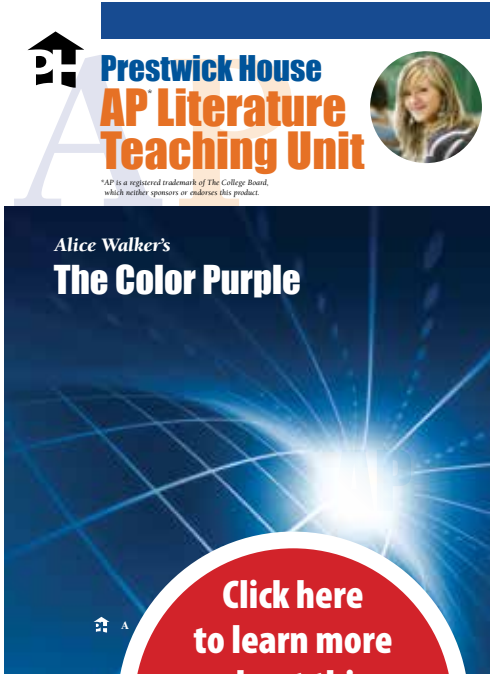




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Teaching Unit

The Color Purple

by Alice Walker

Written by Priscilla Beth Baker



Prestwick House

Item No. 309101

The Color Purple

Objectives

By the end of the Unit, the student will be able to:

1. examine the significance of the novel's title.
2. discuss the role of narrative voice and analyze the author's point of view.
3. discuss the credibility of the narrator and how that is measured.
4. analyze the use of irony in the novel.
5. discuss the function of setting and the time period in the novel.
6. examine the impact of the social and political issues present in the novel on plot, character, and theme.
7. identify and discuss the novel's major themes.
8. trace the development of symbols and motifs in the novel and explain their relevance and meaning.
9. explain the effects of the literary and rhetorical devices used in the novel.
10. trace the character development of the novel's protagonist.
11. discuss the novel as a feminist piece of literature.
12. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
13. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
14. offer a close reading of *The Color Purple* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Introductory Lecture

Alice Walker was born on February 9, 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia, a small rural town. The youngest of eight children to her sharecropper parents, Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Tallulah Grant, Walker developed a love of reading and writing at an early age after a disfiguring accident left her feeling too self-conscious to interact with others; while playing with her brothers, one of them accidentally shot her in the eye.

Walker was an exceptional student and won a scholarship for disabled students to the well-renowned Spelman College for black women in Atlanta where she first became involved in civil rights issues. She worked in the South helping to register voters, promote children's programs, and work for welfare rights.

Transferring after two years to Sarah Lawrence College in New York, Walker had the opportunity to travel to Uganda as an exchange student where she learned about the plight of the African people firsthand. She graduated in 1965, the year she also married a Jewish Civil Rights lawyer, Melvyn Leventhal. They became the first legally married interracial couple in Mississippi and consequently received numerous threats from the Ku Klux Klan. They had one daughter and subsequently divorced in the mid-1970s.

During this time period, Walker published her first volume of poetry entitled *Once* (1968) and first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970). She also held a position at *Ms.* magazine under legendary editor-in-chief Gloria Steinem who was instrumental in encouraging Walker's writing. In 1976, Walker published her second novel, *Meridian*, about a woman fighting for civil rights in the South.

The Color Purple, published in 1982, is Walker's third and most famous novel. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for Fiction, the novel still enjoys wide appeal and remains a staple on countless classroom reading lists. Steven Spielberg adapted the novel into an Academy Award-nominated film in 1985 starring Whoopi Goldberg, Oprah Winfrey, and Danny Glover. The novel was later adapted into a Broadway play in 2005 and garnered a Tony Award for best leading actress in a musical in 2006. The show continues to tour around the world.

Walker is an internationally celebrated author, poet, and activist whose books include seven novels, four collections of short stories, four children's books, and volumes of essays and poetry. Her work has been translated into more than two dozen languages and her books have sold more than fifteen million copies.

