



The Color Purple

Comprehensive Guide
for AS and A Level English Literature

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Teacher's Introduction

The Color Purple is a thought-provoking and engaging text that addresses important themes, offers literary depth, and can lead to meaningful discussions about history, society, and human experiences outside of the A Level curriculum and provides an opportunity to offer pastoral care.

Remember!

Always check the exam board website for new information, including changes to the specification and sample assessment material.

What's included?

The Color Purple A Level Comprehensive Guide is a ZigZag Education resource designed for teachers and students who are working towards AS and A Level Pearson Edexcel English Literature (9ET0) and A Level AQA A English Literature. It can also be adapted for A Level WJEC English Language and Literature. The resource is structured with two main sections: the first focusing on textual analysis with plot and character summaries to aid the students in their understanding of the main themes and characters, and the second which explores textual analysis as a whole. The resource includes activities, exam-style questions and discussion topics for group work, independent study and revision. Students will also be presented with activities that relate to the text as a whole. Indicative content has been provided for all relevant activities.

How to use the guide

The resource is intended to supplement classroom study of *The Color Purple* in a way that encourages the skills and knowledge required for the exams. The resource is best used as a basis for formative assessments, independent study and to guide and encourage group discussions.

Quotations and signposting to further reading (citations) used to illustrate key themes, characterisation and relationships between characters are included on a chapter-by-chapter basis with the relevant page numbers.

Use of the glossary – all highlighted words within the core text indicate a word that may be unfamiliar to the student, or is terminology that the students are required to learn.

Version of the text

The following version of *The Color Purple* has been used: *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (ISBN: 978-1399620857)

June 2024

Specification Information

Assessment Objectives

The assessment objectives set by *Ofqual* will apply to all AS and A Level English Literature, such as, are used by all exam boards (*GCE Subject Level Guidance for English Literature*). The assessment objectives are as follows:

- **AO1:** Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using relevant terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.
- **AO2:** Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts.
- **AO3:** Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts of literary texts, including the writer, the text and the reader.
- **AO4:** Explore connections across literary texts.
- **AO5:** Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

Assessment weightings for Pearson Edexcel English Literature (9ET0)

Table 1: Assessment Objective Weightings for Pearson Edexcel English Literature (9ET0)

Assessment Objective	% in GCE*
AO1	26.7%
AO2	26.7%
AO3	21.9%
AO4	14%
AO5	11%
Total	100%

* Some figures have been rounded up or down.

Assessment weightings for AQA A Level English Literature A (7711, 7712)

Table 2: Assessment Objective Weightings for AQA A Level English Literature A (7711, 7712)

Assessment Objective	% in Paper 1	% in Paper 2
AO1	14	14
AO2	12	12
AO3	12	12
AO4	6	6
AO5	6	6
Total	50%	50%

NOTE! *The Color Purple* is part of the NEA prohibited texts, meaning that students should not use it for non-exam assessment as it appears on the exam set text lists.

Learning aims and the assessment objectives covered by this resource

The purpose of this resource is to encourage students to develop and demonstrate:

- Creation of robust and compelling academic responses to literary texts, using relevant terminology and coherent, accurate written expression.
- Sound understanding of how meanings are shaped in literary texts through the use of language.
- A well-developed understanding of historical and cultural contexts surrounding literary texts, and how critical responses by readers may change over time.
- Comparisons made between literary texts and how they relate to literary traditions.

Each following section will have an indication of which assessment objective will be covered.

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What is expected of the students?

Both AQA A and Edexcel specifications use *The Color Purple* as a set text with question types under the heading 'Texts in shared contexts'.

- For AQA A, *The Color Purple* comes under Section 4.2 (A Level Paper 2) – Texts in shared contexts: literature from 1945 to the present day.
- For Edexcel, *The Color Purple* comes under Component 2: Prose. Students are asked to analyse texts from a chosen theme.
- Both AQA A and Edexcel exams are open book, allowing the students to refer to their notes.

