NEGOTIATING SPACE AND IDENTITY IN ALICE WALKER'S "THE COLOR PURPLE"[1]

***Abstract**: This paper aims at exploring the inextricable relationship between identity and location in Alice Walker's* "The Color Purple". *The spaces that the protagonist of the novel occupies deconstruct and reconstruct her Self, ultimately carving out a new identity. In* "The Color Purple"*, the house has the role of an inner monument that can mark one's place in time and the power of connecting with Celie's innermost self in its extremely dramatic but also nurturing and enchanting ways. Not only does the domestic space trigger painful memories of debilitating experiences but it also offers emotional healing, culminating with the main character's recognition of the value of a genuine home. If initially, for Celie, home does not represent the safe haven that shelters the members of the family against the evil forces that control the world, in the end of the novel, through the agency of spatial relocations, a sense of belonging is attained.*

***Keywords**: house, home, identity.*

There is a great deal of subtle truth in the English saying "A house is not a home". Home is a concept whereas a house is the manifestation of this concept. House and home are not equivalent because there is only one true home ascribed to each individual similar to the one period of time that marks the existence of each one of us such as childhood.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard observes that each house one inhabits throughout life has symbolic constituents of the idea of home: "For our house is the corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word. If we look at it intimately, the humblest dwelling has beauty." (Bachelard, 1969: 4)

The house can also correspond to certain layers of the psyche. As a prerequisite in his topoanalysis, Bachelard starts by envisioning the psyche as a place, and the house as an extension of that place. Both the house and consciousness serve as a repository of memories. Hence, by exploring the topoanalysis of these places, one would be able to make a representation of the topography of the self, because the latter is a reflection of our physical environment: "To come to terms with the inner life, it is not enough to constitute a biography or autobiography in narrative terms; one must also, and more crucially, do a topoanalysis of the places one has inhabited or experienced". (Casey, 1997:289) In this sense, we could all include ourselves in such an analysis based on our memories as a means of exploring our psyche. According to Gaston Bachelard's topoanalysis, the house is considered to be a *felicitous space*, an interrelation between one's inner space and the house one inhabits, representing the inner climate of an individual.

It is probably impossible to apply theories of space to a literary work without making references to Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, especially when it comes the definition of home as "a space for cheer and intimacy, space that is supposed to condense and defend intimacy" (Bachelard, 1969:48). While granting recognition to negative images of home that could have been used for the purpose of his analysis,

[1] Maria-Magdalena Făurar, University of Craiova, magda_faurar@yahoo.com.

*This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/CPP107/DMI1.5/S/78421, Project ID 78421 (2010), co-financed by the European Social Fund – Investing in People, within the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013.

BDD-A5947 © 2011 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:04 UTC)

Bachelard does not make any investigation regarding the existence of "hostile spaces" or the "space of hatred and combat" (Bachelard, 1969:xxxvi introduction), further asserting that such destructive space "can only be studied in the context of impassioned subject matter and apocalyptic images" (Bachelard, 1969:xxxvi). Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple,* takes cognizance of the catastrophic experiences of the home, depicting a crippling space used to create a world of conflict, characterized by hostility and lack of communication of frustrated individuals who live in a disordered universe.

In an attempt to analyze the enclosed space of the house that Celie lives in, a sheltering space by definition, one can notice the fact that in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the interior becomes a place of hostility, hatred and violence, which confines the main character rather than offering comfort. Therefore, in *The Color Purple*, the home does not represent the innermost jewel box of the female-protagonist's being, that is supposed to offer a place of equanimity and imperturbability in which the self would be (re)discovered undisturbed by the tumult and disorder of the outside world, as described by Bachelard in his work on *felicitous space* that shapes his discussion of the home. In this case, the home is experienced at its extreme, that is an oppressive and suffocating presence. For Celie, home signifies violence, rejection, exclusion and secrecy as it includes a tormented subject reduced to silence and unprotected from intrusion and impurity.

Neither her childhood house nor her marital house functions as a home for Celie, a home that would provide an escape or a backstage in order to allow the private self to develop without any restrictions. Her self is invaded first by her stepfather and later by her husband by crossing the border abusively into her intimate spatial domains. In such circumstances, Celie is left with no integrity and is dispossessed by self-expression for her intimate space has been desecrated and the atmosphere poisoned. Thus, the space of the house may be regarded as a cloistered universe which suggests her inability to communicate as well as her alienation towards self and others. In this unit, isolating instances of conflict that Celie experiences are ascribed to the house she lives in, so the interior becomes hostile towards the individual, who goes through certain stages of metamorphosis.

There is a subjective feature attached to each place that an individual experiences. Moreover, the fictional setting has a compelling shaping potential, as pointed out by Eudora Welty in her work "Place of Fiction": "Place has the most delicate control over character […] by confining character it defines it [….] Place in fiction is the named, identified, […] gathering spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced, in the novel's progress". (Welty, 1979:122) Apparently, Welty calls attention to the fact that place is a personalized space, specifying that both the individual and the space are reciprocally defined as an effect of their interaction.

