

Facultade de Filoloxía

*Lesbian Relationships in U.S. Fiction of the 1980s*

Traballo de Fin

de Grao

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

**Titora:** Susana María Jiménez Placer

*<*

**Autora:** Alba Chouza Cruces

**Curso académico:** 2022 - 2023

6

Santiago de Compostela

Xullo 2023

<

Traballo de Fin de Grao presentado na Facultade de Filoloxía para a obtención do Grao en *Lingua e Literatura Inglesas*



Facultade de Filoloxía

*Lesbian Relationships in U.S. Fiction of the 1980s*

Traballo de Fin

de Grao

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

**Titora:** Susana María Jiménez Placer

*<*

**Autora:** Alba Chouza Cruces

**Curso académico:** 2022 - 2023

6

Santiago de Compostela

Xullo 2023

<

Traballo de Fin de Grao presentado na Facultade de Filoloxía para a obtención do Grao en *Lingua e Literatura Inglesas*

Texto

Descripción generada automáticamente

Título: As Relacións Lesbianas na Ficción de Estados Unidos na Década dos 80

Title: Lesbian Relationships in U.S. Fiction of the 1980s

Título: Las Relaciones Lesbianas en la Ficción de Estados Unidos en la Década de los 80

Declaración de orixinalidade:

Dona Alba Chouza Cruces, con DNI 45960723F, declara que o presente Traballo de Fin de Grao é íntegramente orixinal, non tendo sido empregada ninguna fonte sen ser referenciada, sendo consciente do delito de plaxio que constitúe o contrario.

En Santiago de Compostela, a 26 de xuño de 2023.

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

1. INTRODUCTION..................................................................................................................6

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: QUEER STUDIES.........................................................7

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE JIM CROW SOUTH.......................................................15

4. LESBIANISM AND RACISM IN ALICE WALKER’S THE COLOR PURPLE...............18

4.1 Alice Walker: Biographical information.............................................................................18

4.2 Lesbianism within the Dual Oppression of Race and Gender..............................................21

5. LESBIANISM AND RACISM IN FANNIE FLAG’S FRIED GREEN TOMATOES.........42

5.1 Fannie Flag: Biographical Information...............................................................................42

5.2 Lesbianism and racism in the novel in comparison with *The Color Purple*.........................46

6. CONCLUSION....................................................................................................................70

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary literature, lesbian relationships have emerged as powerful and thought-provoking themes, challenging social norms and enriching the discourse on human relations. Such representations challenge social norms, push the boundaries of acceptance, and offer compelling narratives of love and identity. In this thesis, we delve into the exploration of lesbian relationships as depicted in two classic works: Alice Walker's epistolary novel *The Color Purple* and Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes*.

Published in 1982, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker is a novel that explores the lives of African American women in the Southern United States during the early 20th century. The narrative unfolds through a series of letters, offering a personal and intimate view of the struggles and triumphs of its characters. The novel showcases the bonds formed among women who suffer racial discrimination and domestic violence, and particularly, the intimate relationship between Celie and Shug Avery, which transcends social expectations.

Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes* was published in 1987. The story weaves together two timelines, intertwining the lives of the spirited Idgie Threadgoode and Ruth Jamison, set around the 1930s. The novel explores themes of friendship, love, and the strength of women in the face of adversity.

The objective of this thesis is to analyse the portrayals of lesbian relationships in *The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*, with a brief comparison. By examining the characters, their interactions, and the social context within each work, it is aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how lesbian love is depicted or challenged in the face of prevailing social norms and prejudices. Furthermore, this research intends to shed light on the significance of such representations in the broader context of LGBTQ+ literature, showing diverse identities and relationships.

The analysis in this thesis is primarily qualitative, focusing on a close reading and textual analysis of both novels. Through a careful examination of the characters' behaviours, dialogues, and interactions, we will identify and interpret instances where lesbian relationships are either implicitly or explicitly presented.

By exploring how *The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* handle the representation of lesbian relationships, this thesis seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding LGBTQ+ representation in literature. Through this analysis, it is aimed to highlight the progressive aspects of these portrayals while acknowledging the challenges and limitations they face in addressing the complexities of lesbian love during their respective time periods.

In the following chapters, there will be an introduction to queer studies in chapter 2. Chapter 3 will consist of a historical introduction to Jim Crow South. Chapter 4 will focus on *The Color Purple*, starting with Alice Walker’s biography and continuing with an analysis of the novel. Chapter 5 will shift its focus to *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, beginning with a biography of Fannie Flagg and then exploring the relationship between Idgie Threadgoode and Ruth Jamison, also making some comparisons with the lesbian relationship of Celie and Shug from *The Color Purple*. Finally, Chapter 6 will provide a conclusion.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: QUEER STUDIES

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word queer in its origin as: “Strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric. Also: of questionable character; suspicious, dubious” (Oxford University Press). Considering this meaning, the word turned to an insult. During the 16th century, “queer” was used in expressions like “there’s nowt as queer as folksor” and “in queer street”, meaning someone having financial difficulties. The term was used to mean “odd” in the 19th century, and “Even in the early 20th century the word ‘queer’ was still often used in this way, for example, in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories. There’s also the American phrase “queer as a three dollar bill”, from a similar time, suggesting something odd and suspicious” (Barker and Scheele 8).

There are several theories about the first use of the word “queer” as a homophobic insult, but according to Olsen, the most popular among the LGBTIQ+ community is the following:

John Douglas, the 9th Marquess of Queensberry, was the first recorded person that used the term as a slur in 1894. Douglas had found out that his son was in a gay relationship with Oscar Wilde. Because of this, he became concerned about a potential gay sex scandal and aimed to prosecute Wilde in any way he could. As a result, he launched a lengthy court case arguing that Wilde was a “sodomy-obsessed old man” that lured gay sex workers into a degenerate lifestyle. During this court case, the original letter contained the “word” as a slur. Douglas used the term ‘Snob Queers’ to describe gay men (Olsen).

Pretty soon it became “a derogatory term for same-sex sex, or for people with same-sex attractions, particularly ‘effeminate’ or ‘camp’ gay men” (Barker and Scheele 9), especially because “American newspapers started using the word ‘queer’ as a derogatory term. They wanted to portray homosexuality as being strange and out of the ordinary. (…) The word’s reputation became more linked with hate speech and homophobia” (Olsen). It was also used in the same sense as “that’s so gay”, implying that something is bad, worthless, or useless.

But in the late 1980s, this pejorative meaning of the word “queer” changed, becoming more neutral and even positive. This happened because many queer people started to vindicate this word. Nowadays, for the youngest generations, this word is completely reclaimed and used positively, as we can observe with some mainstream shows like: “The Ultimatum: Queer Love”. Nevertheless, some older people do not feel comfortable at all as they still have the painful memory of “queer” being used as an insult towards them.

As Barker and Scheele mention, “queer” is frequently used to refer to those who are neither heterosexual nor cisgender. But “queer activists see ‘queer’ as an umbrella term for folk who are outside of the mainstream” (Barker and Scheele 12). These queer activists highlight that the focus should not only be centred on problems and inequalities like marriage or consumer culture but also on questions that affect more marginalised groups like poverty or homelessness.

It is important to distinguish queer activism, queer studies and queer theory, even though all of them share “an opposition to identity politics: the idea of fighting for rights on the basis of identity (e.g. as an LGB or T person)” (Barker and Scheele 16). Barker and Scheele define each of these three concepts in terms that underscore their distinction. Thus, while they define “Queer *activism*” as “a form of sexuality/gender activism that opposes assimilationist agendas of trying to show how ‘normal’ LG(BT) people are” (15), “Queer studies” is

an *academic discipline* that tries to move beyond lesbian and gay studies to incorporate other sexualities and to take a more critical approach to sexuality as a whole, including heterosexuality. This is similar to how a lot of women’s studies departments became gender studies departments because masculinities and other genders are also important areas of study. It’s *multidisciplinary* because it draws upon many other disciplines, e.g. sociology, geography, history, literature, cultural studies, media studies” (15).

Going beyond queer studies, “queer theory” is a *theoretical approach* that questions “the categories and assumptions on which current popular and academic understandings are based” (15). Moreover, they emphasize that it is important to keep in mind that: “there are really multiple queer activisms, queer studies, and queer theories, which have different focuses, and which may contradict each other” (16). Concerning queer theory, they observe that one of its central aspects is the assumption that “our understandings of sex, gender, identity (and pretty much everything) are *contextual*. That means they have all been understood, and practised, in very different ways over time and across cultures” (Barker and Scheele 17). This leads the to consider that the current queer theory is not the “correct” one or the “right” one among the other, as there was not a continuous development of queer theory to find the perfect one.

Around 1950, Harry Fay founded the Mattachine Foundation which was one of the first gay rights groups in the U.S. This organization aimed to improve the lives of gay men. At the end of 1952, Dale Jennings created an organization which also welcomed women called One, Inc.: “Jennings was ousted from *One*, Inc. in 1953 in part for being a communist—he and Harry Hay were also kicked out of the Mattachine Foundation for their communism—but the magazine continued” (History.com Editors). This organization was the first one in the U.S. to publish a pro-gay magazine, and belonged to the Homophile movement whose purpose was to educate people, by assimilating that homosexuals and heterosexuals were the same. They fought for equal human rights, trying to decrease homophobia and decriminalize homosexuality. It is important to take into account that in 1952, the American Psychiatric Association listed homosexuality as a form of mental disorder and, in 1953 President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed an executive order, that would last for around 20 years, that banned gay people from federal jobs, accusing them of “sexual perversion”.

In 1955, four lesbian couples in San Francisco founded Daughter of Bilitis (DOB) whose name comes from a collection of poems called *Songs of Bilitis* written by Pierre Louÿs: “Bilitis was a female character who was romantically associated with Sappho, the female Greek lyric poet” (Barnes). The organization began as a secret social club for lesbians, being just eight members. At the very beginning, the organization was like an alternative to lesbian bars, which at the time were the target of many raids and police harassment.[[1]](#footnote-1) Due to the fact that some of the original members left the organization because of some conflicting views, DOB was redefined as a political organization focused on lesbian rights. In October 1956, DOB published *The Ladder*, which is considered to be the first nationally distributed lesbian serial of any kind even though in the 1940s there was a short publication called *Vice Versa*. *The Ladder* came to an end in 1972, but the achievements they made were crucial: “Socially, DOB facilitated one of the first opportunities for lesbians to meet and share their everyday struggles. Politically, DOB began the long quest to achieve visibility and acceptance for lesbians and to place lesbian rights on the civil rights agenda” (Barnes).

Queer theory, as the word “queer”, is also controversial as it is in constant flux and many academics and activists use it in distinct ways. In spite of this, for the majority of queer theories, these are some unifying features:

“Resisting the categorization of people; Challenging the idea of essential identities; Questioning binaries like gay/straight, male/female; Demonstrating how things are contextual, based on geography, history, culture, etc.; Examining the power relations underlying certain understandings, categories, identities, etc.” (Barker and Scheele 31).

There were several important precursors in queer theory in the mid to late twentieth century. For example, some existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Sartre believed that: “we’re in a constant process of self-creation, and are both free – and responsible – for what we create” which is also what the queer theory believes (Barker and Scheele 34). De Beauvoir pointed out that because people is born with some characteristics, they are freer than others. The queer theory agrees on this fact, as queer couples have a restricted freedom in comparison with heterosexual couples.

Alfred Kinsey, a U.S. biologist, was another important precursor: “Kinsey also found that 37% of men and 13% of women had at least some overt same-gender experience to orgasm, and many more experienced some degree of same-gender attraction” (Barker and Scheele 37). Therefore, Kinsey broke the binary idea of heterosexuality and homosexuality, with the creation of a spectrum between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Also, he did not focus his studies on classifying people as certain types or fixed identities. Kinsey made his classifications according to what people did or experienced. However, he used the binary distinction for gender (male-female), and for sexuality (same-opposite). Around the 1970s and 1980s, Sandra Bem, who was a psychologist, started to question the rigidity of the gender roles and she defended that “it was actually better for people to be ‘androgynous’, by which she meant being flexibly able to be ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’” (Barker and Scheele 41). Adrienne Rich’s *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* introduced the idea that it was also important to analyse heterosexuality: “Rich argued that women are coerced into heterosexuality, and the associated patriarchal gender relations. This happens through the privileges and pleasures they gain from conformity with heterosexuality, and the punishments and losses associated with deviating from it” (Barker and Scheele 44).

Around the mid-1960s, the big majority of the Greenwich Village gay bars were managed by the Genovese family and in 1966, they bought a bar called Stonewall Inn with the idea of turning it into a gay bar. At this bar, people had to bring their own liquor with the only requirement of signing up their name in a book before entering. The Genovese family bribed New York’s Sixth Police Precinct to ignore all the activities from this bar. Among this precariousness, it is important to mention that there was no fire escape and no running water behind the bar to wash glasses. In addition, the Mafia blackmailed the club's wealthier clients in order to keep their sexuality in secret. Stonewall Inn became very famous among queer people because it allowed entrance to drag queens, and let people dance. Even though raids were still common, the corrupt police notified mafia run bars before they occurred so that they could hide any prove of illegal activities.

The morning of June 28th, 1969, the police raided Stonewall Inn without previous warning. They entered with a warrant, and the police officers beat many clients, and as they found bootlegged alcohol, they arrested thirteen people, some of them by the premise of violating the state’s gender-appropriate clothing statute. It is important to mention that the NYPD had raided the Stonewall Inn a couple of days before. The whole situation provoked that many clients and residents from the neighbourhood stayed at the doors of the bar getting more and more agitated. The outbreak was a policeman who beat a lesbian while forcing her to enter into the police van. She shouted to the people around her to do something, and the crowd started to throw different kinds of objects to the police. The riot began involving hundreds of people. The fire department and a riot squad rescued some people who had barricaded themselves inside the bar, including an editor of the *Village Voice* and some police officers. The protests involved thousands of people, and it lasted for five days. This uprising encouraged and incited the LGBTQ+ political activism that led to the creation of numerous gay rights organizations that are still carrying on.

