

The Color Purple

by Alice Walker

Rationale by Patrick M. Clarke

Grade Level and Audience

In her award-winning novel *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker (1982) tells the story of Celie, a young black girl growing up in the reconstruction South of the United States. In a series of letters to God and to her sister Nettie, Celie tells the story of her life, ranging from the trauma of sexual abuse as a child to her success and wealth as an adult.

The themes presented in *The Color Purple* are very advanced, and the details of Celie's sexual assault are very vivid. The emotional and sexual abuse of Celie continues throughout most of her life, and Celie describes each moment in such a way that the reader feels like he or she is there watching. For this reason, *The Color Purple* is "suitable for mature high school readers" (Gillespie, p. 122).

According to Worthington (1985) "certain people may not be ready for Walker's book" (p. 52). Students in an advanced junior or senior year English class or social studies class doing a unit on the treatment of Black Americans after the Civil War would probably benefit the most from *The Color Purple*.

Also, since the novel contains several references and details that might be considered objectionable, Worthington recommends that teachers should always "allow any reader the opportunity to select another book" (p. 52). (See "Alternative Books.")

Plot Summary

Fourteen year old Celie has led a very rough life. Her mother is very sick, and when she goes to visit the doctor Celie is left alone with her father, Fonso. While the mother is gone, Fonso rapes Celie. Celie's mother dies soon after and now Fonso rapes Celie more and more often, saying "You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't" (p. 1). Celie has two children by her father, both of which he takes away right after they are born. Celie assumes that he has taken the children into the woods and killed them, but actually he has sold them. Fonso eventually remarries, and Celie is a constant reminder to him of his sexual abuse. To get rid of her and the guilty feelings he has he gives her away to be married to a man that is only described as Mr. _____.

Life with Mr. _____ is no better than life back with her father for Celie. Mr. _____ feels that the only way to keep a woman in her place is to beat her, and he beats Celie very often. Mr. _____ does not love Celie. He simply wanted a wife because he needed someone to take care of him and his wild children, and because the woman that he really loves, Shug Avery, refuses to marry him. Shug is a flamboyant blues singer that travels around the country singing in sleazy bars.

Celie's sister Nettie, the only person that Celie has ever truly loved, runs away from home and comes to live with Celie and Mr. _____. Nettie is very beautiful, and Mr. _____ finds her very attractive. He makes many passes at Nettie, but she simply ignores him. Mr. _____ becomes very upset one day when Nettie ignores his advances, and he kicks Nettie out of the house. Nettie and Celie vow to write to each other. Nettie keeps her promise and writes to Celie, but Mr. _____ intercepts the letters before Celie can see them. Celie, ignorant of the letters, decides that Nettie must be dead since she has not written. Nettie was the only person that Celie had ever truly loved, and now that she believes that she is dead Celie has absolutely no will to live anymore. She goes on day to day simply taking all of the abuse that Mr. _____ gives her and never says a word or takes an action of protest.

Shug Avery, Mr. _____'s true love, becomes very ill as a result of her wild lifestyle. She has no real home, so she comes to stay with Mr. _____. Celie feeds Shug and nurses her back to health, and as she gets to know her better Celie finds herself falling in love with Shug. As Celie nurses Shug back to physical health, Shug decides that she will nurse Celie back to emotional health.

Eventually Shug is completely healthy, and her and Celie have become very close to each other. One day Shug goes to get the mail and finds a letter from Nettie to Celie before Mr. _____ has a chance to see it. She shows it to Celie, who is overjoyed to find that her sister is alive. Shug and Celie then search through Mr. _____'s bedroom and find a whole stack of letters that Nettie has written to Celie.

Nettie writes that she has joined a Christian missionary group that has gone to Africa to Christianize the natives. The missionary group is led by a minister and his wife who have two adopted children. Nettie can tell by looking at them that the children are Celie's. Nettie also writes that the man who they thought was their father actually was not. Their real father died at an early age and they moved in with another family. That means that Celie's two children were not born out of incest. Celie is incredibly happy to learn that her sister and her two children are still alive, but she is also fiercely angry with Mr. _____ for keeping this news from her. This anger finally gives her the courage to stand up to Mr. _____. When Mr. _____ attempts to slap Celie she jabs him with a knife. Then she decides to leave Mr. _____ and move with Shug to Memphis. Mr. _____ says that Celie will leave over his dead body, and Celie responds with surprising authority. "It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body is just the welcome mat I need" (Walker, p. 207). After this statement Mr. _____ leaves Celie alone.

In Memphis, Celie starts a new business sewing pants. With the help of Shug she becomes very successful, and she also learns how to love. Men have beaten Celie throughout her life, and women are the only people that she is able to feel love for. Shug does not feel as strongly about Celie as Celie does for Shug and she leaves her for a nineteen-year-old boy named Germaine. When Shug leaves Celie, so does her happiness.