The chosen theme for Edexcel is 'Social and Cultural Change' whereas the themes covered by AQA are 'The legacy of wars; personal and social identity; changing morality and social structure; ethnicity; power, oppression and change; resistance and rebellion; imperialism, post-colonialism; engagement with the social, political, personal and literary issues which have helped shape the 20th century and the early decades of the 21st century'.

Why *The Color Purple* is an Interesting Text to Teach

The Color Purple by Alice Walker is an interesting text to teach for several reasons:

- **Narrative Style and Perspective (AO1, AO2):** *The Color Purple* is written in a narrative style where the story is being told through letters. This narrative style offers a unique perspective on the experiences and allows for discussions on the role of narrative voice, perspective and reader's engagement with the text.
- **Literary Analysis (AO1, AO2):** The novel is rich in symbolism, imagery and literary devices, providing opportunities for students to analyse and interpret these elements in the text and develop their analysis skills.
- **Intersectionality (AO1, AO2):** *The Color Purple* intersects issues of race, gender and class, that can be used to discuss **intersectionality** and the interconnectedness of various forms of social oppression.
- **Themes of Oppression and Empowerment (AO3, AO5):** The novel explores themes of abuse, making it a powerful text for discussions on social justice, human rights, empowerment and liberation. It can lead to meaningful conversations about issues related to discrimination and inequality.
- **Cultural and Historical Context (AO3):** The novel is set in the early 20th century and it provides valuable insights into the historical and cultural context of the time, allowing students to explore the history of African-American communities and women's experiences.
- **Complex Characters (AO1, AO2):** The novel features well-developed and multi-dimensional characters such as Celie, Shug Avery and Sofia. These characters undergo significant growth throughout the story, making them compelling subjects for character analysis and discussion.
- **Controversial Topics:** The book has been both celebrated and challenged for its depictions of sexual and abusive situations. Teaching the novel can open up discussions on freedom of expression and – most importantly – addressing difficult and uncomfortable issues.
- **Film Adaptation (AO5):** The novel was adapted into a successful film and a Broadway musical. Comparing the different forms of media, analysing how the story is translated and discussing its reception by different audiences.
- **Diversity in Literature (AO3, AO5):** *The Color Purple* is a significant work in African American literature, often included in discussions about diversifying the canon. Teaching it can be an opportunity to discuss diversity in literature and the importance of representation.
- **Personal Connection and Empathy:** The novel invites readers to engage with the characters on a personal level, fostering empathy and self-reflection. Teaching *The Color Purple* can encourage students to reflect on their own values, beliefs and experiences in relation to the characters and the themes of the novel.

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Background and Context

Background on the Text (AO3, AO5)

About Alice Walker

Alice Walker stands out as a prolific author, celebrated for her remarkable achievements such as winning both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for her widely acclaimed novel *The Color Purple*. This renowned work catapulted her into literary prominence, but it is just one facet of her extensive body of work. Walker has penned other outstanding novels, including *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Long Walk to Home*. Her literary prowess extends across various genres, encompassing short stories, children's books, poetry and essays, all of which have been translated into over 22 languages.

Born on 9th February 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia, Alice Walker emerged as the eighth and final child of Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Tallulah Grant. Her early life was shaped by the challenges of poverty in a rural Georgian setting, as her parents worked as **sharecroppers**, with her mother also earning extra income as a **seamstress**.

Despite facing adversity early on, Walker's resilience and talent manifested from an early age. A traumatic incident, where she was accidentally shot by one of her brothers, left her permanently blinded in one eye. This experience, coupled with the sense of isolation she felt about her fate, led her to seek solace in isolation, turning to reading and writing as a means of escape.

Growing up in a time of **segregation**, Walker's educational opportunities were limited to Baker High School. Her exceptional literary prowess earned her a full scholarship to Spelman College, where she became actively engaged in the African-American civil rights movement. Later, she studied at the City University of New York, and as an exchange student, she travelled to Uganda. It was during this time she authored *To Hell with Dying*, her first published short story, and *Once: Poems*, her first book of poetry, marking the beginning of her illustrious writing career.