A year after the protests, on June 28, 1970, thousands of people marched from the Stonewall Inn to Central Park, starting the first gay pride parade in the U.S. The parade’s official chant was: “Say it loud, gay is proud”. In 2016, President Barack Obama declared Stonewall Inn, Christopher Park, and the surrounding streets and sidewalks, a national monument in recognition of the area’s contribution to gay rights.

Meanwhile, within queer theory, one of the most important concepts in queer theory is heteronormativity. This term was popularized by Michael Warner in 1991. Heteronormativity is based on the assumption that a “normal” or “natural” relationship or attraction is formed by a ciswoman and cisman who follow the conventional gender roles. It implies PIV (penis-in-vagina) sex is the standard they follow to their sexual practices. Also, people would be always heterosexual unless proven otherwise. This term also implies: monosexism, as each person is naturally attracted to just one gender; compulsory sexuality, as it is implied people experience sexual attraction; mononormativity, as it implies a monogamous couple; and cisnormativity as it is implied people remain in the gender they were assigned at birth. “From a queer perspective, it’s not that any of these concepts (such as homophobia, heterosexism, straight privilege, and heteronormativity) is completely ‘right’ or ‘wrong’; rather, they each open and close different possibilities” (Barker and Scheele 89). From a queer perspective, these concepts are not evaluated based on a fixed moral judgment. Instead, they are recognized as social constructs and ideologies that have profound implications for how individuals perceive and experience their own identities and relationships.

Another important term is cisgenderism which is fully connected to heteronormativity: “Cisgenderism refers to the cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth as well as resulting behavior, expression, and community” (Lennon and Mistler 63). Cisgenderism is nowadays present in language and therefore, perpetuates discrimination toward the transgender community. Cisgenderism refers to the belief that a person's masculine appearance corresponds to their assigned male gender or specific anatomy, disregarding the potential for misgendering. Quite recently, the term used in literature is not cisgenderism but transphobia: “‘transphobia’ addresses fear of trans-identified individuals instead of capturing the critically central and evidently flawed assumptions that underlie the pervasive cultural system of prejudice and discrimination directed toward the transgender community” (Lennon and Mistler 63).

Queer theory and queer studies question the idea that gender identity and sexual orientation are fixed and essential characteristics of a person. Instead, they focus on the social and cultural construction of these categories, arguing that they are fluid, contextually constructed and changing. Furthermore, they also recognise that oppression and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation are intertwined with other systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism, class... And they examine how these different forms of oppression interact and reinforce each other, their intersectionality. Moreover, they also value the personal and subjective experiences of queer people as legitimate sources of knowledge. They aim to give voice to marginalised experiences and challenge dominant narratives about identity and sexuality.

Queer theory and queer studies have a political dimension and seek to challenge and transform power structures that perpetuate oppression and exclusion. They promote politics of liberation that advocate for equal rights, social justice and the inclusion of all gender identities and sexual orientations. These central aspects of queer theory and queer studies demonstrate their commitment to social critique, justice and the promotion of diversity and inclusion in relation to gender identity and sexual orientation. Some of the recent studies are about how fatness is involved in topics like gender, sexuality, class… which is the relation between fat studies and queer theory. Also, studies about asexuality and the troubles with the sexual imperative, which is considered natural.

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE JIM CROW SOUTH

The Jim Crow South refers to a period in American history, predominantly in the southern states, characterized by racial segregation and systemic discrimination against African Americans. It lasted from the late 19th century to the middle of the 20th century. The term ‘Jim Crow’ “was the name of a minstrel routine (actually *Jump Jim Crow*) performed beginning in 1828 by its author, Thomas Dartmouth (“Daddy”) Rice, and by many imitators, including actor Joseph Jefferson” (Urofsky). Minstrel shows were a form of entertainment that lasted until the early 20th century. These shows were characterized by performers, usually white actors, using blackface makeup and caricaturing the stereotypes of African Americans. However, they were deeply harmful and perpetuated negative racial attitudes and prejudices, contributing to the marginalization and degradation of African Americans. The Jim Crow period was marked by the dictation of laws and practices that reinforced racial segregation and promoted white supremacy.

Broadly speaking, this period followed the Reconstruction, which was the term for the era after the Civil War (1861-1865), that started in 1865 and ended in 1877. In contrast with the antebellum decades of the 19th century, when “southern and northern United States began to pull apart … culturally and economically, with slavery at the center of the rift” (History.com Editors), the Reconstruction aimed to reintegrate Southern states in the United States. It was partly to favour this reintegration that President Andrew Johnson, in 1865 and 1866, approved the “Black Codes” that outraged the northern states. With the passage of the Reconstruction Act of 1867, black people gained voice in the government for the very first time in American history.

Black Codes were strict local and state laws detailing everything about how newly freed slaved could work. The codes spread throughout the South as a legal way to indenture servitude among Black American people. These codes were combined with labour camps, that treated black and white people as slaves. The majority of black prisoners during this period rarely completed their sentences, as their terms were consistently longer than those imposed on white prisoners, and they eventually died from hard labour.

Southern states introduced a series of laws known as “Jim Crow laws” that established separate facilities, services, and accommodations for whites and blacks. These laws aimed to maintain white supremacy and control over African Americans by denying them access to the same public spaces (restaurants, means of transport…), education, employment opportunities, and voting rights. Under Jim Crow, African Americans faced widespread discrimination, violence, and social inequality. They were relegated to inferior facilities, inferior education, and restricted job opportunities, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement.

Furthermore, a section of the population tried to restore white supremacy in the South, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) among them: “One group was founded immediately after the Civil War and lasted until the 1870s. The other began in 1915 and has continued to the present” (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). The first branch of the Ku Klux Klan was founded in Pulaski, Tennessee in 1865, as when the first branch disappeared there was a revival some decades later. Around 1867, they started a campaign against Republican leaders, both black and white, with the purpose of restoring white supremacy. By 1870, the Ku Klux Klan was spread to practically all southern states. In each State, the members dressed in robes and masks, planned violent attacks at night. The KKK activity flourished especially in the South. Following the initial decline of the first branch, a revival occurred several decades later. “In United States v. Harris in 1882, the Supreme Court declared the Ku Klux Klan Act unconstitutional, but by that time the Klan had practically disappeared” (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Thomas Dixon’s 1905 book *The Clansman* and D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* inspired the revival of the Ku Klux Klan. Along with being anti-Black, the Klan's second generation also opposed Roman Catholics, Jews and immigrants: “At its peak in the 1920s, Klan membership exceeded 4 million people nationwide” (History.com Editors). The Klan's membership severely decreased during the 1930s Great Depression. In several Southern areas, it experienced a resurgence in the 1960s.

Despite the oppressive environment, African Americans resisted Jim Crow through grassroots movements, civil rights organizations, and courageous individuals who challenged the discriminatory laws and advocated for equal rights and opportunities. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is one of the oldest and most influential civil rights organizations in the United States. Founded in 1909 and composed by black and white people, the NAACP has been at the forefront of the fight against racial discrimination, segregation, and inequality. Throughout its history, the organization has played a crucial role in advocating for the civil rights and social justice of African Americans and other marginalized communities. Therefore, in 1910, Ida B. Wells-Barnett founded Negro Fellowship League, becoming its first president. She also helped and supported migrants from the South. In 1913 she founded what may have been the first Black women’s suffrage group.

The struggle against Jim Crow culminated in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, leading to landmark legal victories and the eventual dismantling of institutionalized segregation. However, the legacy of the Jim Crow South continues to resonate in American society, reminding the importance of promoting equality, inclusivity, and social justice for everyone.

4. LESBIANISM AND RACISM IN ALICE WALKER’S THE COLOR PURPLE

4.1 Alice Walker: Biographical information

Alice Malsenior Walker, known as Alice Walker, was born in Eatonton (Georgia) on February 9th, 1944. She was the eighth child of an African American sharecropper family. Her father was Willie Lee, and her mother was Minnie Lou Grant Walker, who also worked as a maid to support the family. While she was a child, her mother gave her a typewriter when she lost the vision of her right eye due to an accident: "For a long time, I thought I was very ugly and disfigured," (Biography.com Editors) she told John O'Brien in an interview that was published in *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present* (1993). This handicap influenced her writer’s voice, as she became a meticulous observer of human relationships and interaction: "This made me shy and timid, and I often reacted to insults and slights that were not intended" (Biography.com Editors). Thanks to this, she could learn to write instead of doing chores. Walker attended Spelman College in Atlanta with a scholarship for two years, and then, she continued her studies at Sarah Lawrence College in New York. This college offered a study-abroad program which permitted her to visit Africa. She graduated in 1965, earning a BA.

After graduating, Walker moved to Mississippi, and like Flagg, she became active in the Civil Rights Movement, fighting for equality for all African Americans. It was in this period of time in her life that she started teaching and publishing short stories and essays. In 1967 she married Melvyn Rosenman Leventhal, an attorney who was also involved in the Civil Rights Movement and they had a daughter, Rebeca. They became the first legally married interracial couple to live in Mississippi. They were together for ten years, but they got divorced in 1976. Later on, Walker dated both men and women, including the famous singer and songwriter Tracy Chapman.

Walker published her first book of poetry, *Once*, in 1968 and her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, in 1970. This novel extends over 60 years, covering three generations. In 1973, her second volume of poetry was published, *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, and her first collection of short stories *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*. Like in *The Color Purple*, the stories in this collection deal with sexist violence and abuse in the African American community. In 1982 *The Color Purple* was published, although she wrote it when she moved to California. This book won a Pulitzer Prize in 1985 and the National Book Award for Fiction in 1983. The novel was also adapted into a film by Steven Spielberg that received 11 Academy Award nominations. There is also a musical version produced by Oprah Winfrey and Quincy Jones which was premiered in 2004.

Some of Walker’s later fiction are *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), which focuses on female genital mutilation, and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2005), about an older woman’s quest for identity. She also published *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart* in 2000 and many other volumes of poetry such as *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems* in 1991 or *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing* in 2010. Furthermore, she published essays such as *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). At the beginning of this book, she defines the term “womanist”, that has four meanings:

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “you acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. 2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?” Ans. “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.” 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (xi-xii)

She also wrote juvenile fiction and critical essays on such prominent female writers as Flannery O’Connor or Zora Neale Hurston. Also, in 2022 a collection of her journals was published, *Gathering Blossoms Under Fire*, and in 2013 a documentary called *Alice Walker: Beauty in Truth* was released.

Walker was also honoured with the O. Henry Award and the Mahmoud Darwish Literary Prize for Fiction. Moreover, she was inducted into the California Hall of Fame in 2006 and received the LennonOno Peace Award in 2010. She is currently living in California.

4.2 Lesbianism within the Dual Oppression of Race and Gender

Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* provides the point of view of a “black,” “ugly,” and “poor” “woman” in America. The main themes in African American literature had traditionally been race and class, but gender issues had been often ignored until African American women writers like Alice Walker or Zora Neale Hurston began to truly consider the relevance of being “black,” “ugly,” “poor,” and a “woman” in America. Through her development from a submissive woman to an independent woman, the main character in *The Color Purple*, Celie, reflects the need to eliminate both gender and patriarchal oppression within the African American community and the crucial role of sexuality for her development as an independent woman.

The novel begins with Alphonso’s words to Celie: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (Walker 3). This demand for silence will mark Celie’s life for years. Celie starts to write letters to God to cope with her traumas because of this silence imposition. These letters were the only safe space to express herself, while Alphonso kept treating her as a slave:

Alphonso’s rape of Celie invokes the history of African American enslavement where African American women were inherently vulnerable to all forms of sexual coercion. Critics such as Davis (1981) and Hudson- Weems (1989) argue that while the most violent punishments for enslaved men consisted of floggings and mutilations, the enslaved women were flogged, mutilated and raped given that their womanhood placed them in an even more vulnerable position. (Musanga and Mukhuba 391)

In the novel, Celie is repeatedly raped by Alphonso, and she gets pregnant twice by him. Celie has no power to choose or decide anything about her sexuality and her reproductive organs. Moreover, Alphonso takes away her children from her to put more pressure on her and enforce her submission (Abbandonato 1111). The fact that she loses her period can be interpreted as a further effect of the violence and abuses she suffers: “A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don’t bleed no more” (Walker 7). Some critics like Linda Tucker defend that at this point she is “pregnant” with her self-development: “If autobiography is a self-mothering, then Celie's body language bespeaks a gestation period, a condition necessary to the creation of an identity which will come into being through her letters” (85).

At the beginning, it is believed that Alphonso’s crime is incest and rape, but when the information that he is not Celie’s actual father is provided, it appears that the act of rape, despite its moral reprehensibility, may be perceived as less severe in this context. However, this revelation should not undermine the gravity of the situation, as Celie experienced sexual violation at the hands of Alphonso, who held a paternal role in her life, regardless of not being her biological father. With this, Walker manifests the sexual oppression that many women suffer in the Black community. As Musanga and Mukhuba explain: “this echoes the history of enslavement where African American women were projected as ‘breeders’ and not ‘mothers’” (391). In the past, African American women were seen as “breeders” to increase the number of slaves. Moreover, their children were taken away from them, as Alphonso did with Celie. Enslaved women suffered the same punishments as those for men, with the added consequence of sexual violation through rape, because of their gender. Celie’s role in her marriage was to be a breeder of Mr. \_\_\_’s children, and her children were sold by Alphonso.

