competition



Concours national pour étudiantes 1992

Sheila Davis Kusalik  
Dalhousie University

## ABSTRACT

In this article, the author examines the symbolic use of colour and cloth within two novels, *The Color Purple* and *The Mountain and the Valley*. By comparing the quilting and rug-hooking activities of the characters within these works, she explores the emancipatory aspects of women's needle work. Furthermore, she examines the authors' differing subjectivities of gender, race and culture by contrasting their approaches in documenting the relationship between women and their fibre arts.

## RÉSUMÉ

L'auteure de l'article suivant examine l'usage symbolique de couleurs et de tissus dans deux romans, soit *The Color Purple* et *The Mountain and the Valley*. En comparant les activités de piquage de courtepointe et de fabrication de tapis au crochet exercées par les personnages dans ces oeuvres, elle explore les aspects émancipateurs des travaux à l'aiguille pratiqués par les femmes. De plus, elle examine les subjectivités différentes de sexe, de race et de culture dans ces romans en mettant en contraste les façons de décrire la relation entre les femmes et les arts textiles.

**N**EEDLE ARTS SUCH AS QUILT-MAKING and rug-hooking have arisen out of women's associations with cloth and homebound activity (Hedges and Wendt 4). There have been many instances when needle arts have been oppressive: girls were forced to learn to sew instead of learning to read; gender characteristics of neatness, submissiveness, docility and patience were enforced by repetitive sewing practise; and even today there are many women suffering hardship doing piece-

work in factories or homes (Hedges and Wendt 18). There have been emancipatory effects of sewing, however; Susan B. Anthony used quilting bees to educate about women's rights, many women's groups, such as feminist abolitionists, have used needlework to protest injustice, and the quilt projects for women who have died from botched abortions and for people who have died of AIDS have been both moving and educational. In my own life, I have experienced a time when the only politi-

cal discussions in which I was able to engage were at a weekly spinning meeting.

It is these emancipatory aspects of needlework that I would like to examine, in relation to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*. I would like to examine how quilting and rug-hooking are related, how they relate to the forms of the novels, how colour is used and how fibre arts affect and are affected by the relationships of the characters to each other and to the world. The authors of each of these books recognize that fibre arts signify many *connections* among people, but I would like to explore how each author takes (or does not take) advantage of the power behind the metaphorical use of fibre arts within their writing and the historic use of fibre arts in women's lives.

Quilting and rug-making in *The Color Purple* and *The Mountain and the Valley* share a common element: they both use rags from cast-off clothing. Each year, in Ellen's mats, "the house reabsorbed its own residue of discarded clothing" (Buckler 151). Rugmakers and "quilters teach us that there is no such thing as waste, only that for which we currently see no purpose" (Giovanni 89). Celie's life seems like a waste at the start of the novel but she survived and grew into a beautiful and strong woman. Marge Piercy calls the quilt a:

worked jigsaw  
of the memories of braided lives, precious  
scraps: women were buried but their  
clothing wore on (36)

These scraps of clothing represent women (and men) but also evoke them. Corrine is moved to tears when the flowered cloth reminds her of Celie (Walker 1982, 192). When Celie longs to become close to Shug, she covets the yellow fabric from Shug's dress (61). Ellen re-

lies on the cloth strips to "visit" with her dead family members: "these pieces of cloth which had lain sometime against their flesh could bring them right into the room" (Buckler 224).

The quilt and the rug also relate to the *form* of each novel. Buckler writes that "in the country the day is the determinant" (53) and goes on to relate single archetypal days to whole seasons. Just as a single day can represent a whole season, so single pieces of fabric can represent whole persons or events. *The Mountain and the Valley* has a centre of consciousness which moves, just as the focus of Ellen's attention moves from scrap to scrap. The pattern of Ellen's final quilt, concentric circles, is like the rings of a tree, marking off time and reflecting years of rain and drought. As the novel progresses, David's awareness of the world first increases (outward moving circles), then decreases (inward moving circles), and finally expands to encompass the world while leaving him empty. In the final chapter, Ellen's family circle has become very small and she finishes off the small centre of the rug with cloth from the two remaining characters, herself and David.