Even after graduating in 1965, Walker continued her commitment to the **civil rights** movement, participating in black voter registration drives in Georgia and Mississippi in 1965 and 1966. Her marriage to a Jewish civil rights lawyer, in 1967, resulted in the birth of a daughter (Rebecca Walker) and a divorce in the mid-1970s.

Walker's second novel, *Meridian*, delved into the contentious issue of sexism with a focus on the role of women in the civil rights movement. However, it was her 1982 novel, *The Color Purple*, that catapulted her to international fame, becoming her most recognised work.

Sharecropping
A system of land and labor arrangement where tenants, often African Americans, worked the land in exchange for a share of the crop.

Segregation
The practice of separating individuals or groups based on race, ethnicity, or social class, often leading to discrimination and unequal treatment.

Seamstress
A person who sews or alters clothing, often working in a garment factory or as a freelance tailor.

Civil rights
The rights of citizens to political and social freedom and equality, often fought for through legal challenges and social movements.

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Discussion Prompt 1 (AO3, AO5)

Once you have finished reading *The Color Purple* think about the differences between the life of the characters inspired by Alice Walker and your own. What similarities can you see between the events of Walker's life and your own?



About *The Color Purple* and ways to approach reading the text

The Color Purple is a renowned novel written by Alice Walker, first published in 1982. It explores themes of racism, sexism and oppression, while also celebrating the triumph of the human spirit.

Set in rural Georgia during the early 20th century, the story follows the life of Celie, a poor Black woman who faces immense adversity and hardship. The narrative unfolds through a series of letters, providing a deeply intimate and personal account of Celie's experiences.

Celie endures a traumatic childhood marked by sexual abuse and exploitation. She is married to a man named Albert, known as 'Mr. _____' in the novel. Separated from her beloved sister Nettie, she enters a cycle of suffering and isolation. Through her letters, she seeks solace and understanding, finding faith in God and a sense of purpose.

As the story progresses, Celie forms unexpected connections with other women, including the glamorous and independent blues singer who becomes her confidante and lover. Through her relationship with Shug, Celie begins to discover her own self-worth, her capacity for love, and the power of her voice.

The novel garnered widespread critical acclaim and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1983. It also received acclaim for its adaptation into a highly successful film directed by Steven Spielberg, and a Tony Award-winning Broadway musical.¹

Part of the reason behind *The Color Purple*'s success is the unique way in which it is written as an **epistolary novel**.

Not everything is written about the characters, the setting or why the characters do what they do. The dates of the letters are dated, and in order to have a time frame for the novel, we will have to make a note of any mention of the passing of time and what it might mean for clues about the setting, transport, etc. The entire novel covers the points of view of Celie and Nettie through their letters. The text is absent of an omniscient narrator.

Potential challenges in reading and how to overcome them

As they are written in a letter format, for the sake of referring to a particular letter the letters are numbered in the order in which they appear. For example, Celie writes letters One to Fifty-one, then jumps to Letter Fifty-two. The letters should end with Letter Ninety, making 90 letters to read.

Upon finishing the book, we realise that the letters begin in a time when people used horse-drawn carriages, but by the time the letters end, people are driving cars. Thus, the time span of the novel is about 20 years. It is recommended that *The Color Purple* is read at least twice to get this sense of time. Make a note of when Celie's age is mentioned, such as Letter One.

Another potential difficulty, but also the beauty of the text, is that Celie's letters are written in a dialect called 'Black English'. This is sometimes referred to as 'BE' (Black English).² Celie's language is awkward to read at first, so it is recommended to read the letters aloud, especially in the beginning, to understand and enjoy Celie's story.

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¹ <https://www.salempress.com/critical-insights-color-purple>

² <https://www.idpublications.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Full-Paper-LITERARY-USE-OF-DIALECT-ENGLISH-IN-ALICE-WALKER'S-THE-COLOR-PURPLE.pdf>

Critical Reception (AO3, AO5)

The Color Purple, published in 1982, was well-received almost instantly. It won the National Book Award for Fiction the following year in 1983. By 1986, it had already starred Whoopi Goldberg, Oprah Winfrey and Danny Glover.