Consequently, (re)locations have strong repercussions on Celie's identity as they can result in changes in character. Therefore, Celie's body as well as her inner state depend on and are constrained by the shifting locations that take place in the novel. Celie embarks on a progressive journey of domestic sequences that have the power to shape her identity; from her natal home - a depraved location marked by an abusive, incestuous relationship, to another degrading situation as she is forced to enter into an exploitative marriage, then as a positive twist of fate Celie finds herself in both a sympathetic, affectionate friendship and amorous relationship - a symbolic location, namely in the caring arms of Shug Avery (her husband's mistress), and she ultimately steps into her own home that is wedded with her inner state of mind and her revived body.

BDD-A5947 © 2011 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:04 UTC)

At the beginning of the novel, Celie's family home is a place of perversion, even rape by her wretched stepfather, and separation, as she is forced to part from her mother as well as from her own incestuous children. Celie describes the room she and her sister used to live in: "the girls had a little room...off to itself, connected to the house by a little plank walk" (Walker, 1982:116). What should be a territory of safety, a place for nurturance and intimacy, a micro-environment where the self should be perfected becomes a place of abusive manipulation. The bedroom itself is a decayed blockhouse but with no loopholes in it and the entrenchments look out just as menacingly because what should be a sacred haven for the young girl is effaced by the stepfather's violation and perverted actions. Therefore, Celie's room is a space of resistance associated with her inner state which is influenced by the overwhelming hostility of the environment she lives in; at this point in life she is unable to find a proper resort or merely imagine one in the face of misery and maltreatment.

Her marital house is another site of continued tribulation as it is not very different from the initial house she lived in and it leaves no opportunity for Celie to break out of the pattern of abuse. The change of location due to an arranged marriage between her stepfather Alphonso and her husband indicates a perpetuation and of course an aching prolongation of the sexual assaults and domestic violence that Celie has to endure, which marks her disempowerment.

As the author affords little room for her main character to breathe and due to the hostility of the space, Celie remains unshielded from the dangers. She has never experienced the protective characteristic attributed to a home and the shifting locations from one hostile space to another lead to emotional instability within her for the relationship between the character and the setting she is placed in with an emphasis on the interactions within the dwelling, generates and maintains the feeling of isolation, anxiety and alienation in the cloistered space of the house.

Shug Avery's arrival in the house for recuperation is a turning point in Celie's life for it will provide other possibilities rather than mere survival in an oppressive environment for her. Celie welcomes her husband's mistress in the house, remaining in the same wordless setting imposed on her by the two men in her life and the home for "It not my house" (Walker, 1982:47). Shug is exhibiting a repellent and critical attitude towards Celie, as pointed out at her appearance in the house when she looks at Celie with her "Eyes Big, Glossy. Feverish. And mean" (Walker, 1982:48), telling her in a very condescending manner, with no twinge of conscience whatsoever "You sure is ugly, she say, like she ain't believed it" (Walker, 1982:48) Although the mistress is more at home and more articulate than the wife, Celie is quickly gaining Shug's empathy and the two women establish an unbreakable sisterly connection. Due to Shug's mothering nourishing influence, Celie's sense of self is gradually awakened.

It is noteworthy to mention that before physically meeting, nursing and loving Shug Avery, Celie fantasizes and dreams of Shug, an imaginative spatial movement triggered by a photograph of the blues singer that Celie has: "An all night long I stare at it. An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery. She be dress to kill, whirling and laughing." (Walker, 1982: 7). The fantasy space is there to compensate to a certain extent for the lack of a "space of cheer and intimacy" (Bachelard, 1969:48), that Celie should experience in a realistic sense in the home she inhabits. She is unconsciously in a constant search of a felicitous space even if that means imagining or dreaming of one and this alternative space is a perfect substitute that paves the way for self-access in a patriarchal home and society in which she feels physically compelled and emotionally inhibited. The photograph and the thought of Shug Avery make suffering more bearable

BDD-A5947 © 2011 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:04 UTC)

for Celie during her wedding night "I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him" (Walker, 1982: 13). Thus, the surreal dimension of space has a protective and alleviating role for the character in the novel, a frustrated individual, who is in permanent conflict with herself and with the hostile environment surrounding her. By accessing this phantasmagorical space, our protagonist is able to create a world of total refuge and relief, where she bears no hostility; therefore alienation reaches its climax when the dream atmosphere is (re)established due to the delirious sources of inspiration. In other words, erotic angst and alienation, translated into a loss of emotional identity in its paroxysmal phase, leading to the dissolution of the ego are obliterated as Celie is able to escape into her feminine imaginative space. Ultimately, the fantasy space may be perceived as a stage in the series of spatial movements moving towards self-actualization.