The first time Celie’s sexuality can be doubted is when Alphonso hits her because he believes she had winked at a boy in church, but she did not: “I don’t even look at mens. That’s the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I’m not scared of them.” (Walker 7).

Alphonso arranges Celie’s marriage with Mr. \_\_\_, and he treats her like an animal (like a cow) or a slave. In order to keep Celie silenced and invalidate everything she could say, Alphonso tells Mr. \_\_\_: “And another thing - she tells lies” (Walker 10). On her wedding day, Celie is raped by Mr. \_\_\_, so she has changed from one man to another, from one master to another, but she continues suffering several physical and mental abuses:

Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ say, Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for—he don’t finish. (…) Remind me of Pa. Harpo ast me, How come you stubborn? He don’t ast How come you his wife? Nobody ast that. I say, Just born that way, I reckon. He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don’t never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man. (Walker 22)

Harpo does not understand why his father beats Celie. Mr. \_\_\_ answers that she is his wife, as if this were enough reason, thus asserting complete domination over her, akin to his treatment of his own children, although he subjects her to greater abuse because they are more valuable to him than her. Celie draws a correlation between her emotional experiences with Mr. \_\_\_ and Alphonso, as both men share the same opinion on beating ‘their possession’. As Celie verbalizes, nobody asks her how she became Mr. \_\_\_’s wife, because she could not choose nor reject the marriage, as Alphonso was the one deciding for her, as a slave.

Shug represents the kind of woman Celie wants to be. From the very first moment Celie shows interest in her: “Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw (…) And now when I dream, I dream of Shug” (Walker 8). One of the first characteristics readers know about this character is that she is a woman. Celie affirms: “I look at women, tho, cause I’m not scared of them” (Walker 7). At the moment, Celie is surrounded by men who affirm their power over her. By introducing Shug as a woman, the novel immediately highlights the significance of gender dynamics within the story. Although Shug is not physically present at the beginning, she has an important role in Celie’s self-development, since she seems to be always present in her decisions “I think what color Shug Avery would wear. She like a queen to me so I say to Kate” (Walker 20). Shug becomes a trusted confidante and a source of emotional support for Celie. In a life where she has experienced little love and care, Celie finds comfort and understanding in Shug's presence. Shug's independent and rebellious nature challenges Celie's belief in the traditional roles imposed on women. Her impact on Celie's self-development goes far beyond imitating her behaviour, even though at the beginning Celie copies Shug, as the fragment shows, to choose her clothes. It can also be interpreted as the first time Celie hints that she might be experiencing a sexual attraction towards Shug. This is also supported by an incident at church where Alphonso hits her because he believes she had winked at a boy in church, but she did not: “I don’t even look at mens. That’s the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I’m not scared of them” (Walker 7).

The image that Celie has about Shug contrasts with that of the community, as the figure of Shug was ridiculed by them, even by the priest:

Even the preacher got his mouth on Shug Avery, now she down. (…) He don’t call no name, but he don’t have to. Everybody know who he mean. He talk bout a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other women mens. Talk bout slut, hussy, heifer and streetcleaner.” (40)

This is a turning point for Mr. \_\_\_ who after this, goes searching for Shug and takes her to his house. Celie’s opinion about Shug did not change at all after the priest’s speech. The first time Celie sees Shug, her reaction is priceless: “I don’t move at once, cause I can’t. I need to see her eyes” (Walker 42). Celie's initial reaction upon seeing Shug Avery and her desire to observe her eyes not only shows her attraction towards her, but also symbolizes that her eyes will transmit her inner strength and independence. Eyes are often considered windows to the soul, and Celie's wish to see Shug's eyes reveals her desire for emotional connection. Celie becomes immobilized just with her presence, as for her it seems that Shug is superior to the others, even divine. In contrast with Celie’s “positive” reaction, Shug’s response is full of criticism: “You sure *is* ugly, she say, like she ain’t believed it”. This non-womanist[[2]](#footnote-2) (non-feminist) reaction can be attributed to Shug’s sense of competitiveness for male attention, as Shug and Mr. \_\_\_ used to have a relationship. Shug judges her in this initial encounter, as it seems she assumes that a woman's worth is determined upon her physical appearance. Also, it reflects Shug’s honest and straightforward nature. Later, Shug will prove that she no longer judges Celie for her physical appearance but for who she is as a person.

Moreover, Shug calls Mr. \_\_\_ for his name, Albert, which Celie had never used. Calling Mr.\_\_\_\_\_ for his name is one of the “goals” that Celie achieves with Shug’s help. Celie has never used the name of male figures in her letters to God. She uses “he” to refer to her father, “Mr. \_\_\_” for her husband and even “*Reverend* Mr. \_\_\_” for Samuel. This is because: “all men are nondifferentiated forces that exercise power over her, and their names are reduced to an appropriate semiological (and phallic) line” (Tucker 84). Celie had to recall that Albert is Mr. \_\_\_ ’s name: “Who Albert, I wonder. Then I remember Albert Mr. \_\_\_\_   first name”. This is the first time Celie hears a woman calling Mr. \_\_\_, Albert, which is significant because Celie will end up calling him Albert as an act of asserting her own identity and reclaiming her voice. This can be seen as a rejection of the submissive role she once occupied. Calling him Albert signifies a shift in the power dynamic, as they are equals.

The second time readers are aware of Celie’s potential sexual interest in Shug, is when she gives her a bath: “First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man” (45). Celie shows how *compulsory heterosexuality*[[3]](#footnote-3)has influenced her, as she has “turned into a man” (45), rejecting the idea that what she is experiencing is related to what a woman could feel for other women. This is the reason why in the initial portrayal of Shug, Celie highlights that Shug is a woman. This sexual tension continues as Celie washes Shug’s body: “She have the nerve to put one hand on her naked hip and bat her eyes at me. Then she suck her teef and roll her eyes at the ceiling while I wash her. I wash her body, it feel like I’m praying. My hands tremble and my breath short” (45). After this scene, they talk about Celie’s children. Some critics use the conversation to link this sexual scene into a representation of mother-infant exchange, which also happens in their first sexually explicit encounter that will be explained later. The categorization of this scene as a mother-infant exchange is Celie's role as a nurturing mother figure, tending to a woman who is debilitated and fatigued, thereby assuming the caretaker's role in the act of bathing. The theme of mother-infant exchange extends beyond biological ties. Shug Avery, in particular, assumes a spiritual motherly role in Celie's life, providing her with guidance, love, and emotional support. Shug's presence helps Celie discover her self-worth and empowers her to assert her independence and overcome the trauma of her past. Nevertheless, its sexual tension is plausible, as Shug poses to let Celie analyse her body. In this scene, Celie confesses that she has already seen Nettie and Sophia’s body: “Cept for Sofia, and she so plump and ruddy and crazy she feel like my sister” (45). Celie’s reaction to Shug’s body is different, as she does not see Shug in a “sister’s way”. She feels an attraction she had never felt with Nettie nor Sophia. There is no mother-infant exchange, as the exchange is a beginning of Celie’s sexual awakening.

In the next letter, Celie’s thoughts respecting Shug are more explicit: “If I don’t watch out I’ll have hold of her hand, tasting her fingers in my mouth” (Walker 46). They also exchange the meaningful act of Celie washing and combing Shug’s hair. While this action is taking place, Shug starts humming a song. This song will be important in Celie’s self-development. When Celie goes to Harpo’s juke joint to listen to Shug singing, there is a change in Celie. At first, Shug sings “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” while exchanging looks with Mr. \_\_\_, which lowers Celie’s self-esteem and hurts her: “I hate the way I look, I hate the way I’m dress” (Walker 64). At this breakdown, Celie also expresses her confusion, as she does not know yet why she is feeling like this: “Before I know it, tears meet under my chin. And I’m confuse. He love looking at Shug. I love looking at Shug. But Shug don’t love looking at but one of us. Him. But that the way it spose to be. I know that. But if that so, why my heart hurt me so?” (Walker 64). She is a melting pot of emotions, but again, she compares herself with a man. She acts within the heteronormativity she has been raised in, admitting that Shug looking at him (Mr.\_\_\_) is what is supposed to be, although she still expresses this makes her heart hurt. All this sadness changes instantly when Shug mentions Celie’s name and she says she named the song “Miss Celie’s song. Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was sick” (Walker 65). Celie hums this song along with Shug and reveals that is the “First time somebody made something and name it after me” (Walker 65). Naming the song affirms Celie’s identity and individuality, something that nobody had ever done, as she was devalued and disposed of her own identity. Moreover, it strengthens Shug and Celie’s emotional connection and intimacy.

According to Tucker, “Walker often speaks of song in connection with the making of art, and it is not accidental that one of the dominant figures of *The Color Purple* is a singer” (86). Shug’s career as a singer provides her economic stability, independence and freedom. Therefore, Shug’s songs and performance influences those around her, especially Celie. She also uses art as a way of challenging social conventions, inspiring Celie to find her own voice. This will also aid Celie to discover her own creativity, as we will see with the creation of pants. In Mary Agnes’s case, she begins her path of empowerment by imposing her real name instead of Squeak, because she is very quiet, and people usually refer to her as “little Squeak”. Working as a singer will encourage her towards the freedom she desires. Mary Agnes is described as “yellowskin”, meaning that she has lighter skin: “Yellow like she is, stringy hair and cloudy eyes, the men’ll be crazy bout her” (Walker 99). This manifests the presence of intraracial racism within the African American community, where there is a preference for lighter skin, because of its proximity to whiteness. This characteristic also leads to a hyper sexualisation of lighter-skinned women. This sexualization she suffers because of her skin makes her even doubt if Harpo loves her: “Harpo, she say, do you really love me, or just my color?” (Walker 84). Her light skin makes it possible for her to look like a white woman: “Us dress Squeak like she a white woman, only her clothes patch” (Walker 82). The song that Mary Agnes writes claiming her identity as a black light-skin woman is highly significant:

“They calls me yellow

like yellow be my name

They calls me yellow

like yellow be my name

But if yellow is a name

Why ain’t black the same

Well, if I say Hey black girl

Lord, she try to ruin my game” (Walker 85).

According to Tucker, “In the above passage black and yellow are signifiers created by a white patriarchal world that would impose hierarchies of worth based on color and sex appeal. But Mary Agnes is able to deny both her nickname and her ‘color’ name, thereby creating a new, authentic text of her self” (87). Mary Agnes' song reflects the complexities of racial identity and the impact of colourism within the African American community. The song addresses the struggle of individuals who do not clearly fit into predefined racial categories. It is also a prove of her journey towards self-acceptance and empowerment.

While Celie washes and combs Shug’s hair, she compares the scene with that of a mother doing her daughter’s hair. Celie has idealized this action because she could not do it with her mother, and she would like to do it to her daughter: “I work on her like she a doll or like she Olivia—or like she mama. (…) That feel like mama used to do. Or maybe not mama. Maybe grandma” (Walker 48). As Celie still does not contemplate being queer as a possibility owing to ignorance, she compares this action with a mother-daughter activity, because Celie, in the role of a mother, has feelings of attachment, warmth and passion for Shug, that she cannot recognize or name yet. Moreover, it is important to take into account that Celie’s experience with love is reduced to Nettie’s love.

In a conversation about sex with Sofia, Celie confesses: “I don’t know nothing bout it” (Walker 59), referring to sexual pleasure, and she compares what she feels with Mr. \_\_\_ and Shug, admitting she feels sexually attracted to Shug: “Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ clam on top of me, do his business, in ten minutes us both sleep. Only time I feel something stirring down there is when I think bout Shug. And that like running to the end of the road and it turn back on itself” (Walker 59). When Shug tells Celie that she will leave soon, Celie confesses her Mr. \_\_\_ beats her and that the reason is “For being me and not you” (Walker 66). So, Shug says she will stay until he stops beating her. This is the beginning of Celie’s rupture of the imposition of silence, as it is the first time she confesses it out loud.

Shug and Celie share opinions about how they feel about having sex with Albert. Celie describes what is like for her: “He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain’t there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep” (Walker 68). Shug summarizes her opinion about this description: “You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you. That what it feel like, I [Celie] say” (Walker 69). So, Shug informs her: “you still a virgin” (Walker 69), referring to the fact that Celie had never experienced pleasure. Before this, Celie had expressed her concern about Shug getting pregnant, but Shug calm her down telling she uses a “sponge”. She is talking about the vaginal contraceptive sponge, which was approved on April 1, 1983, the same year of the publication of *The Color Purple*.

After this conversation, Shug teaches her about her vagina and about pleasure. Celie shows she does not have any knowledge about this topic: “My face hot enough to melt itself. She say, Here, take this mirror and go look at yourself down there, I bet you never seen it, have you? Naw. And I bet you never seen Albert down there either. I felt him, I say” (Walker 69). She feels embarrassed, but Shug helps Celie to feel empowered and proud of her body: “Then inside look like a wet rose. It a lot prettier than you thought, ain’t it?” (Walker 69). This shows the important role of Shug in Celie’s self-love development. Shug's influence on Celie's self-esteem is intimately connected to her invitation for Celie to explore her own sexuality. By extending this invitation, Shug creates a safe and comfortable environment for Celie to embrace her desires, fostering a sense of empowerment and self-acceptance. Her sexual exploration with Shug allows her to better understand her own desires and preferences. After the exploration of her sexuality with Shug that challenges the restrictive gender and sexual norms, Celie still continues to prioritize men's reactions over her own, maintaining her pattern of self-comparison with male figures: “All the men got they eyes glued to Shug’s bosom. I got my eyes glued there too. I feel my nipples harden under my dress. My little button sort of perk up too” (Walker 72).