It received contemporary praise by a number of critics, such as Mel Watkins in 1982: 'Alice Walker's latest novel is her most impressive.'³ This praise was met with equal fervor more so after the 1985 film adaptation, with Mel Watkins writing in another article: 'The movie has inspired community forums, picket lines, and a new sense of solidarity among blacks in many parts of the country.'

Although *The Color Purple* has high acclaim for its honest and powerful depiction of impoverished, African-American women face, it was also critiqued for its 'one dimensional' approach, seemingly following the contemporary stereotype of 'fictional portraits of black men and ne'er-do-wells.' It was seen as challenging the stereotypes of 'Deep South' blacks.

It was also seen as controversial for the topics it covered. The American Library Association placed it in the 'Top 100 Most Banned and Challenged Books' for its depiction of sexual violence and homosexuality.⁵ These controversial themes contributed to the ongoing discussion of the novel's place in American literature.

Trudier Harris believes that the novel's popularity is 'detrimental' as the book 'reinforces a narrow 'cadre of spectator readers'. Although she praises Walker for being able to 'capture the essence of black life without all the caricature that usually typifies such efforts', Harris also criticises Walker for 'reducing black women' and could not imagine '... a Celie existing in any black community I knew'.

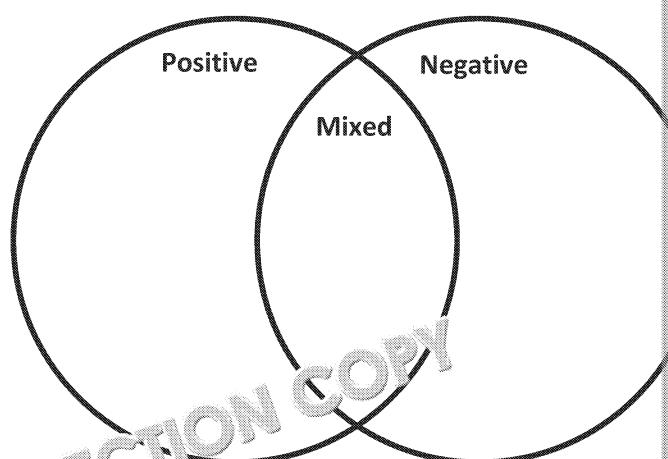
Overall, *The Color Purple's* critical reception was a mix of praise and controversy. While its exploration of the struggles faced by African-American women, it faced scrutiny for the sensitive topics it addressed. Nevertheless, its impact on literature and popular culture solidifying its place as a novel that challenges the boundaries of fiction.



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Learning Task 1 (AO5)

In groups of three or four, create a Venn diagram to highlight the elements of the novel that garnered both positive and negative reviews.



Recommended further reading

Alice Walker: Writing What's Right – An Interview with Guernica Magazine

³ <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/04/specials/walker-color.html>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/01/27/us/blacks-in-heated-debate-over-the-color-purple.html>

⁵ <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/decade2019>

⁶ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2904291>

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Cultural and Historical Context (A03)

The Color Purple is situated within a significant cultural and historical context, encompassing the African-American experience in the United States during the early 20th century.

Racial Discrimination and Segregation: The novel takes place in a period characterised by **racial segregation** and widespread **discrimination** against African Americans. The oppressive system enforced racial separation and denied civil rights to black individuals. The novel portrays the daily struggles and injustices faced by African Americans, highlighting the pervasive racism of the time.⁷

Gender Inequality: Gender inequality, particularly the marginalisation and mistreatment of African-American women, was also an issue during the time of writing. Celie and other female characters in the story face multiple forms of oppression, including domestic violence, sexual abuse and limited opportunities for education and self-expression. The novel sheds light on the **intersectionality** of race and gender, emphasising the unique challenges faced by black women.

Feminism and Women's Rights: The novel reflects the emerging feminist movement when it was written. Alice Walker, herself a prominent **womanist**, addresses issues of empowerment, female solidarity, and the reclamation of women's voices and agency. It contributes to the wider discourse on women's rights and feminism, encouraging **norms** and advocate for gender equality.⁸

African-American Cultural Heritage and Southern Black Culture: The novel explores traditions, spirituality and folklore, serving as a celebration and preservation of black culture. It delves into the significance of community, oral storytelling, and the resilience of African Americans in the face of adversity.