The stories told by the characters in *The Color Purple* are like swatches of fabric placed next to one another. Some are shocking and bright, others are warm and soft. Many are rough, others are smooth. The stories are not given in a linear progression. They move in various directions. Brown argues that the symmetry of African-American quilts comes not from uniformity but from diversity (923) and the essential lessons of the quilt are "that people and actions move in multiple directions at once" (929). This is certainly reflected in the polycentric form of *The Color Purple*. Celie's letters reflect changing textures within the novel. As she grows in self-awareness and strength, her writing reflects these changes.

Collins suggests that the traditional African-American quilt patterns which rely on contrast for structure and organization are analogous to African-American society, which values individuality and difference (215). Walker reflects this value in *The Color Purple*. The women in the novel — Celie, Shug, Sophia, Nettie, Mary Agnes, Henrietta — are portrayed as women of contrast. They do not detract from each other (although they certainly clash at times) but, together, they create a community of sisters who nurture and challenge one another.

The mats that Ellen hooks reflect *her* social context. The people of Entremont do not value individuality very highly. Throughout the novel, David has to live two lives: the inner authentic life of sensitivity and creativity, and the outward life of conformity. Despite the efforts he makes to fit in, eventually he becomes an outsider within his own town. The designs on Ellen's rugs are conventional: scrolls, flowers, landscapes. The individuality of the fabrics comes from the hidden stories, not from the outward contrasts of colour. Like the repetitive nature of Ellen's work and behaviour, her rug hook moves steadily and rhythmically.

Contrasts of colour are often used within the text of *The Color Purple*. Throughout the book Celie and Nettie comment on the colours around them, especially with regard to how people look. There are specific colour contrasts which are important to the development of the novel, such as Shug's dress which Celie incorporates into her quilt as yellow. This bright colour, "the little yellow pieces look like stars" (61), is cheerful and hopeful, like Celie's words a few pages before, "for the first time in my life, I feel just right" (59). Another prominent colour (and the source of the title) is yellow's opposite: purple. According to Barbara Walker, ancient royal purple was "a dark

wine-red, often likened to the color of menstrual blood" (151). It is significant, therefore, that Celie links Shug to royal purple even before they meet (22), especially considering the sexual love and sensual spirituality they share with each other later in the novel (Christian 190).

The most serious contrast of colour in *The Color Purple* is that of skin colour. Racism pervades Celie's and Nettie's worlds and affects the standards of beauty, class, and acceptability (in America, the whiter the better). This racial inequality and domination causes humiliation (Sophia and the mayor's wife), exploitation (the Olinka and the road) and death (Celie's real Pa). The colour purple is again used to describe the racist brutality directed toward Sophia who becomes "just about the color of a eggplant" (92).

Colour is very important to Ellen as well. She knows exactly what she wants before she chooses a strip of fabric. At the end of the novel (and the end of her rug), Ellen chooses for the penultimate circle the scarlet of the cape that David wore when he was publicly shamed and then, for the centre, she chooses white lace, the lace from her wedding. She calls out "David, the rug is done" (300), but his life, too, is done, as the lacy white snow falls on him. When Ellen is teaching Anna to make rugs, "Anna chooses the very colors Ellen would" (52). This is a lovely example of the connection these two have made through their mutual artistic project.

Harmony Hammond suggests:

for women, the meaning of sewing and knitting is "connecting" — connecting the parts of one's own life, and connecting to other women — creating a sense of community and wholeness. (67)

Ellen certainly is a woman of connections. She has links with England and with the past and she acts as an intermediary within the family. With her rug-hooking she writes history. Her mat hook "made a steady staccato like the sounds of seconds dropping" (13), and when she remembers each of her family members, "she might have been writing the facts down somewhere, for reference" (15). Ellen is the one who has created art from her family's history. Her rug might be:

the only perfect artifact a woman would ever see, yet she did not doubt what we had forgotten, that out of her potatoes and colic, sawdust and blood she could create; together, alone, she seized her time and made new.

(Piercy 36)

I remember as an at-home mother with two toddlers the satisfaction I derived from fibre handicrafts (sewing, quilting, spinning, knitting). They were tangible evidence that I existed and that my life was productive, even in the midst of repetitive labour which was undone as quickly as it was done.