Celie’s conversation with Shug about her past is a turning point for her. Celie tells Shug about the first time she was raped by Alphonso with the premise of cutting his hair when she was fourteen years old. This rape is connected with the beginning of the novel: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy”, as rape is used as an instrument to keep Celie silenced, and until this moment, she had never told anyone. Until this moment, Celie had been carrying the burden of her abuse in silence, just sharing it with God in her letters. Alphonso imposed this silence that kept Celie isolated in her pain, and the fact of telling this ‘secret’ emphasizes the strength and healing power of her connection with Shug. Celie’s development started when she saw a picture of Shug, and now she is revealing her experience of abuse to Shug, challenging the patriarchal system that perpetuates silence and shame around sexual violence.

The first sexual encounter between Celie and Shug is the first time Celie enjoys a sexual experience, the first time she experiences consensual sex and a clitoral orgasm:

I would suggest, the notion of the mature vaginal orgasm still predominates, since it is a necessary myth within our compulsorily heterosexual society. For a long time Celie's clitoris remained "undiscovered"; and while real women in heterosexual relationships undoubtedly have lovers more skillful and sensitive than Mr. (even if his being signified in this way does mischievously imply that he is the archetypal male), the ideological construct woman still seems to be experiencing orgasm without reference to her clitoris. (Abbandonato 1112)

The notion that vaginal orgasms were more mature and healthier than other sexual practices is due to Sigmund Freud:

Freud’s pleasure principle opened up the possibility that it might be okay to want sex for the pleasure of the act itself. However, his ideas of the mature sexual aim were also part of the reason that penis-in-vagina (PIV) sex became the gold standard against which people tend to measure all other sexual practices (Barker and Scheele 22).

Celie discovers her clitoris thanks to Shug: “[Celie] Where the button? Right up near the top, she [Shug] say. The part that stick out a little” (Walker 70), and clitoral orgasm seems to be hidden, out of reach, for male characters: “He [Mr. \_\_\_] try to play with the button but feel like his fingers dry” (Walker 95). For Celie, everything with Shug is better, even sleeping: “It feels like heaven is what it feel like, not like sleeping with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ at all” (Walker 98).

Shug has an essential role helping Celie to find out that Mr. \_\_\_ has been hiding Nettie’s letters, as Celie thought Nettie was already dead. With this new information, Celie has a breakdown: “I don’t sleep. I don’t cry. I don’t do nothing. I’m cold too. Pretty soon I think maybe I’m dead” (Walker 103). Shug has a monologue where she questions herself. As I already mentioned, Shug was mean to women who were dating Albert because of her competitiveness for Albert’s attention, for male approval, and she admits it:

Poor Annie Julia, Shug say. She never had a chance. I was so mean, and so wild, Lord. I used to go round saying, I don’t care who he married to, I’m gonna fuck him (…) I liked her myself. Why I hurt her so? I used to keep Albert away from home for a week at the time. She’d come and beg him for money to buy groceries for the children (…) And when I come here, say Shug, I treated you so mean. Like you was a servant. And all because Albert married you. And I didn’t even want him for a husband, she say. I never really wanted Albert for a husband. But just to choose me, you know, cause nature had already done it. (Walker 104-105)

Shug recognizes the negative impact of her past actions on Annie Julia. She acknowledges that her behaviour towards Annie Julia was hurtful and mean, indicating a sense of regret for the pain she caused and proof of her own journey of self-development because of her feelings towards Celie. Shug’s actions towards Annie Julia suggest underlying feelings of jealousy and insecurity that may have been triggered by the premise that Albert chose to marry Annie Julia, even though she claims not to have wanted him as a husband. Shug has a fixation on Albert due to their long history together, but their relationship is based on their physical encounters, which seems to please both of them. Therefore, this represents Shug’s openness to sexual relationships with individuals regardless of their gender, and her bisexuality.

Shug not only supports Celie but also helps her to get the letters from Albert’s trunk. After her breakdown reading the letters, Mr. \_\_\_ is no longer Mr. \_\_\_, as Celie starts to call him Albert, proving that she is no longer afraid of him. As Celie feels more confident and learns to express her thoughts and feelings, she becomes more assertive in her interactions with Albert. She no longer allows him to control or intimidate her, and she stands up for herself and her desires. But Celie’s breakdown kills all her sexual desire: “Much as I still want to be with her, much as I love to look, my titties stay soft, my little button never rise. Now I know I’m dead” (Walker 124). After discovering several letters from her sister that Albert had concealed, Celie experiences a sense of deception, leading her into a state of depression that does not allows her to feel anything, nor even pleasure. After her finding of sexual pleasure, its lack make her feel as being dead. The reason for this is not only the fact of missing her sister but also the exposure to some memories of her past traumas.

Shug proposes to wear pants, but Celie refuses it because: “I ain’t no man (…) Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ not going to let his wife wear pants” (Walker 124). As this quote illustrates, pants are traditionally associated with men and they symbolize freedom, which was often denied to women. Disregarding the constraints imposed by Mr. \_\_\_ on Celie’s clothing, she starts wearing pants, that represents a symbolic breaking of gender norms and the beginning of her full liberation. Wearing pants exemplifies Celie’s empowerment. It symbolises not only her independence, but also her assertion of identity, as she will start to make pants. Moreover, as pants are often associated with masculinity, it means Celie has embraced certain masculine attributes, which can be seen as an affirmation of her own sexual desires and preferences. It indicates a rejection of the traditional view of femininity and the social norms that dictate how women should express their sexuality.

When Celie discovers Alphonso is not her father, in her last letter to God, she ends by saying: “You must be sleep” (Walker 151), referring to God. From now own, Celie replaces God with her sister: “I don’t write to God no more. I write to you” (Walker 164). Unlike her letters to God, writing to Nettie means she shares her thoughts and experiences with someone she deeply cares about, proving she is no longer silenced or oppressed. Celie’s crisis of faith ends thanks to Shug’s intervention, because she explains what religion and God mean to her. The crisis of faith was triggered because Celie had realized that: “the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful and lowdown” (164), and not only a man but also a white man: “He big and old and tall and graybearded and white” (Walker 165). Shug explains to her that: “that’s the one that’s in the white folks’ white bible” (Walker 166). Now that Celie is an empowered woman that has embraced her blackness, her beauty and her sexual desire, a white man will not stop her. Shug believes the same as her “When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest” (Walker 166).

Shug’s explanation of what she believes God is, brings back Celie’s faith: “God love everything you love—and a mess of stuff you don’t” (Walker 167). This God even loves what Celie expects to be dirty:

It sort of like you know what, she [Shug] say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh. Shug! I say. Oh, she say. God love all them feelings. That’s some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves ’em you enjoys ’em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that’s going, and praise God by liking what you like. God don’t think it dirty? I ast. Naw, she say. (Walker 167).

*The Color Purple* depicts a society where traditional religious beliefs contribute to the repression of female sexuality. Celie’s initial understanding of God demonstrated how religious dogmas were oppressive, not allowing her to embrace her own desires. Thanks to Shug’s explanation, Celie questions the traditional teachings of the church and begins to find divinity in the natural world and in the joy of living. This shift allows Celie to challenge the oppressive views imposed on her sexuality and embrace a broader sense of spirituality that isn't constrained by religious doctrines, as she no longer believes in a punishing God. The fact that Shug relates God with nature: “My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. (…) I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed” (Walker 167), is connected to Africa, as we can observe with the Olinka’s ritual of honouring a new roof: “Shug has been teaching her [Celie] to see the divine in trees and in all of nature rather than in the ‘patriarchal’ images of Christianity” (McEwan 67).

Celie’s discovery that God embraces and validates every single part of her development, even the sexual one, returns her strength, her confidence and her self-love. All this development is demonstrated when Celie informs Albert she will leave him, as she will go with Shug to Memphis. Celie does not remain silent anymore: “Sofia so surprise to hear me speak up she ain’t chewed for ten minutes” (Walker 171). At this moment of Celie’s rebellion, there is also a beautiful moment of sorority and complicity: “A woman can’t git a man if peoples talk [Grady]. Shug look at me and us giggle. Then us laugh sure nuff. Then Squeak start to laugh. Then Sofia. All us laugh and laugh. (…) It bad luck for women to laugh at men [Harpo]” (Walker 171). Mary Agnes (Squeak) is also leaving, following her dream of singing.

In order to stop Celie from going away, Mr. \_\_\_ tells her: “You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people. All you fit to do in Memphis is be Shug’s maid. (…) And nobody crazy or backward enough to want to marry you, neither. What you gon do? (…) You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all” (Walker 175). Celie fights back with a curse:

I curse you, I say. (…) Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble. (…) Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. (…) Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice, I say. (…) The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot, I say. (…) Anything you do to me, already done to you. Then I feel Shug shake me. Celie, she say. And I come to myself. I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here. (Walker 176)

Celie embraces what Albert thought were insults, as she is still fighting, learning and progressing. It seems that this curse not only comes out from her body but from the divinity in the beauty and wonder of the natural world: “I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees. (…) Then I say, You better stop talking because all I’m telling you ain’t coming just from me. (…) Then I feel Shug shake me. Celie, she say. And I come to myself” (Walker 176). The act of cursing is connected with African diasporic religious practices: “When Celie asserts a place for herself within African diasporic religious practice that is recognizable to Albert, she affirms her existence to him, as well as their shared inter-subjective experience” (Lewis 168).

While they are in Memphis, they talk about houses and they spend time together: “Us lay with our arms round each other” (Walker 178). Celie insists on going with Shug to work: “Let me go with you, I say. I can press your clothes, do your hair. It would be like old times, when you was singing at Harpo’s” (Walker 179), but Shug refuses because: “You not my maid. I didn’t bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet” (Walker 179). This is the drive Celie needed to start doing something on her own. Soon after this, she starts making pants. They actually seem like a usual couple living together: “She come home, kiss me, step over all the mess. Say, before she leave again, How much money you think you need this week?” (Walker 180).

Celie made many pants trying to find the perfect one: “Then finally one day I made the perfect pair of pants. For my sugar, naturally” (Walker 180). After this, she starts doing pants for her close circle: Mary Agnes, Jack, Odessa, Shug… She takes into account every detail of people’s life to make the perfect pants for them. Celie wants her pants to become this turning point to aid them to empower and liberate what oppresses them, as it did with her. Shug helps Celie to put some advertisements of the pants to start the business: “You making your living, Celie, she say. Girl, you on your way” (Walker 181). She ends this letter: “Amen, Your Sister, Celie. Folkspants, Unlimited. Sugar Avery Drive. Memphis, Tennessee” (Walker 182), showing how she is actually starting the business. Celie has arrived at the peak of her self-development as she has achieved everything she wanted to: “I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you [Nettie] alive and be home soon. With our children” (Walker 183), and also: “I smoke when I want to make love. Lately I feel like me and God make love just fine anyhow. (…) Girl, I’m bless, I say to Sofia. God know what I mean” (Walker 187).

Darlene, who helps Celie with her business, is “trying to teach her how to speak. She say US not so hot. A dead country give-away. You say US where most folks say WE, she say, and peoples think you dumb. Colored peoples think you a hick and white folks be amuse” (Walker 183). Darlene wants Celie to stop using African American Vernacular English (AAVE), saying she will be happier and also that “She [Shug] won’t be shame to take you [Celie] anywhere” (Walker 183). Celie knows Shug is not ashamed at all, but Darlene does not believe it: “Shug say, She can talk in sign language for all I care” (Walker 183). Celie’s opinion about using AAVE is clear: “Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind” (Walker 184). Concerning the use of AAVE, Christopher S. Lewis affirms: “Written to be accessible to readers like her mother rather than white readers, *The Color Purple*’s strategic fulfillment of the linguistic conventions of black literary realism” (167). Alice Walker wanted to give voice to people who speak AAVE. Many people believe that speaking AAVE means having no education. As Darlene mentions, among the African American community, they imitate the ‘correct English’, leading to a sense of shame among those who speak AAVE. In contrast, Grady, “try to talk like somebody from the North. Memphis, Tennessee ain’t North” (Walker 98), meaning that he attempts to look sophisticated, which Celie did not like at all.

Shug comes back from working with the band and confesses to Celie that she has met someone who is a lot younger than her. It seems that Shug believes she is getting old and ugly, and this leads her to seek out the companionship of a younger man to fulfil her sexual desires, after which she intends to return to Celie: “Celie, she say. All I ast is six months. Just six months to have my last fling. I got to have it Celie. I’m too weak a woman not to. But if you just give me six months, Celie, I will try to make our life together like it was” (Walker 211). With this fragment, it is clear that Celie is a lesbian: “Take off they pants, I say, and men look like frogs to me. No matter how you kiss ’em, as far as I’m concern, frogs is what they stay” (Walker 215), while Shug is bisexual: “And I [Shug] know how you [Celie] feel about men. But I don’t feel that way. I would never be fool enough to take any of them seriously, she say, but some mens can be a lots of fun” (Walker 211). Shug is a complex character. While she deeply cares for Celie, she may also feel conflicted about her desires and sense of self. Shug's decision to be with Germaine might be part of her journey of self-discovery and growth. It allows her to explore different relationships and aspects of her sexuality. Shug has been using men to her sexual satisfaction, but she has only created deeper bonds with Celie.

Celie is sure about her feelings toward women: “Sofia and Harpo always try to set me up with some man. They know I love Shug but they think womens love just by accident, anybody handy likely to do” (Walker 221). Mr.\_\_\_ has changed completely since Celie left him, he understands her and respects her, and he even has her back with her sexuality: “Everytime I go to Harpo’s some little policy salesman git all up in my face. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ have to come to the rescue. He tell the man, This lady my wife. The man vanish out the door” (Walker 221). Mr. \_\_\_ has understood that he does not have to follow the gender roles that had been imposed by society. Also, witnessing Celie’s transformation asserting her independence, finding her voice, and discovering her self-worth has forced him to reevaluate his actions and attitudes, so that he started to regard Celie as an independent human being, not the wife he got by force. He was the first spectator of Shug and Celie’s relationship, and regarding what they had achieved together made him realise that heterosexual sexuality was also something imposed by society.