Fonso, the man who claimed to be Celie's father, dies and leaves Celie his house. Celie moves in and continues her pants-making business there. Celie eventually becomes friends with Mr. _____, who has changed a great deal since Celie's departure. He has learned a great deal about life and love since Celie left him, and he states what he has learned near the end of the novel:

I start to wonder why us need love. Why us suffer. Why us black. Why us men and women. Where do children really come from. It didn't take long to realize I didn't hardly know nothing...The more I wonder, he say, the more I love. (p. 289)

Celie is developing a friendship with Mr. _____, but she can never love a man again and believes that love will never be back in her life. But then her sister Nettie returns from Africa with her two children. The family is reunited, and Celie feels a happiness and love that she has never before experienced. Celie's final letter to God states that, despite her old age, "I think this the youngest us ever felt" (p. 295).

Theoretical Support and Redeeming Values

Donelson and Nilsen (1989) state that "one of the great values and pleasures of literature is that it frees us to travel vicariously to other times and places" (p. 374). For this reason they suggest using literature in a social studies classroom. *The Color Purple* may be fiction, but it would be a very powerful way to help a student understand what Black Americans went through in the early 1900's. But *The Color Purple* almost was never published because of its realistic nature. Alice Walker states that:

When I finished writing *The Color Purple* I sent it to a leading Black women's magazine, believing they would recognize its value better than anyone. The magazine declined to run an excerpt from it, however, because according to an editor, "Black people don't talk like that. And I suppose in her mind they never did, and if they did, who cared?" (Garrett & McCue, 1990, p. 229).

But the character of Celie is based on Walker's step-grandmother, Rachel, who did speak like that. *The Color Purple* is full of social and historical values that merit the novel a place in any social studies unit on Black Americans.

Rosenblatt's theories support the use of *The Color Purple* in the classroom. Rosenblatt (1983) states that if a student is aware of his own past and the history of mankind and its injustices, he will "be better able to make choices, to dominate, and if necessary, to remold his environment" (p. 156). Students who read *The Color Purple* and see the injustices that people have been forced to endure in the past will be better able to make sure that these mistakes are not repeated in the future.

Kohlberg (1969) states that the moral development of humans pass through six stages, ranging from early childhood where avoiding punishment is the main objective to the postconventional stages where ethical principles guide a person. Kohlberg also states that moral development is best taught through history and literature. *The Color Purple* is a wonderful way to teach moral development as we see the character Celie start out in the pre-conventional stages and mature through the postconventional stages. Kohlberg recommends literature that is at a level above the student's level of moral development. Most young adults are in the conventional stage of moral development, so *The Color Purple* wonderfully fits Kohlberg's criteria.

Literary Qualities and Summary of Reviews

The Color Purple is a novel that should be read by adolescents and adults alike. Despite the attempts to censor it, the novel has received more critical acclaim than any other novel in recent history. According to Peter S. Prescott (1982), *The Color Purple* is in the category of the great works of literature.

This is an American novel of permanent importance, that rare sort of book which amounts to a diversion in the fields of dread...Love redeems, meanness kills--that *The Color Purple*'s principal theme, the theme of most of the world's great fiction. (p. 676)

One of the most highly praised aspects of *The Color Purple* is Walker's use of language. Celie's dialect brings the story to life. Fort (1982) states that "Walker's use of language, especially black idiom, is masterful and adds poignancy and depth to the narrative" (p. 115).

Robert Trowers (1982) in the *New York Review of Books* agrees, stating that Walker has met the challenge of "the conversion, in Celie's letters, of a subliterary dialect into a medium of remarkable expressiveness, color, and poignancy" (p. 35).

Mel Watkins (1982) in the *New York Times Book Review* also feels that the language choice of Walker is one of the most appealing aspects of the book. He states that some readers may initially be put off by Celie's dialect and simple way of speaking, but that after the reader accepts the dialect it "assumes a lyrical cadence of its own...The cumulative effect is a novel that is convincing because of the authenticity of its folk voice" (p. 7).

Gloria Steinem (1982) has very strong words about the "black folk English" used by Celie:

Celie just writes her heart out, putting words down the way they feel and sound. Pretty soon you can't imagine why anyone would bother to write any other way. (p. 89)

The history lesson that *The Color Purple* gives us is also another very important literary quality. "Miss Walker exposes us to a way of life that for the most part existed beyond or below the reach of fiction" (p. 35) states Towers (1982) in the New York Review of Books. Seniorplots states that "most of all this is a story of the suffering and injustice brought about through bigotry and discrimination" (p. 124).

The Color Purple helps the reader to realize what the members of the Black race have been put through in American history. Walker doesn't just describe the injustices against Blacks, but, according to Worthington (1985) "forces us to become a member of an oppressed race as we struggle to hear the rhythm and sway of Celie's mind moving" (p. 51). "No writer has made the intimate hurt of racism more palpable than Walker" (p. 182) states Dinita Smith in The Nation. Donelson & Nilsen (1989) write:

Historical fiction, fiction set in other countries, fiction about members of ethnic groups in the United States, and well-written informative books should all be part of high-school social studies classes. (p. 374)

The Color Purple tells the story of the struggle against injustice of Black Americans in the early 1900's in a way that makes the reader believe he or she is actually there. The reader will actually want to get up and do something about the problems of racism in our society after reading *The Color Purple*.

