Review of *Am I Blue*, by Alice Walker


By Jemimah Halbert

Alice Walker is an African-American author, activist and vegan. Her work is widely acclaimed and includes the novel *The Colour Purple*, for which she won the Pulitzer Prize. Her work is focused on the themes of Civil Rights, the treatment and experiences of African-Americans, and also the experiences of women as a minority. Many of these factors are conveyed in her essay *Am I Blue*, written in 1986 in the style of a short story. It tells the tale of her relationship with a horse named Blue, and through the unfolding of this relationship, Walker examines wider issues on the themes of social justice and how humans treat animals and each other.

The story begins when the protagonist befriends a horse named Blue, who runs free in a five-acre meadow near her house in the mountains. Pivotal to their friendship is an apple tree growing on the other side of Blue’s fence. Sharing the apples every day forges a bond between the two. One day a brown mare is put in the meadow with Blue. Upon her impregnation the mare is taken away again, leaving Blue, in the protagonist’s eyes, blue. Through this incident the author observes that humans have the capacity and propensity to treat animals, and each other, with indifferent cruelty. She points out incidents such as white settlers who considered Native Americans to be animals, the treatment of slaves in early America, and the treatment of women and children throughout history. Walker links these and other points with the plight of Blue, raising him as a material example of man’s indifferent cruelty. Strong emotions are conveyed to the reader about this issue through the author’s style and use of audience engagement.
Walker conveys strong emotion for these issues by assigning Blue human attributes. For example, she says that “....I had forgotten the depth of feeling one could see in horse’s eyes.” When the brown mare has been with Blue for a few weeks “...there was a different look in his eyes.... of independence, of self-possession, of inalienable horseness.” Here Walker assigns Blue many complicated human attributes, engaging the reader to identify with him as a human-like character, not just an animal. This assignation of human attributes is a powerful method of engagement, and it is due to this engagement with Blue as a character that we feel strongly for him when the mare is taken away. Walker uses this technique of audience engagement to make the reader consider their own treatment of animals, and to understand that animals deserve respect and dignity as humans do.

In between her use of audience engagement in identifying with Blue, Walker also raises the social issue that animals have become “…merely ‘images’ of what they once so beautifully expressed”. She observes that we as a society are used to drinking milk from cartons showing “contented” cows, and eating eggs and chicken meat from “happy” hens. This point is reflected in the author’s own work. The image of a trapped and neglected horse has greater impact than had she used another animal in the same situation. While pointing out that animals have become merely images and symbols to humans, the author has used that very symbolism to engage the reader.

Alice Walker’s essay Am I Blue tells the story of a woman’s friendship with a horse named Blue, and at the same time it is a deeper look at society’s problems. Walker uses the relationship with Blue to convey her deep regard for animals, and through her description of the neglect and indifference with which Blue is treated, she also conveys her desire for humans to treat animals, and each other, with respect and tolerance. The author uses assignation to cultivate audience engagement, describing Blue as though he were a human experiencing happiness and suffering. Walker’s essay is
effectively written for audience engagement and empathy, and she has effectively pointed out that humans have the capacity for great cruelty and indifference, and that we must recognise it within ourselves for a difference to be made.