Civil Rights Movement: While *The Color Purple* is set before the peak of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, it provides a historical backdrop influenced by the movement's ideals of social justice, and the fight against institutionalised racism informs the narrative, as the pursuit of liberation and equal rights. Alice Walker herself was, and still is, an advocate for civil rights, participating in a number of marches such as the 1963 march on Washington.⁹



Active Learning Task 2 (A03)

Research the key terms below, writing no more than a paragraph to explain each. You note where you have found the answers from. Are there multiple meanings? Discuss with your group.

- Deep South
- Womanist

Epistolary: The style of the novel, written as a series of letters, is more characteristic of the 19th century than the narrative form.

Discrimination: The novel explores the experience of an individual, Celie, who is subjected to discrimination on the basis of her race and gender, and the intersection of these factors.

Intersectionality: The novel describes the experience of individuals who are subjected to multiple forms of oppression, such as race, gender, and class.

Patriarchy: The novel explores the experience of men who are subjected to oppression, such as the character of Mr. T.

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⁷ <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/segregation-era.html>

⁸ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2904292?origin=crossref>

⁹ <https://gender.stanford.edu/news/film-showcases-alice-walkers-lifelong-fight-against-injustice>

Plot and Character Summary

Setting

The Color Purple is primarily set in rural Georgia, United States, during the early 20th century. The narrative spans several decades, providing a glimpse into the evolving social and cultural landscape of the time.

Protagonist
story with
decision

The story begins in the early 1900s, with Celie as the central **protagonist**. She resides in a small, impoverished rural community where she endures a life of hardship and poverty. The setting reflects the poverty, isolation and racial tensions prevalent in the South.

Celie's life revolves around her family's homestead, a modest house surrounded by fields. The homestead serves as a backdrop to her experiences, as she toils in the fields and finds solace in the stark contrast between the simplicity of nature and the complex social dynamics of her community.

As the story progresses, Celie's circumstances change when she is married off to Alphonso, the owner of the plantation. She moves to his house, which becomes another significant setting in the novel. The plantation represents wealth and social standing, contrasting sharply with the poverty of Celie's upbringing. It is a place of confinement and male dominance, as Celie navigates a life of subservience and abuse.

Another important setting is the town of Memphis, where Shug Avery, a prominent blues singer, resides. Memphis represents a different world for Celie, as she experiences a more vibrant and diverse urban environment. Memphis offers a glimpse of the potential for liberation and self-discovery.

Throughout the novel, the setting expands to include other locations, such as Africa, where Celie eventually finds her true home. Celie's letters to God and her sister Nettie provide insights into the connections between various communities affected by racism and oppression.

Plot

The novel opens with Celie as a young girl, enduring a life of abuse and hardship. She learns to cope with her pain by keeping her deepest secrets and sorrows. Celie's father, Mr. T, is a violent man who impregnates her multiple times. The children are taken away from her, and she is known as 'Nettie' (Albert).

Celie's life becomes a cycle of suffering and isolation in her marriage. She forms a bond with Nettie, who later escapes their father's abuse and travels to Africa as a missionary. Her journey is intercepted by Albert, preventing Celie from knowing about her sister's whereabouts.

As Celie endures her oppressive existence, she finds solace in her relationship with Shug Avery, an independent blues singer who becomes a catalyst for her transformation. Shug dies after falling ill, and Celie is assigned to care for her. Over time, Celie and Shug develop a sexual connection, leading Celie to question her own desires and identity.

Shug encourages Celie to find her own voice and stand up against the oppressive system. Celie challenges Albert's dominance and finds support from the women around her, forming a sense of empowerment and solidarity.

Through her burgeoning relationships with Shug and the women in the community, Celie gains strength and capacity for love and self-expression. She also learns about her sister Nettie's journey to Africa through the letters Albert had intercepted.

Celie eventually musters the courage to leave Albert and forge a life of her own. She becomes a successful businesswoman and creates a sense of community and love around her.