Periodicals and literary magazines are not the only ones raving over *The Color Purple*. *The Color Purple* has won many prestigious awards including the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Also, it has been recommended in publications such as SeniorPlots (1989), Senior High School Library Catalog (1987), Good Reading (1990), and by the National Council of Teachers of English (1982).

Objectives, Teaching Methods, and Assignments

Suggested Teaching Objectives

1. To trace Celie's moral, ethical, and emotional development as the story progresses.
2. To examine the use of dialect in the novel.
3. To examine whether or not the events of the novel are realistic.
4. To examine whether or not the events of *The Color Purple* are still relevant in today's society.
5. To analyze the history of Blacks in America.
6. To study racism and racial stereotypes in the past and in the present.
7. To analyze the importance of character development in the novel.

To accomplish these teaching objectives, teachers could select from the following suggested student activities or use the suggestions to create activities of their own.

Suggested Student Activities

1. Watch the movie version of *The Color Purple* and compare and contrast it with the book.
2. Write a critique of the movie version of *The Color Purple*.
3. In discussion groups, talk about whether Mr. _____ deserves to be forgiven.
4. Write a short biography for each of the main characters (Celie, Nettie, Fonso, Mr. _____, Shug Avery, Harpo, and Sofia).

5. Write a letter from Celie to Nettie describing the events of her life since Nettie left.
6. Find newspaper and magazine articles on the status of Blacks in America.
7. Compare these with the status of Blacks in *The Color Purple*.
8. Study the work of J.L. Dillard or other scholars of the history of Black English. Study the history of the treatment of Blacks in America from the time after the Civil War.
9. Read some of Walker's poetry and compare the ideas of it with *The Color Purple*.

Possible Essay Questions

1. How does Celie change over the course of the novel?
2. Write a brief summary of the events that made Celie decide to take control of her life.
3. Compare and contrast the problems of Black Americans in the early 1900's with those of modern Black Americans.
4. Discuss why the use of dialect is so important to *The Color Purple*. Were there any passages that were hard understand?
5. Explain who you believe is the "hero" of the novel and why.
6. Compare and contrast the different male characters in *The Color Purple*. What generalizations does Walker make about males?
7. Compare and contrast the different female characters in *The Color Purple*. What generalizations does Walker make about females?
8. Compare and contrast the movie version of *The Color Purple* with the novel.

Possible Objections

Theorists say that students should read books that present real-life situations in order for them to be able to cope with life better when they are out of school. Sometimes this reality is very harsh. Problems such as rape, profanity, incest, homosexuality, alcoholism, drug addiction, and violence all exist in real-life. But the censor's motto, according to Worthington (1985), is "better to deny than to face" (p. 48). The following is a list of real-life problems discussed in *The Color Purple* that censors might cite as reasons to censor the book:

Vulgar language	Bad grammar, Black dialect
Sexual references	Violence
Incest	Reference to religious beliefs
Rape	Poor portrayal of "family unit"
Wife-beating	African tribal customs
Adultery	Racial stereotypes
Hints of lesbianism	Women in non-traditional roles
Drug use	Mental illness
Alcoholism	
Murder	

The Color Purple also supports many of the values and attitudes to be fostered by the public schools according to Christensen (1988). These values include "developing the courage to resist group (or individual) pressures to do what we believe, when alone, that we should not do," "recognizing that no person is an island, that behavior that may seem to be of purely private concern often affects those about us and society itself," and "recognizing that the most important thing in life is the kind of person we are becoming, the qualities of character we are developing" (p. 1).

Carlsen's theories of reading development also support the use of *The Color Purple* in the high school

classroom. Carlsen (1979) states that young adults in late adolescence, the last two years of high school, will want to read adult books. They want to read books that will tell stories of a search for personal values, books of social significance, books of strange and unusual human experiences, and books dealing with the transition to adult life. *The Color Purple* fits into all of these categories. The character of Celie is struggling through experiences that most children will never have to undergo, but these children still want to know what does go on in the adult world, even the strange and unusual happenings that are described in *The Color Purple*.

Havighurst (1953) describes the developmental tasks that young readers are facing in their lives and states that young adults should read books with characters that are undergoing these same challenges. Among the ten developmental tasks that Havighurst lists, Celie faces several of them. These include acquiring more mature social skills as she learns that men do not control her life, achieving a masculine or feminine sex role as she realizes that it is possible to love, achieving emotional independence from parents and other adults as she leaves Mr. _____ to start her own life, and selecting and preparing for an occupation as she begins her pants making company and achieves financial independence.

Carlsen (1974) and Early's (1960) Birthday Cake Theory of Reading Development also supports use of *The Color Purple*. According to the Birthday Cake Theory, students in upper high school and college should read literature that forces them to go beyond their own circle and ask questions about society. The struggle that is Celie's life will definitely force readers to ask questions about the society that they live in.

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