Celie asks Mr. \_\_\_ what he loves about Shug: “He say he love her style. He say to tell the truth, Shug act more manly than most men” (Walker 228). Celie has a different opinion: “What Shug got is womanly it seem like to me. Specially since she and Sofia the ones got it. Sofia and Shug not like men, he [Mr. \_\_\_] say, but they not like women either. You mean they not like you or me [Celie]” (Walker 228). This conversation represents the complete brochure of gender roles by Shug, Sophia and Celie. While Mr. \_\_\_ still regards them as behaving manly, Celie has achieved the freedom and the discovery that strict gender roles are negative, as it is the right for each person to behave freely. In this conversation, Mr. \_\_\_ confesses what had happened when Shug find out he was hitting Celie:

But Shug spoke right up for you, Celie, he say. She say Albert, you been mistreating somebody I love. So as far as you concern, I’m gone. I couldn’t believe it, he say. (…) But she meant what she said. I tried to tease her. You don’t love old dumb Celie, I said. She ugly and skinny and can’t hold a candle to you. She can’t even screw. What I want to say that for. From what she tell me, Shug said, she don’t have no reason to screw. You on and off like a jackrabbit. Plus, she say, Celie say you not always clean. And she turn up her nose. I wanted to kill you, said Mr. \_\_\_\_   and I did slap you around a couple of times. I never understood how you and Shug got along so well together and it bothered the hell out of me. When she was mean and nasty to you, I understood. But when I looked around and the two of you was always doing each other’s hair, I start to worry. (Walker 229)

This fragment shows how Shug was trying to protect Celie, and also how Mr. \_\_\_ understood what was happening between both of them. Mr. \_\_\_ tries to tease Shug, he focused on Celie’s value from her physical characteristics, as Mr. \_\_\_ never bothered to know her, but Shug has a deeper interest in Celie, as she regards her for who she is, not just her physical appearance. Shug dismisses Mr. \_\_\_'s teasing and defends Celie, as their relationship is based on a deep emotional bond. Mr. \_\_\_’s confusion was based on his lack of understanding of their relationship and jealousy and fear of losing Shug, but doing each other’s hair represented an intimate caring gesture, which involves physical closeness and a sense of trust, and he recognized that their connection was deeper than what he had initially perceived. Mr. \_\_\_ had always undervalued Celie. His reaction after this conversation was to slap Celie a couple of times, as her masculinity was attacked when Shug did speak up for Celie and scolded him. In the end. Mr. \_\_\_ was the character that understood Celie the most, and, unlike Harpo and Sofia, he comprehends and respects their queer relationship, as he compares what he felt with what Celie is feeling: “I’m real sorry she left you, Celie. I remember how I felt when she left me. (…) Here us is, I [Celie] thought, two old fools left over from love, keeping each other company under the stars” (Walker 230).

At the moment that Celie talks about her pants with Mr. \_\_\_, he expresses his patriarchal opinion, but she explains to him that in Africa, people wear what felt more comfortable for them: “But men and women both preshate a nice dress” (Walker 230). This gives the unusual view of Africa as the most advanced continent in contraposition with America: “They not so backward as mens here.” (Walker 230). “And men sew in Africa, too, I [Celie] say”, this gives Mr. \_\_\_ the push to start sewing again. Gender roles forced Mr. \_\_\_\_ to stop sewing as he understood this activity was aimed at women, since everybody laughed at him. This proves Sandra Bem’s conclusion that “rigid adherence to masculine or feminine gender roles was not psychologically healthy – as had previously been assumed – and that it was actually better for people to be ‘androgynous’, by which Bem meant being flexibly able to be ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’” (Barker and Scheele 41).

The happy ending of the novel begins addressing: “Dear god. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear god” (Walker 242). This addressing represents the culmination of Celie’s journey of sexual self-discovery, empowerment, and spiritual transformation. Celie addresses God but her current perception of God transcends the confines of traditional religious notions, indicating an expanded and more inclusive understanding, that she did not have at the beginning of the novel. She sees divinity not only in an abstract and distant being but also in the natural world and in the interconnectedness of all living beings. She thanks for the return of Nettie and the children. All together, they celebrate the 4th of July, but their reasons differ from the ones of white people: “White people busy celebrating they independence from England July 4th, say Harpo, so most black folks don’t have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other” (Walker 243). Furthermore, even though Celie knows people think they (Nettie, Shug, Albert, Samuel, Harpo, Sofia, Jack, Odessa and herself) are old, she does not feel this way at all: “[But] I don’t think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt” (Walker 244). Despite the passing of time and the challenges she has faced in her life, Celie does not feel old at all as she has found strength in her relationships with others and her ability to appreciate the simple pleasures of life. The gathering and celebration on the 4th of July symbolize a moment of unity and joy among family, marking a departure from the isolation and loneliness Celie experienced in the past. It demonstrates the power of community and Shug’s love in transforming lives and rejuvenating spirits.

5. LESBIANISM AND RACISM IN FANNIE FLAG’S FRIED GREEN TOMATOES

5.1 Fannie Flag: Biographical Information

Patricia Neal was born in Birmingham, Jefferson County (Alabama) on September 21, 1944. She was an only child from the marriage of William H. and Marion Leona LeGore Neal. Her family lived in Irondale and her father was a businessman and a movie theatre projectionist. He went to the war with the Army in 1942 and came back in 1944. She started acting at the age of 14 with a Birmingham theatre troupe, which was composed of children and young adults. At this theatre group, they called her Baby Girl as she was the youngest. She began writing skits in which she played the lead roles (*The Whoopee Girls*). At the age of 17, she registered with Actor’s Equity, a union for actors who worked in live theatre. In order to avoid being mistaken for Oscar-winning actress Patricia Neal, she later changed her name to Frances Carlton Flagg, or Fannie Flagg if shortened. It was her father who told her: “Take a name that is really spectacular. One that no one will forget” (Reynolds 30).

Flagg attended the University of Alabama, but she did not complete her degree. After she spent time at the Pittsburgh Playhouse where she continued writing and performing plays, and thus developing her craft, Flagg returned to Alabama where she worked as a producer on the Morning Show on WBRC-TV in Birmingham. She also appeared at the Upstairs at the Downstairs nightclub in New York, a melting pot for the country’s best comedy and musical talents. In 1964, Flagg was hired as part of the staff writer for Alan Funt’s *Candid Camera* Televisions Series. After a few months, Alan decided to put her on the show, and she continued working there for five years.

In the late 60s she made comedy albums for RCA Victor and she acted in several TV shows like *The Dick Van Dyke Show* or *The Love Boat*. Also, she appeared in some films, for example, in *Grease* as Nurse Wilkins. During her years as an active working actress, she was a frequent guest on game shows and talk shows.

Flagg won first place in fiction for a short story that she had written at the Santa Barbara Writer’s Conference in 1978. This work became the basis for her novel Coming Attractions. After the deaths of both her parents three months apart in 1980, she became a full-time writer. While she was playing the lead role on Broadway in *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas,* she had an epiphany: “I was sitting in the dressing room, covered with makeup in a low-cut gown and I thought, ‘I am so unhappy’. I stopped then and there and decided to be a full-time writer” (Reynolds 31).

She suffered from an undiagnosed dyslexia: “I always wanted to write but acting came so much more easily,” she declared. “I didn't pursue writing because I always assumed and was told that if you can't spell you can't be a writer (…) It was so embarrassing” (Reynolds 30). At the age of 40, it still embarrassed her. “To have gone,” she said, “from being a girl who could not spell her name to an author with her own books on a library shelf is the most rewarding thing that has ever happened to me” (Reynolds 30-31).

Her first novel called Coming Attractions: A Wonderful Novel, was published in 1981. The book was reprinted as Daisy Fay and the Miracle Man in 1992. A coming-of-age novel set around 1952, where the eleven-year-old protagonist, Daisy Fay Harper, tells the story of her alcoholic father and her mother through her diary. This book remained for 10 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list.

Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-Stop Cafe was published in 1987 and it was on the New York Times bestseller list for 36 weeks. Both winners of the Pulitzer Prize, Harper Lee and Eudora Welty praised her novel. Flagg has admitted that Harper Lee was like a mentor to her. Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-Stop Cafe is Flagg’s best-known and most successful novel. Flagg, together with Jon Avnet, adapted the novel for a 1991 film of the same name. She started writing the screenplay with Carol Sobieski when she fell ill and Jon Avnet finished it. The screenplay was nominated for an Academy Award and won the University of Southern California (USC) Scripter Award from the Friends of USC Libraries and “Best Adapted Screenplay” from the Writer’s Guild of America in 1992. Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-Stop Cafe was rejected by nineteen publishing houses before Random House eventually agreed to publish it, and that is the reason why she continues with these publishers. Fannie Flagg’s Original Whistle-Stop Café Cookbook (1993) and The Wonder Boy of Whistle Stop (2020) are two later publications based on Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-Stop Cafe.

Flagg is a politically conscious artist, as was shown when she spoke out on behalf of the Equal Rights Amendment. Women have the leading role in her novels, as we can see in I Still Dream About You (2010), a comedic mystery about a former Miss Alabama; and The All-Girl Filling Station’s Last Reunion (2013), a tribute to the women who served in the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) during World War II.

Except for *Welcome to the World, Baby Girl!* (1998), which is set in New York City, Flagg usually sets her novels in the South, but Flagg does not consider herself a Southern writer but an American writer, as she is in love with the American character. The people who interest Flagg the most are those: “living quiet lives, nurses and firemen and those people who never get recognized. They don't really have a voice. In the South, we hear about the very poor or the very wealthy. There aren't many people writing for middle-class America.” (Reynolds 31) Her opinion about the South and the Southerners:

To me, the thing that is most interesting about Southerners is that everybody’s a character. There’s just no dull people. They’re hilarious. I love the way they use the language. They love to talk. You just don’t find that in other parts of the country. When I go home, I can talk for two hours with a total stranger. They’ll just tell you everything you want to know. They just love to talk, love to visit with one another, and love their neighbors and community. It’s just a whole different part of the country.

We all speak English, but we have different cultures everywhere, and the Southern culture is just different from the culture in New Hampshire or New England or California. Of course, being a Southerner, I relate to southerners.

Being a Southerner has been one of the joys of my life because no matter where I go, if I hear that accent, I’ve got a friend. I can walk up to them and say, “Where are you from?” They’d tell me and ask where I’m from. I’d say, “I’m from Birmingham, Alabama.” Then, you’ve got a conversation because we relate to one another (smashinginterviews.com).

She lives currently in California and Alabama and has received several awards especially in Alabama: she won the 2001 Alabama State Council on the Arts Distinguished Artist Award, and in 2012, she won the Harper Lee Award, which honours Alabama’s distinguished writer of the year. Flagg guards her privacy, but she has confessed that many of her friends appear in her novels with real names. Flagg shared a house with Rita Mae Brown a feminist LGBTQ activist for a period of time and was also in a relationship with actress Susan Flannery. In 1992, the film Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-Stop Café won an award from the GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation).

5.2 Lesbianism and racism in the novel in comparison with the *Color Purple*

*Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* was published in 1987, the novel alternates the present events at Rose Terrace Nursing Home, with the past events at Whistle Stop. Ninny, (Virginia) functions as the link between the stories since she participates in both: she is an inmate at Rose Terrace Nursing Home in the present, and in the past she was married to Cleo, one of the sons of the Threadgoode family. The past events centred around this family, specifically the daughter, Idgie, and her very close relationship with Ruth Jamison. The description of their sentimental relationship is subtle, but it is shown to go beyond mere friendship. Within this lesbian relationship, Idgie can be described as a butch. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “butch” means: “A lesbian whose appearance, behaviour, or identity is regarded as masculine. Frequently in explicit or implied contrast with *femme*”. The first use of “butch” with this meaning was in 1947. Before this, in 1939, another meaning was “that is or resembles a tough, violent, or physically fit man (…). More generally: demonstrating qualities traditionally or stereotypically associated with masculinity, such as assertive or ostentatious toughness, rejection of sentimentality or sensitivity, etc.; macho; manly” (Oxford English Dictionary). The term ‘butch’ is the term used to describe masculine (masc.) lesbians. On the contrary, Ruth is a “femme”: “A lesbian whose appearance, behaviour, identity, etc., is regarded as feminine. Frequently in explicit or implied contrast with butch” (Oxford English Dictionary). Therefore, Idgie and Ruth could be considered a butch-femme couple, as will be discussed through this chapter. Butch-femme couples are the most popular representation of a lesbian relationship. This is the stereotypical perception of lesbian relationships, which reflects the initial impression of individuals outside the queer community when contemplating a romantic union between two women. From both inside and outside the queer community, butch-femme relationships had been criticised and they are usually regarded as: “the predatory female masculine invert and the child woman who most easily fell her victim” (Joan Nestle 14). Even the Daughters of Bilitis “pressured butches to appear more feminine” (them). Moreover, “butches were even considered ‘politically incorrect’ by lesbian feminists in the 1970s” (them).

Among the queer community, criticism on butch-femme relationships is still present nowadays, since “feminists and lesbian-feminists consider butch-femme relationships a reproduction of heterosexual models” (Joan Nestle 138). Because of the masculinity of the butch and the femininity of the femme, from the outside it may look like a recreation of a traditional heterosexual couple. The question seems to be whether “femmes and butches [are] dupes of heterosexuality, or (…) gender pioneers with knack for alchemy” (Joan Nestle 14). It is important to take into account that criticism tends to associate the masculine behaviour of a butch with the toxic masculinities that could be latent.