The novel concludes with a sense of hope and reconciliation as Celie reunites with Nettie and their extended family, finding healing and **redemption** through their bond. Celie's letters to God evolve into letters addressed to her sister, reflecting her journey of self-discovery and resilience.

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Letters One to Nine (pages 1–1

Summary

In the beginning, Celie's world is bleak and matter-of-fact, as her mother dies, leaving her with two children and the household due to her mother's poor health. Alphonso, her father, replaces her mother as a substitute. Celie begins writing letters to God, and her mother is happier now that Alphonso is there. Celie's second child is taken away and possibly sold to a man and his wife, and her father is concerned about her appearance. Celie is concerned that her little sister, Nettie, may also end up being sold.

In Letter Four, Celie introduces her new mother, 'New Mammy', and Nettie's boyfriend, 'Mr. ____'. She should focus on her school work instead of marrying a man who already has children. Pa for believes in looking at a boy in church.

In Letter Six, 'Mr. ____' asks for Nettie's hand in marriage, but Pa refuses. Alphonso offers her a new mother. In Letter Eight, Celie considers marrying 'Mr. ____', believing she can protect Nettie and herself.

'Mr. ____' returns, asking to take another look at Celie. Pa makes Celie turn around so that she can see him. 'Mr. ____' asks if he can still have the cow.

Letter Nine sees Celie away from her childhood home but is injured by 'Mr. ____'s' 12-year-old son. The children appear to have been neglected since their mother died, with the new mother.

Analysis

Within the space of nine letters, we witness Celie being sexually abused by 'Pa', enduring her first pregnancy at 14, losing her mother and both of her children, and missing out on her education. Celie spends the time trying to 'keep the household' and protect Nettie. Her periods stop and it is indicated she cannot have children. By the time she is 20, she is married to 'Mr. ____', not for love but to be used as a housekeeper.

Infer/infer based on involves or under that is n

During this time, there is a fair amount of information we have to 'parse out' or infer (implicit information) that build up a bigger picture over time: 'I don't never git us raped by 'Pa' on more than one occasion. 'By the time I git back from the well, the that she is struggling as she is heavily pregnant, and we only have more of an indication who impregnated Celie.

This implicit delivery of information indicates a few key elements to the reader: the relationship between Celie and God, and the reader is listening in to this. There is also the indication that Celie always know how to best explain the situation and may not know a better way to 'explain' or when she explains the birth of her child: 'that little baby come out my pu have knock me over with a feather. Don't nobody come see us.' Celie is still young and 'what is happening to me' when she has 'always been a good girl'. So, she talks to using words that she likely only learned from her 'Pa' with no sense that they are. This is something we are encouraged to infer by considering her age and unfiltered language would she learn such sexualised words?

The contrast between adult language and innocent questioning of what is happening to the reader.

There is also a lot that is left open for the reader to interpret: did Celie's mother know she was being abused? How many children live in the household? Celie, Nettie and Lucious, or more?

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When Alphonso takes away Celie's first child there is a strong **juxtaposition** when Celie writes: 'I say God took it. He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods.' We can only assume 'He' is Alphonso as Celie uses 'He' to refer to her 'Pa' for the majority of the letters, indicating fear as well as possible disdain – she cannot bear to say his name. The use of **anaphora** here emphasises that 'he' (Alphonso) is the one committing wrong-doings.

Juxtaposition
or incongruity
together
to highlight
the two
Anaphora
reference
word, phrase
clarity and

The following letters open up Celie's world to show that the men in her life (in this case, 'Mr. _____'), treat her just as much as an expendable. We can see this with the exchanges between 'Mr. _____' and Alphonso about Nettie as she is 'important' ('[m]ake a schoolteacher out of her') and referring to her as livestock ('[s]he spoiled. Twice. But you don't need a fresh woman no how...', '... she work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you make you feed it or clothe it.').

What 'seals the bargain' is the promise of actual livestock (a cow) to 'Mr. _____', and to refuse marriage. Finally, just as calves are taken from their mothers, Celie was sold; they were given to others; the milk she produces is wasted. Celie believes that Alphonso is selling her children: 'I think he sold it to a man an his wife'.

