

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Color Purple

by
Alice Walker

Book Information

Alice Walker, The Color Purple
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Life was not easy for Celie. But she knew how to survive, needing little to get by. Finally, she gains the courage to ask for more out of her life.

Award: American Book Award; National Book Award/ Honors; Pulitzer Prize

Topics: Adventure, Survival; Emotions, Love; Family Life, Domestic Abuse; People, African American; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks

Main Characters

Adam Celie's biological son, who is adopted by missionaries

Albert (Mr. _____) Celie's husband, who is in love with Shug Avery

Celie a woman who finds strength through her friendship with Shug Avery

Corrine the wife of Samuel and a missionary in Africa

Eleanor Jane Miz Millie's daughter, who was primarily raised by Sofia

Grady Shug Avery's husband

Harpo Albert's son from his deceased wife, who later marries Sofia

Miz Millie the mayor's wife

Nettie Celie's sister, who runs away and becomes a missionary

Olivia Celie's biological daughter, who is adopted by missionaries

Pa (Alphonso) the man who raised and abused Celie and Nettie; the girls discover he is not their biological father

Samuel the reverend who becomes a missionary and later marries Nettie

Shug Avery a local singer whose friendship allows Celie to become a stronger woman

Sofia Harpo's wife, who insults the mayor's wife and is thrown in jail

Squeak (Mary Agnes) Harpo's girlfriend, who helps Sofia in her time of need

Tashi an Olinka girl who later marries Adam

Vocabulary

Amazons a mythical race of female warriors

blasphemy profane use of sacred things

intuitive knowledgeable by sharp insight

seining fishing with a large net that is weighted at the bottom

verbosity the use of too many words

Synopsis

The Color Purple is a story told through Celie's letters to God and to her sister Nettie. Celie is a woman who, to most people she meets, is homely and obedient. Shug Avery, a local singer, feels this way when she first meets Celie, but as time progresses, Shug helps Celie become a stronger person.

Celie's life has been damaged by years of physical, mental, and sexual abuse by her father. Celie's father, Alphonso, has even fathered two children by Celie. When a local man named Albert asks Alphonso for Nettie's hand, Alphonso refuses. Instead, Alphonso persuades Albert to marry Celie.

Shug Avery and Celie meet when Albert brings Shug to their home when Shug is sick. Albert and Shug have been having an affair for years, which does not bother Celie. Celie begins to care for Shug in a gentle, loving manner, despite Shug's frequently cruel remarks.

During this time, Harpo, Albert's son, falls in love and impregnates a local girl, Sofia. The two get married, and for a short time, everything seems fine. However, Harpo wants Sofia to obey him the way

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Celie obeys Albert. Celie suggests that Harpo beat Sofia. Harpo tries, but Sofia beats him instead. Harpo begins to eat ravenously, almost as if, in Celie's opinion, he is trying to get as big as Sofia.

Eventually, Sofia decides to leave Harpo. She is gone for over six months, and when she returns, she finds her home has been turned into a jukejoint and Harpo has a new girlfriend, Squeak. Sofia and Squeak get into a fight, and Sofia later gets thrown in jail for talking rudely to Miz Millie, the mayor's wife. Everyone bands together to think of ways to help Sofia, but it is Squeak who convinces the warden that making Sofia become Miz Millie's maid would be better punishment than jail.

In the meantime, Celie and Shug become very close. They share many secrets and Celie tells Shug that Albert beats her. Shug assures Celie that she will not leave until she is sure that Albert will not beat Celie again. Eventually Shug leaves and begins to tour the country as a singer. When Shug returns, she brings Grady, her new husband, which makes both Albert and Celie jealous. One night, Celie tells Shug about her sister, Nettie, who had run away several years prior. When Shug learns this, she discovers that Albert has been hiding Nettie's letters to Celie for years.

Through Nettie's letter, Celie learns that her sister is a missionary in Africa. Nettie has been traveling with Celie's two children that had been given up by Alphonso and adopted by Samuel and Corrine, two other missionaries. Over the course of many years, Nettie becomes very close with the family and, after Corrine dies, Nettie and Samuel marry.