She has become known as a feminist but prefers the term "womanist" instead. Walker remains a passionate activist in environmental, feminist, and economic causes all over the world and works tirelessly to provide support for the "revolutionaries, teachers and leaders who seek change and transformation of the world."

The Color Purple

Letters 1–5

1. Examine what is revealed in Letter 1 and the resulting tone created by the author.

2. Given what the reader learns about Celie in the novel’s opening, what might be her reason for crossing out the phrase “I am” and replacing it with “I have”?

3. Explain the irony of Celie noting that her mother is “happy, cause he good to her now” in Letter 1.

4. Analyze the subtlety with which Walker reveals the details of Celie’s pregnancies in Letters 2 and 3. Note Walker’s use of language, in particular, and the effect on the reader.

5. Account for the passage of time in the first five letters and note the key events.

Letters 6–10

1. Compare and contrast Fonso’s attitude towards Celie and Nettie as seen in Letters 6–8. What is implied and explicitly stated about his attitude towards which daughter will marry Mr.____, and how is the reader’s perception of Fonso affected as a result?

2. Examine Walker’s use of language in Letters 7 and 8, in which Fonso is trying to convince Mr.____ to marry Celie instead. How does the author’s diction parallel what one might expect in the description of the slave trade?

3. We have seen, several times, that Celie is protective of Nettie. How do these letters reveal that Nettie cares about Celie? Why, though, is Nettie ultimately unable to help Celie?

Letters 11–15

- 1. What can the reader assume is the reason Nettie has come to live with Celie? Why is she then forced to leave?

- 2. How does Celie’s parenting style contribute to her character?

- 3. Explore the theme of the power of female relationships in these letters and what Celie learns from these relationships. What other major theme(s) are explored as well?

Letters 16-20

1. In Letter 17, how does Celie’s description of how it feels to pat Harpo further establish the symbolic significance of trees?

2. Explain how the war analogy in Letter 17 characterizes the relationship between Harpo and Sofia.

3. Characterize Sofia. What aspects of her personality is Celie most struck by?

4. Analyze Harpo’s emotional, moral, and physical struggles as seen in these letters and explain how these struggles are tied to a major theme in the novel.

5. Given what we know of Celie as a compassionate and giving person, what logical reason might there be for Celie’s surprising advice at the end of Letter 19? What does this scene say about her character?

Letters 21–25

1. Compare and contrast Celie's and Sofia's attitudes towards marriage, power, and spirituality as seen in Letter 21. Explain the shift in their relationship which results from their conversation. What revelation does Celie have which alters the course of their friendship?

2. How does the theme of the cyclical nature of abuse play a significant role in Letter 21? What important information do we learn about Sofia that is somewhat surprising and has shaped who she is?

3. Explore the theme of religious hypocrisy seen in Letter 22, paying particular attention to the diction Walker uses.

4. Analyze the effect of the last paragraph of Letter 22. What role do the italics play in the shift in tone here?

5. Discuss the sharp contrast in Mr._____'s character in Letter 23 as compared with what we have seen of him so far in the novel. What is the power dynamic in his relationship with Shug? And what is significant about the fact that we learn his first name only now?

Letters 26-30

1. How does the scene in Letter 26 serve as a transition in Shug and Celie’s relationship?

2. Characterize the relationship between Albert and his father. What parallels can be seen in Albert’s relationship with his own son, Harpo?

3. In what ways are Celie and Mr. ____ emerging as allies in this section of the novel and what is the primary cause?

4. Reflect on the literal and symbolic function of the quilt motif in these letters and its role in the novel so far, particularly regarding thematic development.

5. Compare and contrast Sofia and Celie’s attitudes towards marriage and sex.

6. Examine Harpo’s continued identity struggle and its effects on both him and Sofia. What does Celie try to help him understand? How is his struggle tied to the theme of gender roles?