Within the space of nine letters, we can also see a change in Celie – she has become aware of other's intentions and she is protective of Nettie.

Themes and Context

Childhood; family; women and femininity; the rural African American community



Discussion Task 1 (AO1, AO2)



How does the death of Celie's mother change Celie's relationship with God?



Reading and Interpretation Task 1 (AO1, AO2)

How old is Celie in Letter Three? Explain how you know this.



Active Learning Task 3 (AO1, AO2)

In groups of three, identify the symbols of education throughout these letters (and write down your discussion) how those symbols are connected with Celie's better life.

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Letters Ten to Twelve (pages 13

Summary

Letter Ten begins with Celie at the dry goods store with 'Mr. ____' who believes to be Olivia (her child) walking with Corrine. She talks to Corrine and finds her 'pleasant'. Corrine tells Celie a joke before the reverend catches up with Corrine and Celie is so happy.

Nettie and Celie reunite when Nettie runs away from home and moves in. It appears that Mr. ____ is constantly complimenting her, which makes Nettie uncomfortable to the point that 'Mr. ____' works out from this that Nettie has no interest and tells Celie that she must leave. The only one who can help her to go to the reverend's house since his wife is 'the only woman' Nettie says that 'nothing but death' can keep her from writing to Celie. Celie ends the letter.

Celie meets Kate and Carrie, 'Mr. ____'s sisters, for the first time, who compliment her on her child-rearing. A few days later, Kate comes to visit and tries to make life easier for Celie by giving her a new dress and telling Harpo ('Mr. ____'s oldest son) to help with the housework. Harpo then kicks his sister out of the house. Kate begs Celie to fight for herself. Celie believes that she will stay alive.

Racism: During the turn of the century, when the story is set, inter-racial racism was a common issue where the darker your skin colour, the lower class and less desirable you were. This partly stemmed from slavery where mixed-race slaves were given more desirable positions.

Age and family: Although 25 is hardly considered to be an 'old maid' by today's standards, in the early 20th century communities would have their members married around 18-20. By 25, most wives were expected to be at this point.

Analysis

The following letter shows how Celie resigns herself to a monotonous and labour-intensive life. However, Walker introduces elements of hope through the people Celie meets, which offer more effective alternatives to Celie's reliance on the church and God.

Letter Ten is a much longer letter, especially in comparison to Letter Nine, where Celie meets Corrine and Pauline (Olivia). Celie details the embroidery she had done for Olivia's nappies ('daidies') and the pleasant interaction she has with Corrine. It is juxtaposed to the conversations held by the men (the store owner and 'Mr. ____') towards Celie and Corrine: 'Girl you want that cloth or not? We got other customers sides you.' and 'Mr. ____' asking Celie: 'What you setting here laughing like a fool fer?'

Celie is overjoyed when she learns that her daughter, whom she thought was dead, is alive with the reverend and his wife. While Corrine is kind, her connection to the church symbolises her distance from God: Corrine lacks understanding of the church, she lives in, as she is sheltered and unaware of the violence that occurs outside. Despite feeling poor in comparison to Corrine, knowing her daughter is alive and well is symbolised by the dress Corrine plans to buy.

The arrival of Nettie demonstrates to Celie that she does have other options in life other than to simply comply with 'Mr. ____' and his family's wishes – Celie can become educated like Nettie. Kate also tries to protect Celie by making her a dress, but 'Mr. ____' exerts control over Celie's life. Even when Kate manages to buy Celie a dress, 'Mr. ____' controls the decision.

¹⁰ <https://insightcced.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/skin-tone-and-opportunities.pdf>

Celie wants a purple dress but settles for blue out of fear that 'Mr. ____' won't pay for red. Kate and Nettie leave, urging Celie to fight for herself, but they fail to understand Celie's reticence. Celie is afraid of their departure and sees their independence as futile, preferring to stay alive rather than be alone and unprotected. To Celie, life means security, even though she continues to be abused by 'Mr. ____' and his children: 'I don't fight, I stay where I'm _____. But I'm alive.' **Ironically**, she wishes to be buried to avoid _____. Her fear of being alone and unprotected outweighs her desire to be free from 'Mr. ____' and his children. _____. He claims to have God's support, her unhappiness _____. Her willingness to change her situation make her _____. Her view: the dependence on an ethereal, patriarchal _____. _____. It does not seem to work for Celie.