*The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* by Joan Nestle gathers some personal experiences of butch-femme relationships, showing experiences they suffer as a couple or just as individuals. Jeanne Cordova, who identifies herself as a butch, describes an attack she had suffered and concludes: “He was in a rage because this bull dyke was neither male nor female. I’d eclipsed his gender boundaries” (273). Butch lesbians are probably the ones that suffered from more physical aggressions among lesbians.

In Flagg’s novel, Idgie could be regarded as a “tomboy” at the beginning of the story, but when her sexual orientation comes out, “butch” would be the proper term. Tomboy refers to her behaviour and physical appearance, while butch adds her sexual orientation. As a tomboy, from the beginning of the novel, she refuses to wear dresses: “‘I'm never gonna wear another dress as long as I live!’ And with that, honey, she marched upstairs and put on a pair of Buddy's old pants and a shirt” (Flagg 13). Idgie’s family thought she would change her mind for her sister’s wedding, but she did not. In fact, she wore a bow tie, that is one typical item of clothing of butch lesbians, as it is stated throughout the work: *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* which brings together the views of many self-described butchs. Idgie has short hair: “after Buddy got her hair all bobbed off, you'd swear she was a little boy” (Flagg 34). Moreover, she admired his brother, Buddy, and she followed his model: “Buddy was eight when she was born, and he used to carry her all over town, just like she was a doll. When she got old enough to walk, she'd paddle around after him like a little duck” (Flagg 25). Buddy was an essential figure for Idgie, who as a kid, always tried to imitate him. Buddy was an unconditional support for her. When Buddy was killed by the train, the one who suffered the most was Idgie: “You never saw anybody hurt so much. I thought she would die right along with him. It would break your heart to look at her. (…) but she never did cry. She was too hurt to cry…” (Flagg 37).

Idgie was completely heartbroken after Buddy’s death, but when she met Ruth everything changed: “Besides, just like Idgie meeting Ruth, God never shuts a door unless he opens another, and I believe He must have sent Ruth over to stay with us that summer for a reason…” (Flagg 37). Although how Ruth and Idgie met is attributed to a divine force, it is similar to how Celie and Shug met, because they were both in a situation of emotional need and support. None of them (Idgie and Celie) would never imagine how their life would change and improve thanks to Ruth and Shug, respectively.

In the present at Rose Terrace Nursing Home, Ninny meets Evelyn Couch, and their relationship proves determinant for the latter’s development since Ninny assumes the role of inducing a transformative awakening in Evelyn, thus becoming the incentive for an enlightened understanding of her own life and circumstances. Like Celie, Evelyn has not discovered pleasure yet, and it is Ninny who is going to guide her toward the discovery of her self-worth: “She [Evelyn] still didn’t enjoy sex” (Flagg 41). Evelyn has always pursued to be a “good girl”: “She had been a good girl, had always acted like a lady, never raised her voice, always deferred to everybody and everything” (Flagg 42). Now that she is married, and her children are gone she realises that being a “bad girl” does not seem ‘wrong’. Evelyn did everything she was supposed to do: “So all that struggle to stay pure, the fear of being touched, the fear of driving a boy mad with passion by any gesture, and the ultimate fear—getting pregnant—all that wasted energy was for nothing” (Flagg 42), but she is not happy at all. The psychologist Sandra Bem explains that “rigid adherence to masculine or feminine gender roles was not psychologically healthy – as had previously been assumed – and that it was actually better for people to be ‘androgynous’, by which she meant being flexibly able to be ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’” (Barker and Scheele 41).

Evelyn feels she does not fit anywhere, not even when she started attending a group called “The Complete Woman”: “The organization believed that women could find complete happiness if they, in turn, would dedicate their entire lives to just making their man happy” (Flagg 42-43). This organization aimed to follow strictly the traditional feminine role. Evelyn runs away when the organization suggests they should bring a mirror to study their vaginas as she was: “too scared to look at her own vagina” (Flagg 43). The reason for her retreat is rooted in her deep-seated fear or discomfort in confronting her own body and its intimate aspects. Evelyn harbours a sense of shame or embarrassment concerning her sexuality and anatomy, leading her to avoid the vulnerable and potentially confronting experience of self-examination. In contrast with Celie’s curiosity about her body, Evelyn is scared. Evelyn always wanted to be this “good girl” and everything related to sex and pleasure was “forbidden”:

The ‘good girl’ is taught to be uninterested in sexual activity except for the purpose of legitimate procreation because it is traditionally believed unnatural for women to have sexual desire. In fact, ‘good’ women are expected to find sex frightening and disgusting. 'Bad girls' are used and then discarded because they do not deserve to bear a man's name or his legitimate children. That role is appropriate only for a submissive ‘good girl.’ The ‘good girl’ is, thus, rewarded for her 'good' behaviour while the ‘bad girl’ is denounced and punished (Chatraporn 45).

This ideal of the “good girl” is opposed to Eva Bates who was Buddy’s love; he used to take Idgie to Wagon Wheel Club and Camp, to meet Eva there. After Buddy’s death Idgie went there to tell Eva. Eva Bates belongs to the group of the “bad girls”, because: “she had slept with a lot of men since she was twelve and had enjoyed it every time” (Flagg 94). She did not follow feminine roles and she was proud of who she was, not listening to the social conventions. Buddy knew all this information, and he loved Eva for who she was: “she had slept with whomever she pleased, whenever she pleased; but no matter what anybody thought or said, when she loved you, she was strictly a one-man woman. Eva belonged to Buddy, and as much as Buddy liked to flirt around, he belonged to Eva” (Flagg 95). Buddy wanted to marry her, he even introduced her to his family, and she introduced him to her father. Eva is the opposite of Evelyn, continuing with the binarism of “good girls” and “bad girls”.

Evelyn’s unhappiness is explained because she was meticulously trying to follow her gender role and she believed her husband, Ed, was doing so, too: “Lately, he [Ed] had started acting more and more like his daddy, trying to behave like he thought the man of the house should” (Flagg 44). Evelyn had reached the point where “She even knew how she would kill herself” (Flagg 63), with all the details.

As the conversation between Evelyn and Ninny continues, Ninny makes an assessment on “how peculiar it seemed to her that colored people came in so many different shades” (Flagg 73). She tells about the reaction of Onzell’s mother, Big George’s wife: “it nearly broke her momma's heart when she married George, because he was so black” (Flagg 73), and he also had blue gum. Sipsey’s reaction about her grandson Artis shows a similar concern: “she [Sipsey] shook her head in dismay. ‘God help us’” (Flagg 75). This manifests the intraracial racism among the black community, clarifying that the lighter the color of the skin the better. Big George laughed at this because he was not superstitious. But ten years later, it seems to be proved that Artis was going to be inherently cruel, because of being bluegums and having blue gums: he “had stabbed him [his younger brother, Jasper] five in the arm” (Flagg 75). Afterwards, Artis told his brother: “I knowed I shouldn'ta done it . . . but it felt so good, I jes couldn't stop” (Flagg 76).

Sipsey is one of the most important black characters in the novel. Ninny did not know where she came from “you never know where colored people come from” (Flagg 47), she just knew that she appeared one day at Troutville: “the colored quarters across the tracks, and said her name was Sipsey Peavey and she was lookin' for a job” (Flagg 48), and Idgie’s mother just kept her. She helped to raise all the Threadgoode children, and, as Musanga and Mukhuba explain: “this echoes the history of enslavement where African American women were projected as ‘breeders’ and not ‘mothers’” (391). Nevertheless, she becomes a mother adopting George Pullman Peavey, who was given away by his mother. Sipsey’s life and in consequence, Big George’s life were deeply connected to music, as Celie and Shug’s lives: “She [Sipsey] was always singing her gospel songs . . . 'In the Baggage Car Ahead,' and ‘I’m Going Home on the Morning Train' . . . always singing about trains” (Flagg 50). Her mother was a slave, and Sipsey maintains African diasporic traditions:

she was scared to death of spells . . . told Momma that her neighbor in Troutville had put yellow conjure powder in this man's shoes every night, and had caused him to lose his functions. But the thing she was the most deathly afraid of in the world was the heads of animals. If you brought her a chicken or a fish or if Big George killed a hog, she wouldn't touch it or cook it until she'd buried the head out in the garden. She said that if you didn't bury the head, the spirit of that animal would enter your body and cause you to go completely insane. (Flagg 48)

The gospel music has its origins in the late 19th century. The African American communities would reunite in churches just for black people to praise God by singing. These singings were accompanied with handclapping and food-stomping. Evelyn went to a black church, and with all the singing: “She felt her heart open and fill with the pure wonder of being alive and making it through” (Flagg 312).

The Threadgoode family was white, but all the members treated white and coloured people as equals. The Threadgoode family employs Big George and Sipsey and treats them as valued members of their team, breaking away from the discriminatory and prevalent practices in the Southern society during that era. Their actions demonstrate their commitment protecting them and advocating for justice, regardless of the racial dynamics involved. The cafe serves both white and coloured customers, defying the racially segregated norms of the time. Idgie, in particular, exemplifies the family's values of equality. She is depicted as an independent and progressive woman who befriends and supports individuals from all walks of life, challenging the racial prejudices and stereotypes that surround her:

She’d serve the colored out the back door. Of course, a lot of people didn't like the idea of her selling food to the coloreds, and she got into some trouble doing it, but she said that nobody was gonna tell her what she could and could not do. Cleo said she stood right up to the Ku Klux Klan all by herself, and wouldn't let them stop her. As good- natured as she was, Idgie turned out to be brave when push came to shove… (Flagg 51).

This fragment shows the segregation institutionalized by Jim Crow Laws in restaurants. Even though the Whistle Stop Cafe was already segregated, as they served black people outside, white supremacists and people that belonged to the Ku Klux Klan, did not even want black people to be attended at the Cafe. Idgie expresses: “You know that if it was up to me, I'd have you come on in the front door and sit at a table, but you know I cain't do that” (Flagg 53), and she would not do it because: “There's a bunch in town that would burn me down in a minute, and I've got to make a living” (Flagg 53). Idgie also adds that if they need something they can come in through the kitchen’s door and ask Sipsey. Sipsey warns her: “You gonna get yourself in a whole lot of trouble wid them Ku Kluxes, and I'm gonna be gone” (Flagg 53). According to Boonyaoudomsart “The white Threadgoode family (…) typifies a unified community that solemnly endorses an idea of togetherness and collectivity regardless of gender, class and race” (23).

Three days later, Grady Kilgore, the local sheriff and part-time railroad detective, went to the Cafe to inform Idgie: “Idgie, you ought not to be selling those niggers food, you know better than that. And there's some boys in this town that's not too happy about it. Nobody wants to eat in the same place that niggers come, it's not right and you just ought not be doin' it” (Flagg 53). Idgie gives her opinion of the Ku Klux Klan: “I think a bunch of grown men getting liquored up and putting sheets on their heads is pretty damn funny” (Flagg 54). In fact, Idgie tells the name of some men she knows are part of the Ku Klux Klan. She is critical and judgemental with Grady, as he had been: “down at the river for three days, drunk as a dog, crying like a baby, 'cause Joe, that old colored man that raised him, died” (Flagg 55), and she does not understand why “They're terrified to sit next to a nigger and have a meal, but they'll eat eggs that came right out of a chicken's ass” (Flagg 55). Idgie emphasizes that children who were raised and loved by black people, grow up to be racist and perpetuate the white supremacy. This is connected to Sofia’s words in *The Color Purple* about being a black maid:

[Eleanor Jane] I’m his mama and I won’t let him be mean to colored. You and whose army? say Sofia. The first word he likely to speak won’t be nothing he learn from you. You telling me I won’t even be able to love my own son, say Miss Eleanor Jane. No, say Sofia. That’s not what I’m telling you. I’m telling you I won’t be able to love your own son. You can love him just as much as you want to. But be ready to suffer the consequences. That’s how the colored live. (Walker 225-226).

Sofia explains that coloured maids teach the kids they raised the values of not being mean towards the black community.

*Fried Green Tomatoes* continues with the appearance of Ruth, who came from Georgia to be in charge of some activities at the church. She was around twenty-two and she is described as: “She had light auburn hair and brown eyes with long lashes, and was so sweet and soft-spoken that people just fell in love with her on first sight. (…) she was just one of those sweet-to-the-bone girls, and the more you knew her, the prettier she got” (Flagg 80). She was an only child that had not been away from home before, so she is described as extremely feminine, innocent and pure. Since the very first moment “Idgie was just fascinated with her” (Flagg 80), and she tried to look ‘masculine’ to Ruth: “coming home with a huge string of fish over her shoulder at the same time that Ruth would be coming across the street from church” (Flagg 81). When a butch lesbian is interested in a femme woman, she usually tries to look as masculine as possible.

Since the beginning of their interactions, Ruth unconsciously modifies Idgie’s behaviour. For example, Idgie almost never had dinner at the table, but when her mother asked Ruth to tell her to sit at the table, she accepted. Her mother, noticing that it was a new and delicate situation, warned their siblings: “Now, children, your sister has a crush, and I don't want one person to laugh at her. Is that understood?” (Flagg 81). Idgie, who got especially ready for the dinner, sat next to Ruth: “All Ruth asked her was if she cared for some more string beans, and she blushed so bad that her ears turned as red as a tomato” (Flagg 81). For Idgie, as well as for Celie, this is the first time they discover the queer alternative, so the nervousness about the new is common. The bond between them got stronger, and they started to spend more time together:

Idgie could make her laugh, and, oh, Idgie would do anything to entertain her. (…) It was a mutual thing. They just took to each other, and you could hear them, sittin' on the swing on the porch, gigglin' all night. Even Sipsey razzed her. She'd see Idgie by herself and say, “That ol’ love bug done bit Idgie” (Flagg 82).