Ellen creates beauty out of the dailiness of her life and passes on knowledge and skill to her granddaughter. Ellen tells Anna about each piece of garment and Anna asks Ellen about the world (52). At the end of the novel, Ellen has no family to whom she can pass her knowledge. Most of her family is dead and, therefore, will not be sources of rags or stories. "Rags were scarce now" (15). Scarce, too, become Ellen's memories. The novel ends with the sad feeling that the connections Ellen made with her family, with the past, and with reality are becoming frayed.

In *The Color Purple*, there are numerous connections made through quilting. The quilt, Sister's Choice, is the single source of competence and confidence for Celie in the early

part of the novel. Shug relies on Celie's moral support (Albert's brother and father have just been deriding Shug) when she asks, "how you sew this damn thing?" (59). Sophia comes to Celie for advice about Harpo's eating and she starts by sewing for a while (61). Although Celie would prefer to keep the quilt once it is made (and personal possessions are rare for her), she gives it to Sophia because she is concerned for Sophia's comfort (71). Another quilt, made by Corrine, is an important link between Africa and the South. Corrine admires the colourful quilts of the Olinka and uses family clothing to make similar ones. It is this quilt which Nettie uses to remind Corrine of Celie, restoring the bonds among Nettie, Corrine and Samuel. Finally, sewing creates a space for Albert and Celie to become closer friends (279, 290). It is after Albert designs shirts which are similar to Celie's pants that Celie is able to say, "let's us be friends" (290).

Quilting accompanies political action, too. Celie becomes aware of "the world" for the first time while quilting (59). When Shug turns to Celie for moral support, Shug is described as having a smile "like a razor opening" (59). She ends up holding a needle. Later, when Celie wants to kill Albert for hiding Nettie's letters, Shug convinces her to make unisex pants (perhaps a political statement about gender relations). Celie says, "And everyday we going to read Nettie's letters and sew. A needle and not a razor in my hand, I think" (152-53). For Celie, the making of pants which turns into a business arises from quilting, just as her self-confidence and freedom arise from her sisterly relationship with Shug. Albert asks Celie about her business and eventually learns how to sew. It is during these times together that Celie is able to tell him about African men, dispelling myths around gender and race (the Olinka men are proficient sewers), empowering Albert and healing their relationship (278-79).

When access to action is denied, whether in medieval tower or suburban ranch house, sewing may provide expression. (Hedges and Wendt 5)

Sewing provides expression for Ellen, who was not able to be politically active. She was denied action by her husband (31) and, when she tells Anna of hiding the sailor in the barn, she feels the need to defend herself and her marriage (32-35). The effects of her rug-making do not seem to extend beyond her own family and certainly do not have the awareness and consciousness-raising effects that Celie's sewing has for *her*.

Fibre arts of all varieties have only recently become acceptable as showpieces and art. For women of the past, they have been a vehicle of expression, history-writing and, sometimes, political action. It is possible to see how Buckler in *The Mountain and the Valley*

and Walker in *The Color Purple* have portrayed these aspects of quilting and rug-making. It seems, however, that Walker is more able to capture the *meanings* and uses of quilting for the African-American community, while Buckler is content to use rug-making as a form and symbol without questioning or exploring deeply how the lives of the artisans are changed by the act of rug-hooking. Perhaps the difference between the two is due to the differing subjectivities of gender, race and culture of the authors, or perhaps due to the subjective differences between the characters/artisans of the two books. Nevertheless, Walker alone:

brings together ... the theme of the (black) woman's creativity, her transformation, despite opposition, of the bits and pieces allowed to her by society into a work of functional beauty. (Christian 86)

#### REFERENCES

- Brown, Elsa Barkley. "African-American Women's Quilting: A Framework for Conceptualizing and Teaching African-American Women's History." *Signs* 14.4 (1989): 921-29.
- Buckler, Ernest. *The Mountain and the Valley*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1984.
- Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1985.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1991.
- Giovanni, Nikki. "Sacred Cows ... and Other Edibles." *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Ed. Patricia Hill Collins. New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1991.
- Hammond, Harmony. "Feminist Abstract Art — A Political Viewpoint." *Heresies* (Jan. 1977): 67.
- Hedges, Elaine and Ingrid Wendt, eds. *In Her Own Image: Women Working in the Arts*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1980.
- Piercy, Marge. "Looking at Quilts." In *In Her Own Image: Women Working in the Arts*. Eds. Elaine Hedges and Ingrid Wendt. New York: The Feminist Press, 1980.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982.
- Walker, Barbara. *A Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1988.