Celie also learns that Alphonso is really their stepfather. Nettie explains that she learned this fact from Samuel when he disclosed the information about the adoption of Celie's children, Adam and Olivia. When Alphonso dies, he leaves Nettie and Celie his home and store because the land had belonged to their biological father, who had been lynched in their youth.

When Shug leaves with a younger man, Albert and

Celie begin to reacquaint themselves. Together, they discuss Shug and how much she means to each of them. Shug returns and becomes a little jealous over how close Albert and Celie have become.

From the final letter, the reader learns that Nettie and her family come home to Celie. The novel ends with Celie's account of a family reunion on the Fourth of July. Although she feels a little odd around her grown children, Celie feels complete.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

At the beginning, Celie writes her letters to God. During the course of the novel, however, she switches from writing to God and writes to Nettie instead. But Celie's last letter is addressed to God, stars, trees, sky, people, and Everything. Why do you think Celie addressed her final letter this way?

Celie had stopped writing to God when she found out the truth about her father. However, at the end of the novel, Celie is so grateful to have her entire family with her that she thanks everything around her. It is at this point that Celie truly understands what Shug meant when she said that God is in everything.

Literary Analysis

Near the end of the story, Celie begins to create pants for herself, friends, and family. In your opinion, what do the pants symbolize?

In this time period, pants are typically worn by men. The pants symbolize strength and creativity. By wearing and creating pants for women and men, Celie is showing her new found strength and independence. Celie also puts a great deal of time and effort into making each pair of pants. This shows that she also carefully considers who the recipient of each pair will be and what type of pants will best suit that person.

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Inferential Comprehension

Describe Sofia and Squeak's relationship by comparing and contrasting their character traits.

Sofia is a big, strong, stubborn, and independent woman. Squeak, however, is small and does whatever Harpo tells her to. Sofia is Harpo's wife who leaves him for over six months. When she returns, she finds he has turned their home into a jukejoint and he is dating Squeak. She and Squeak have a physical confrontation, and Sofia knocks Squeak's teeth out. However, when Sofia ends up in jail for speaking rudely to the mayor's wife, it is Squeak who comes to her aid. Squeak shows her strength by convincing the warden that forcing Sofia to become Miz Millie's maid is a better punishment than serving time in jail. When Sofia gets out of her duties as a maid to Miz Millie, Squeak announces that she is leaving. Their bad feelings towards each other have softened, and Sofia promises to look after Squeak's child.

Constructing Meaning

Most readers were probably surprised when Celie explains to Albert about the Olinka tribe's belief that Adam and Eve were pushed out of their village because they were white. Why might this be surprising?

Readers may be surprised because throughout most of the novel, Celie is not able to discuss anything with Albert because she is too shy and he does not respect her opinions. Celie shows that she is growing in confidence by discussing this issue with her husband. Readers might also be surprised by the Olinka's theological beliefs and their interpretation of Christianity. This shows that they have been influenced by the missionaries, and their beliefs have been somewhat altered but not changed completely.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Feelings In the novel, Nettie describes the duties of the missionaries in Africa. She discusses the differences in perception and

culture between the black missionaries and the members of the Olinka tribe. Have the students research the influence of missionaries in Africa. Then have them write a short story based on their understanding of missionaries. The story may be of any style or genre: historical, satirical, fantasy, etc.

Responding to Literature Show the movie *The Color Purple* to your class. Ask your students to keep a list of any discrepancies between the movie and the novel. Then discuss how the movie may have differed from the students' visual picture of the action in the book.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors When Squeak is persuaded to go to the warden and talk about Sofia, she is accused of "Uncle Tomming." Have your students read excerpts or the full text of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Then ask the students to write their reaction to this accusation.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Shug Avery claims to know other great musicians such as Sophie Tucker and Duke Ellington. Play several of these artists' songs and ask your students to write a short response on their opinion of the music.