After two months since Ruth arrived, they both went on a picnic. Idgie had planned a date for them, even though Ruth did not know about it as she believed Idgie’s sisters would come. Idgie had prepared a surprise for her, she wanted to show her how she could be covered by bees with a jar full of wild honey: “Ruth, who had been scared out of her wits, slid down the tree onto the ground, and burst into tears. ‘I thought you were dead! Why did you do that? You could have been killed!’” (Flagg 85). Idgie did not expect Ruth’s concern, as she was very proud of her ability with the bees, and this was a representation of the closeness she felt with Ruth: “Just think, Ruth, I never did it for anybody else before. Now nobody in the whole world knows I can do that but you. I just wanted for us to have a secret together, that's all” (Flagg 85-86). Also, Idgie adds some important information that later, after Frank Bennet’s death, makes the reader believe that she murdered him: “You know, Ruth, I'd kill for you. Anybody that would ever hurt you, I'd kill them in a minute and never think twice about it (…) I'd rather kill for love than kill for hate” (Flagg 86). It is at the end of this conversation when Ruth refers to Idgie as ‘bee charmer’, and Idgie “was as happy as anybody who is in love in the summertime can be” (Flagg 87).

Until now, readers only knew about Idgie’s feelings, but as the end of the summer was close, meaning they would have to be separated, Ruth’s sentiments are made explicit to the reader: “all these feelings that she had been trying to hold back came flooding through her, and it was at that second in time that she knew she loved Idgie with all her heart. That's why she had been crying, that day. She had never felt that way before and she knew she probably would never feel that way again” (Flagg 88). Because of the age difference, as Ruth was around twenty-two and Idgie was sixteen, she believes that Idgie has a teenage crush, but her feelings are deeper, and she could not accept Idgie’s proposal of living together: “She had no idea when she was begging Ruth to stay and live with them what she was asking” (Flagg 88). So, Ruth decides: “to go back home and marry Frank Bennett, the young man she was engaged to marry, and to try to be a good wife and mother” (Flagg 88). Ruth assumes that her only possibility is to accept her gender role as the wife and the mother, not even mentioning feelings for Frank Bennett. Her decision is therefore connected to compulsory heterosexuality. She was already engaged to Frank, and she could not stay with the Threadgoode family.

Idgie was driven mad by Ruth’s decision, as she was in love with her. Recognizing the unique influence Ruth hold over Idgie, her mother asks Ruth to talk to her, knowing that Idgie would only listen to her: “Ruth, please go in there and talk to her. She won't let me or her daddy in the room, and everyone else is afraid to go in there. Please, honey, I'm scared she's gonna hurt herself” (Flagg 89). Idgie’s reaction breaking furniture from the room is not a mature ‘feminine’ way of coping with being heartbroken, as aggressiveness is typically associated with gender roles assigned to men. In order to make Idgie feel better, Ruth lies and tells her she loves Frank Bennett and really wants to marry him. They have a toxic argument, culminating in Ruth resorting to physical violence by slapping Idgie: “So Ruth did the hardest thing she had ever done in her life; she just turned around and left, and closed the door behind her” (Flagg 91).

Idgie appears at the club where Buddy used to take her to see Eva. Eva notices that something is wrong, and when someone plays a sad love song, they both cry together: “ldgie would live down at the river, on and off, for the next five years. Eva was always there when needed, just like she had been for Buddy” (Flagg 98). Eva and Idgie have a bond, not only because of Buddy and being both heartbroken, but also because they both act and behave without thinking of social impositions. Idgie, in particular, emerges as a fiercely independent and free-spirited woman who acts on her own terms, pursuing friendships and relationships based on genuine connections rather than social norms. Not only her lesbian relationship with Ruth is “against” social norms but also her deep friendship with Eva. Eva's open-heartedness and warmth are evident in her interactions with others, making her a source of comfort and joy to those around her.

Idgie goes to Ruth’s wedding just to see her because she cannot forget her. She also wants Ruth to know she is there, so she blows her horn when the couple enters into the church. Pretty soon, it is said that Frank Bennet “was a man who got what he wanted, and he wanted Ruth Jamison. Pretty soon, it is said that Frank Bennet “was a man who got what he wanted, and he wanted Ruth Jamison. He'd had just about every available girl around, including, and preferring, the black girls he would take by force while his friends held them down” (Flagg 175). This is the first red flag about Frank, as he uses girls as objects to satisfy his sexual desires. Frank was looking for a “good girl” to marry her, and for him, Ruth was the one: “Ruth was young, pretty, certainly untouched, and needed a place for herself and her mother” (Flagg 175).

Furthermore, it appears that Idgie had a perception that Frank was morally compromised and dishonest, concealing his true nature. So, the nineteen-year-old Idgie embarked on a journey to Valdosta with the intention of ensuring Ruth's well-being, stressing her constant sense of responsibility and commitment to protect Ruth's welfare. She went to her house to tell her: “I still love you and I always will and I still don't care what anybody thinks” (Flagg 178). Frank interrupts them and Idgie just goes away. Ruth also confesses: “There had not been a day when Ruth had not thought about her” (Flagg 178). The description exhibits a stereotypical representation of compulsory heterosexuality, where two women find themselves in a romantic relationship but face restrictions because one of them is already married. This social expectation of adhering to heterosexual norms creates difficulties on their relation. Consequently, their love is met with limitations, and they reluctantly settle for brief encounters. The unmarried individual assumes a more substantial responsibility for maintaining the relationship. This makes a big difference with T*he Color Purple*. Celie had been married since the beginning of her relationship with Shug, but this was not an obstacle to be with her. At the same time, Shug was also having sexual encounters with men, and then she married Grady, which was not an impediment as well. Shug shares with Eva Bates that she could have sex with many men, but when she loved she was strictly a one-woman woman[[4]](#footnote-4).

Two years later, Idgie comes back to spy on Frank Bennet, and a barber tells her that he beats his wife: “He's blackened her eye and knocked her down the stairs, and once, he broke her arm” (Flagg 188). Until now, Idgie did not know anything negative leading her to confront him directly with threats. However, following her departure, Frank said: “That boy must be crazy” (Flagg 189), believing Idgie was a man because of her appearance, reinforcing the idea of the butch lesbian.

One day, Idgie received a page of the Bible from the King James Version: Ruth1:16-20: “And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, *or* to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people *shall be* my people, and thy God my God” (Flagg 191). Idgie asked her mother for the meaning, and she said: “I think tomorrow you and your brothers and Big George better go over there and get that girl, don't you? You know you're not going to be fit to live with till you do” (Flagg 191). Idgie’s mother, as a member of the Threadgoode family is not judgemental at all, she is a supportive mother who encourages her daughter to fight for love, behaving as a true ally.

Ninny, from the present, explains that Ruth told her how Frank got drunk on their wedding night and raped her: “while the whole time she was begging him to stop (…) Then he started forcing himself on the poor colored girls he had working for him. Ruth said one little girl was only twelve years old” (Flagg 192). Along with sexism and racism, classism is also present in Frank’s choices. He chooses women that cannot be a threat to his reputation and cannot protect themselves. He uses and pursues any characteristic that he could use to invalidate women in case they speak up. This is similar to Alphonso’s imposition of silence on Celie, as if women do not speak up, they cannot be accused of anything. And in Frank’s case, even if they do speak up, he had chosen the ones that nobody would believe.

Ruth believed Frank was violent towards her because he “felt the love inside she had for Idgie” (Flagg 195), and she believed it was a punishment as if loving Idgie was wrong. Frank's apparent lack of affection towards Ruth becomes evident, and without Idgie's love and constant displays of affection and support, Ruth would continue to be trapped in her abusive marriage. The turning point that makes Ruth abandon Frank, is her mother, who after not speaking in a week, said: “You get away from him. . . . Ruth, promise me. He's the devil. I've seen God, and he's the devil” (Flagg 195), and that afternoon she died. So, she sends the page of the Bible to Idgie to save her. If Idgie was a boy, the fact that she went to Ruth’s house to save her from the devil husband, would be regarded as the classical scene of the prince saving his beloved princess. So, this would be the classical scene of the masculine princess saving her beloved princess.

Frank told everyone that Evelyn had gone crazy after her mother’s death and “He had been forced to have her committed to an insane asylum, outside of Atlanta” (Flagg 197). If people knew that Ruth was able to escape and he was not able to stop her, it would have hurt his masculinity and his honour. Also, he uses the argument that she was mentally unstable, to invalidate everything she would try to explain so that nobody would believe it. Frank's false narrative allows him to maintain control over the situation and further manipulate those around him. By spreading the story of Ruth's supposed insanity, he aims to damage her reputation and discredit her, effectively silencing any potential opposition or investigation into her actual fate. By inventing a story about Ruth's supposed insanity, Frank perpetuates harmful stereotypes about mental health issues. The possibility that he decided to talk about a mental asylum, could be related to Ruth’s sexuality. In the context of the story, Frank becomes aware of Ruth's affectionate and emotional connection with Idgie, which challenges the traditional heterosexual expectations and norms of their time. As a result, Frank could perceive Ruth's feelings for Idgie as a potential threat to their marriage and his own masculinity. To exert control and maintain dominance, he resorts to manipulative tactics, inventing an excuse to Ruth’s disappearance. By linking Ruth's sexuality to the possibility of mental instability, Frank may attempt to reinforce social norms and maintain his perceived authority within the relationship.

When they arrived at Whistle Stop, Idgie’s parents give ‘their approval’ to Ruth: “Poppa and I just want you to know that we think of you as one of the family now, and we couldn't be happier for our little girl to have such a sweet companion as you” (Flagg 199). The word companion here, like terms such as ‘Wellesley marriage’ or a ‘Boston marriage’, denotes the cohabitation of two women devoid of male support or involvement. Of course, in some of these cases, friendship was the main reason to cohabitate. But these terms, were a cover for many lesbian relationships, as they allowed women to cohabitate in privacy without the persistence of marrying a man.

When Ruth left, she did not know she was pregnant, and the first time Idgie’s mother saw the newborn she said: “Oh look, Idgie, he's got your hair!” (Flagg 192). Even though Buddy Jr. did not have Idgie’s genetic information, from the beginning, he is treated as their son, by both Ruth and Idgie. His name is also very meaningful, and although it is not said, it was obviously chosen in honour of Idgie’s brother. Idgie’s father’s words about the situation are especially meaningful: “now that she was going to be responsible for Ruth and a baby, she'd better figure out what she wanted to do, and gave her five hundred dollars to start a business with. That's what she bought the cafe with” (Flagg 192-193). Now Idgie was the head of the family, and she was responsible for them. Idgie's role as the head of the family becomes even more evident as she assumes the role of protector and provider, shouldering the responsibilities that come with nurturing a family unit. At the time, assuming the role of the family's head was an uncommon occurrence for women, rendering the possibility of two women forming a family unit with one assuming the position of the head even more exceptional. Idgie's nonconforming gender behaviour and her rejection of conventional feminine roles challenge these norms. In this manner, Idgie emerges as a figure of strength, resilience, and leadership, exemplifying the qualities of a devoted and responsible family leader.

When Detective Curtis Smoote went to the café because of the disappearance of Frank Bennet, he continuously referred to Idgie as “girlie girl” sarcastically, because she was not. This term is often employed to describe women who conform to traditional roles of femininity, displaying qualities considered conventionally feminine or delicate. Detective Smoote, influenced by prevailing gender norms, utilized this term to assert a power dynamic based on gender distinctions.

When Buddy Jr. lost his arm, it was Idgie who dealt with the situation. She prepared a grave for Buddy Jr.’s arm, and she was the one who started calling him Stump: “Idgie raised him that way, to be tough and take hard knocks” (Flagg 108). Idgie introduces Stump to ‘masculine’ activities: “he said that his Aunt Idgie, who helped raise him, taught him everything he knows about football” (Flagg 261). Stump always refers to Idgie as “Aunt Idgie” (Flagg 221). She also teaches him essential values. Stump liked Peggy, and he was not acting correctly, so Idgie told him: “You were just kidding, huh? What you were doing is standing around, trying to be a big shot in front of all your friends, is what you were doing” (Flagg 263). Idgie does not want him to become a man with fragile masculinity who behaves a ‘cocky’ when he is with his group of friends:

You told her to come back when she had grown some tits and ask you again. Isn't that right? (…) Aunt Idgie, I was just kidding (…) Your mother and I didn't raise you to be an ignorant, knothead redneck. How would you feel if somebody talked like that to your mother? What if some girl told you to come back when you grew a penis? (Flagg 263).

This is also an important moment because Idgie knows something is bothering Stump. He is scared about sex: “Well, I’m kinda afraid I’ll fall on her or lose my balance because of my arm and maybe I just won't know how to do it right. You know, I might hurt her or something . . . I don't know” (Flagg 266). Idgie summarizes the real problem: “You're afraid some girl might laugh, aren't you?” (Flagg 266). Significantly Stump chooses Idgie to have ‘the talk’ about sex, and Idgie reinforces Stump’s masculinity. She takes him to talk to Eva Bates, as Idgie believes she is the best one to teach Stump. Furthermore, when Ruth died because of cancer, Idgie was treated as her close family along with Stump and she continued taking care of him. From the beginning Idgie assumed the masculine role of the family. Idgie's relationship with Ruth constitutes a non-traditional family unit based on love, care, and mutual support. It is non-traditional because they are not married, and they are two women. Her sexuality contributes to the formation of these strong bonds, as it allows her to connect authentically and passionately with those she loves, redefining the concept of family beyond the traditional nuclear unit.   
After Ruth's death, Idgie becomes Stump's only close family and continues as his maternal figure, with the two living together despite not being genetically related.