Nevertheless, Shug represents a mystical presence drawn by Celie's desire and symbolically she becomes the space that Celie needs and can find refuge in, just like she writes in one of her letter: "My life stop when I left home, I think. But then I think again. It stop with Mr.__ maybe, but start up again with Shug" (Walker, 1982:85). As stated, her own being is abstracted; her erotic subjectivity is annihilated by its location in a patriarchal context which also depersonalizes the main character, placing her into nothingness. However, the search is no longer a futile one and home is no longer an eternally elusive prey when Celie finds herself in Shug's tender arms, the life-generating womb, the shelter offering protection from the chaos in the outer world. Furthermore, it is the mistress who functions as a safe haven and feminine space in which Celie is free to "re(claim) her physical body and sexuality for herself rather than to view them as something taken by others. This (re)claiming of her body leads also to the (re)claiming of the Spirit within her" (Thyreen, 1999: 57).

In the final pages of the novel, subsequent to Alphonso's death, Celie inherits a house, land and a store. She is taken aback by the overwhelming news and empowered by the long-term outlook: "Just to think about having my own house enough to scare me" (Walker, 1982:251). The visit she pays to her childhood home on Easter is a crucial moment in the novel displaying a wonderful interlude where the chimerical and the ordinary are interwoven in the recurring uniqueness of the moment:

> The first thing us notice soon as we turn into the lane is how green everything is, like even though the ground everywhere else not warmed up good, Pa's land is warm and ready to go. Then all along the road there's Easter lilies and jonquils and daffodils and all kinds of little early wildflowers. Then us notice all the birds singing they little cans off, all up and down the hedge, that itself is putting out little yellow flowers smell like Virginia creeper. It all so different from the rest of the country us drive through, it make us real quiet. I know this sound funny, Nettie, but even the sun seemed to stand a little longer over our heads. (Walker, 1982: 184-185)

Celie has no recollection of this bloom and beauty springing from the same hostile space of her childhood. She finds the atmosphere and the house on the hill transformed: "a big yellow two story house with green shutters and a steep green single roof [just like] some white person's house". The same place is not a black women's confinement anymore for it now is a place of contentment that encompasses aspects of the American Dream. In an analogy, we witness an inverted Paradise myth – Celie is cast out in the outer world, her family, home and even her existence are denied. The Edenic space is concealed and prohibited, all her knowledge as well as its availability are suppressed. However, she recognizes it as Eden from the outside due to the major

BDD-A5947 © 2011 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:04 UTC)

spiritual transformations she undergoes throughout her life and her access into the garden is eventually earned; she is finally "laid in the cradle of the house" (Bachelard, 1969: 7), not before but after being abandoned in the world, as life should have begun for her "enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house" (Bachelard, 1969: 7). The place she inherited is not an escapist fantasy but a utopian land of freedom and beauty on earth that she is about to inhabit for the rest of her life along with her dearest family and friends.

Significantly, the childhood house that she owns now has been altered, because the stepfather "got an Atlanta architect to design it" (Walker, 1982: 252). Shug and Celie use cedar sticks in order to cast away the painful memories and the evil: "chasing out all the evil and making a place for good" (Walker, 1982: 253) Therefore, as an aspect of the cyclic nature of things, she returns to her childhood home, which any individual craves for in an attempt to regain the past, now that the evil is exonerated, making it a good place to live in and awaiting for the new family to come along – Celie, her sister Nettie and her husband, the children and Shug. Thus, the new home, now free of abuse and exploitation, is a place for the dear ones sharing their love. Celie is finally introduced to familial interrelationships that emanate love and affection rather than physical and spiritual pollution.

However, it is her own body that Celie has to come to terms with in order to reach self-recognition and the first step in doing so is to embrace her abused body and to absorb Shug's therapeutic touches. As Danielle Russell asserts in her article: "Celie has never been at home in her own skin. The disconnection from her body is a direct legacy of abuse [...] More than pleasure, the act of intimacy affords a lesson in self-love which leads to a reconnection with the self—the most intimate of homes."(Russell, 2009: 206). The female-protagonist finally learns to acknowledge the significance of an authentic home by beginning to accept and delight into her own sexuality, loving herself unabashedly, feeling at home in her own body and accepting a flexible concept of family.

The interrelation between the individual and the whim of locations Celie is subjected to is meaningful in the sense that the spaces that Celie occupies have the power to bring about redemption. Therefore, the spaces she experiences, either domestic, spiritual or indulged in fantasies, although eliciting inhumane experiences, they also represent an essential means to convey the engulfing element of transformation which integrates physical healing and spiritual salvation.

Bibliography

Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space* translated by Maria Jolas. Boston, Beacon Press, 1969.

Casey, Edward S., The Fate of Place: a Philosophical History. Berkeley, University of California, 1997.

Russell, Danielle, "Homeward Bound: Transformative Spaces in The Color Purple", in Kheven LaGrone (ed.), *Alice Walker's The Color Purple,* Amsterdam/New York, Rodopi, 2009. 195-207.

Thyreen, Jeannine, "Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: Redefining God and (Re)Claiming the Spirit Within." *Christianity and Literature* 49.1 (1999): 49-66.

Walker, Alice, *The Color Purple*. New York, Pocket Books, 1982.

Welty, Eudora, *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews*. New York, Random House, 1979.

BDD-A5947 © 2011 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:56:04 UTC)