Another example that reinforces Idgie’s masculinity is the character of Railroad Bill. Railroad Bill was a famous legendary bandit: “They say he was a colored man that would sneak on the trains and throw food and coal off the government supply trains at night, and the colored people that lived along the tracks would come and get the stuff at daybreak and run home with it as fast as they could” (Flagg 123). Nobody could find who Railroad Bill was, even though the reward was constantly going up. There were different opinions about him, as for some he was a thieve, and for others, especially for the black community, a hero: “I guess that Railroad Bill is about the bravest man that ever lived, huh, Aunt Idgie?” (Flagg 130). This black ‘man’ that everyone was looking for was Idgie: “it had been my Aunt Idgie jumping them trains, all along” (Flagg 332). Nobody would believe that Railroad Bill could be a woman. Moreover, it shows Idgie’s ability to trespass both gender and racial boundaries. “Railroad Bill” is a figure rooted in folklore and history, often associated with acts of rebellion and resistance against authority figures. By embodying this legendary figure, she creates a layer of anonymity that allows her to navigate potentially dangerous situations and challenges with a degree of obscurity, reflecting her own rebellious nature and resistance against social norms, expectations and gender roles that seek to confine her. It also underscores Idgie’s protective instincts, as she assumes this identity to safeguard those she cares about. Just as the legendary outlaw protected the oppressed, Idgie employs this persona to shield her loved ones from harm and injustice.

One of the most pronounced differences between *The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* lies in their respective treatment of lesbian relationships. The two novels adopt distinct approaches in portraying and addressing such relationships. On the one hand, in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* the treatment of Idgie and Ruth's relationship, besides being very subtle, is based on displays of affection. Idgie and Ruth's relationship is built upon sentimental and emotional gestures, seen in their shared activities like collecting honey from bees and Idgie's rescue of Ruth from her oppressive marriage. These instances underscore the depth of their bond and the genuine affection they share. Their entire relationship is filled with romantic gestures, and there is no physical closeness of any kind: no kissing, no hugging, no sexual scenes.

In contrast with *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, *The Color Purple*’s representation of the lesbian relationship is different, particularly in the depiction of Shug and Celie’s bond. Within *The Color Purple*, the emotional dynamics between Shug and Celie are explicitly articulated through actual actions, specifically in Shug's consistent support for Celie. Their relationship is characterized by a pronounced emphasis on sexual intimacy, with Celie's sexual awakening and exploration intricately tied to her connection with Shug. Consequently, Shug motivates Celie's self-discovery, leading her to experience sexual pleasure and its broader implications.

Another important difference between both novels is that Shug and Celie conform a black lesbian relationship, while Idgie and Ruth are white lesbians. This introduces relevant intersectional dynamics in the novel *The Color Purple*. Intersectionality refers to how different aspects of a person's identity, such as race, gender, and sexuality, intersect and interact to shape their experiences and social positions. In the context of the novel, being black and lesbian adds layers of complexity to the characters’ lives. For Shug and Celie, their identity as black women in a racist and patriarchal society influences how they navigate their relationship and sexuality. They not only face challenges related to their sexual orientation but also confront racial discrimination and the intersecting oppressions faced by black women during that era. The novel highlights the struggles of black women who were often marginalized, oppressed, and subjected to systemic injustices, including violence and objectification.

On the other hand, Idgie and Ruth's experiences as white lesbians also reveal different aspects of intersectionality. Although they might not face racial discrimination to the same extent as Shug and Celie, they still encounter social expectations and norms related to gender and sexuality. The expectations of conforming heteronormative standards and traditional gender roles within their white community might affect how they express and negotiate their relationship. By presenting both black and white lesbian relationships, the novel addresses the diverse and varied experiences of queer women within different racial and social contexts. It showcases how intersectionality shapes their identities, relationships, and the challenges they face in a world that often seeks to constrain and oppress non-conforming identities.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of lesbian relationships in *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* by Fannie Flagg offers a profound exploration of love, resilience, and self-development. Both works beautifully capture the complexities of human connections and challenge conventional expectations, presenting intimate and powerful portrayals of lesbian love.

Our examination of *The Color Purple* explores the transformative journey of Celie and Shug Avery, whose relationship transcends the boundaries of gender and social norms. Their love blossoms into a profound understanding of themselves and the liberation from oppressive forces. Walker's portrayal of the themes of race, gender, and sexual identity, creates a narrative that celebrates the strength of female bonds. Similarly, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* provides a heartfelt exploration of the connection between Idgie Threadgoode and Ruth Jamison. Within the constraints of the 1930s Southern society, the novel delicately provides a description of their relationship, highlighting the power of love and loyalty in times of adversity. Fannie Flagg's portrayal of these characters serves as a testament to the resilience of love.

Throughout this thesis, the objective of analysing the description of lesbian relationships in *The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*, with a brief comparison, has been successfully achieved. The examination of characters, their interactions, and the social context within each work has provided a deeper understanding of how lesbian love is depicted or challenged in the face of prevailing social norms and prejudices. By analysing the representation of lesbian relationships in *The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* *at the Whistle Stop Cafe,* this thesis has contributed valuable awareness to the broader discourse on LGBTQ+ representation in literature. This exploration has highlighted the progressive aspects of the works, illustrating diverse identities and relationships within their respective historical contexts, adding the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality.

The significance of these representations cannot be understated. Both works challenge prevailing attitudes towards LGBTQ+ relationships, fostering empathy and understanding for marginalized communities. By breaking barriers and defying stereotypes, *The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* have become literary milestones, shaping the discourse on lesbian relationships in literature and beyond. However, it is essential to recognize the limitations in these portrayals. Both works were products of their time, and while they introduced groundbreaking perspectives, some aspects may not fully align with contemporary understandings of LGBTQ+ experiences. The subtle implications in *Fried Green Tomatoes* leave room for broader exploration, potentially leading to varied interpretations. Despite these limitations, the enduring impact of *The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* on LGBTQ+ representation is undeniable. Their narratives have inspired readers and viewers alike, encouraging conversations about love, acceptance, and the power of human connections across boundaries.

To conclude this analysis, it is clear that these works have opened doors for greater inclusivity and understanding. The portrayal of lesbian relationships in literature has come a long way, and the journey continues. Future research can build upon these foundations, delving deeper into the intricacies of LGBTQ+ representation and its impact on cultural perceptions. In a world where representation matters, *The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* stand as beacons of hope, reminding us of the strength found in love and the significance of authentic storytelling. May their legacies continue to inspire future generations to embrace diversity, celebrate love in all its forms, and challenge societal norms for a more inclusive and empathetic world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"butch, n. and adj." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2023, www.oed.com/view/Entry/25321.

"femme, n. and adj." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2023, www.oed.com/view/Entry/69200.

"queer, adj.1." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2023, www.oed.com/view/Entry/156236.

“Alice Walker.” *Poetry Foundation*, www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alice-walker.

Abbandonato, Linda. “"A View from ‘Elsewhere’ ": Subversive Sexuality and the Rewriting of the Heroine’s Story in The Color Purple.” *PMLA*, vol. 106, no. 5, October 1991, pp. 1106–15. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/462683.

Abernethy, Michael. “Fried Green Tomatoes in the Rubyfruit Jungle.” *PopMatters*, 9 June 2017, www.popmatters.com/fried-green-tomatoes-in-the-rubyfruit-jungle-2495389366.html.

Barker, Meg-John, and Scheele, Julia. *Queer: A Graphic History*, London, Icon Books Ltd, 2016.

Barnes, Rebecca. “Daughter of Bilitis.” Encyclopedia Britannica, 20 March 2023, www.britannica.com/topic/Daughters-of-Bilitis.

Berlant, Lauren. “Race, Gender, and Nation in ‘The Color Purple.’” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 14, no. 4, Summer 1988, pp. 831–59. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343674.

Biography.com Editors “Alice Walker Biography.” *The Biography.com website,* 3 April 2014, www.biography.com/authors-writers/alice-walker.

Boonyaoudomsart, Natthapol. “Away from Home Are Some and I—Homeplace in Fannie Flagg’s Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café: A Black Feminist Lens”, *English Language and Literature Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 3 February 2018, pp. 20-27. *Canadian Center of Science and Education*, <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v8n1p20>.

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Alice Walker." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 12 May 2023, www.britannica.com/biography/Alice-Walker.

Chatraporn, Surapeepan. “The Defiance of Patriarchy and The Creation of a Female Literary Tradition in Contemporary World Popular Fiction.” *Manusya : Journal of Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1 January 2016, pp. 35-53. *BRILL*, https://doi.org/10.1163/26659077-00903002.

eNotes Editorial. "Fannie Flagg – Biography." *eNotes.com*, ENotes Editorial, 6 May 2015, [www.enotes.com/topics/fannie-flagg](https://www.enotes.com/topics/fannie-flagg).

Flagg, Fannie. *Fried Green Tomatoes Whistle Stop Cafe*, United Kingdom,Vintage U.K. Random House, 1992.

Gumbs, Alexis Pauline, et al. “Alice Walker Official Biography.” *Alice Walker the official website*, alicewalkersgarden.com/about/.

History.com Editors. “Gay Rights” *History*, A&E Television Networks, 28 June 2017, 27 April 2023, www.history.com/topics/gay-rights/history-of-gay-rights.

History.com Editors. “Stonewall Riots” *History*, A&E Television Networks, 31 May 2017, 23 June 2023, www.history.com/topics/gay-rights/the-stonewall-riots.

Kingsbury, Pam. “Fannie Flagg.” *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, 20 September 2009, encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/fannie-flagg/.

Leath, Ashley. “Fannie Flagg Talks About the Joy of Returning to the Whistle Stop Café.” *Country Living*, 19 October 2020, www.countryliving.com/entertaining/a34361248/fannie-flagg-whistle-stop-cafe-finding-hope-in-uncertain-times/.

Lennon, Erica, and Mistler, Brian J. “Cisgenderism.” *TSQ*, 1 May 2014, vol. 1, no. 1-2, pp. 63-64. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399623>.

Lewis, Christopher S. “Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker’s ‘The Color Purple.’” *Rocky Mountain Review*, vol. 66, no. 2, Fall 2012, pp. 158–75. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41763555.

McEwan, Neil. *The Color Purple, Alice Walker*, London, York Notes Advanced, 2001.

Musanga, Terrence, and Theophilus Mukhuba. “Toward the Survival and Wholeness of the African American Community: A Womanist Reading of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982).” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 50, no. 4, May 2019, pp. 388–400. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26641537.

Nestle, Joan. “Butches, Lies, and Feminism by Jeanne Cordova.” *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, Joan Nestle, London, Alyson Publication, Inc., 1992.

Olsen, Billie. “Is the Term “Queer” Offensive?” *LGBTQ and ALL*, Billie Olsen, 19 January 2022, www.lgbtqandall.com/is-the-term-queer-offensive/.

Parker, Melissa. “Fannie Flagg Interview: Southern Author on “The Whole Town’s Talking” and Chance Meeting with Harper Lee.” *Smashing Interviews Magazine*, Interviews Authors, 5 December 2016, smashinginterviews.com/interviews/authors/fannie-flagg-interview-southern-author-on-the-whole-towns-talking-and-chance-meeting-with-harper-lee.

Reynolds, Susan Salter. “Fannie Flagg: Voice of Middle America.” *Publishers Weekly,* 21 September 1998, pp. 30–31.

Southern Living, “Fanie Flagg: A Southern Storyteller | Southern Living.” *YouTube*, 17 December 2016, youtube.com/watch?v=2JvgtBtu\_04.

Them. “InQueery: The REAL Meaning of the World ‘Butch’.” *Them*, August 21 2018, www.them.us/story/inqueery-butch.

Tucker, Lindsey. “Alice Walker’s The Color Purple: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text.” *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 22, no. 1, Spring 1988, pp. 81–95. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2904151.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, London, A Phoenix Paperback, 2005, pp. xi-xii.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*, Great Britain, The Women’s Press Classic, 2001.

Wygant, Bobbie. “Fannie Flagg “Fried Green Tomatoes” 1991 – Bobbie Wygant Archive”.” *YouTube*, 15 December 2020, youtube.com/watch?v=oK1AlbmpCdU.

Urofsky, Melvin I.. “Jim Crow law.” *Encyclopaedia* *Britannica*, 30 June 2023, www.britannica.com/event/Jim-Crow-law.

History.com Editors. “Ku Klux Klan.” *Historia*, A&E Television Networks, 20 April 2023, www.history.com/topics/19th-century/ku-klux-klan.

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Ku Klux Klan". *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 3 July 2023, www.britannica.com/topic/Ku-Klux-Klan.

1. For more information about these raids and police harassment watch *A Secret Love* by Chris Bolan. In this documental, Yvonne Zipter says: “Bars that were suspected being lesbian bars were frequently raided and if women didn’t have on three articles of women’s clothing, they could be arrested and thrown in jail” (17:29). Marge Summit, an activist that was in some raids, adds: “If you went to the bars, they would check you with a flashlight, and you came out of the bar, if you had fly-front pants on, you went in the paddy wagon. You were impersonating a man” (17:49). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. "Womanist" is a term coined by Walker and defined at the very beginning on her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose,* published 21st January 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “The term *compulsory heterosexuality* originated with Gayle Rubin: her influential essay "The Traffic in Women" synthesizes readings of Freud, Lacan, Marx, and Levi-Strauss to account for our enculturation into the sex-gender system” (Abbandonato 1113). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is an adaptation of: “she had slept with whomever she pleased, whenever she pleased; but no matter what anybody thought or said, when she loved you, she was strictly a one-man woman” (Flagg 95). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)