Irony: a situation that involves a contrast between what is expected and what actually happens. It often involves incongruity or contradiction. It can be found in literature, such as in the plot of a story or a drama.

Motif: a phrase, image, or symbol that is repeated throughout a work of literature, emphasizing a particular theme or idea.

Motifs

Dresses, colour and the moods they reflect and the protection they provide. Dresses throughout *The Color Purple* symbolise love and protection. The meanings: purple for regality and power, red for sensuality and vitality, blue for calmness (and submission). Celie ultimately is only given colours that are muted: 'brown, ma

Themes

Sisterhood and solidarity between women; racial segregation; motherhood



Discussion Point 2 (AO1, AO2)

Referring to letters Ten to Twelve, why are we not provided 'Mr. ____'s' re to communicate to the reader with this deliberate omission?



Discussion Point 3 (AO2)

Nettie and ____ (Mr. ____'s sister) both leave Celie on sad terms, unable _____. _____. What does this echo from letters One to Nine?



Active Learning Task 4 (AO1, AO2)

In pairs, list the similarities and differences between Celie and Kate. Wh story across letters Eleven and Twelve?

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Letters Thirteen to Eighteen (pages

Summary

Letter Thirteen opens up with Harpo asking questions about 'Mr. ____'. 'Mr. ____' beats Celie, to which 'Mr. ____' responds 'cause she my wife.' Celie immediately and Pa.

Harpo confides in Celie that he is in love with a girl he met in church and even though one another, he already plans to marry her. When 'Mr. ____' becomes excited when he plays in a nightclub. He fixes himself up in a way that he has never done for Celie.

He tries to kiss Celie, but Celie already knows. She wishes she could go and meet her mind for Harpo. 'Mr. ____' is gone for the weekend, and when he finally returns, he becomes even more curious about Shug. Even though she has 'a million question to ask' get any answers. Harpo's relationship with the girl becomes real, and Harpo confesses to Celie that his mother, Mrs. Butler, is pregnant. Harpo has already met Sofia's father, and did not receive a blessing. A scandal caused by his mother.

Harpo then takes Sofia to meet his own father. 'Mr. ____' looks at Sofia and refuses to give her anything. Harpo because he believes his son is young and limited and she could be tricking him. At this and says that she doesn't need Harpo or 'Mr. ____'s' property. Sofia moves to her room, knowing that she will be waiting for him when he is ready. Harpo, unable to convince his father, brings Sofia and their new baby home. Harpo and Sofia move into the shed behind 'Mr. ____'s' house. 'Mr. ____' gives his son some money for working at the farm.

Analysis

Harpo asks Celie: 'How come you stubborn?' to which she considers: 'He don't ask nobody ast that.' In this case, Harpo may well be questioning whether she is actually just a reason to be beaten. It seems that nobody asks why 'Mr. ____' and Celie are together. Subconsciously, there is an understanding that marriage is not for love but for labour. Celie should comprehend that physical abuse is a normal aspect of husband-wife relationships.

It is up until this point of the story that the male characters, such as Mr. ____ and Mr. T, are violent and misogynist. As Harpo matures, a new male perspective comes to light, shaking off its violent past. Harpo's inquiries regarding 'Mr. ____' and his treatment of Celie show his awareness about male roles beyond the model set by his father. However, when his feelings and sentiments clash with 'Mr. ____'s' callous and unloving attitude towards Celie. Harpo seeks a true understanding of relationships and seeks guidance from Celie – quite a change from a man who violently rejects Celie as a mother figure to now coming to her for guidance.

The lack of comprehension is further compounded for Harpo when he faces rejection from his father specifically turns Harpo away due to the scandal involving Harpo's mother. As a result of an ongoing affair, with her lover ending her life to prevent her return, the father places blame on the wife; wives are subjected to abuse for being labelled as 'stubborn'. The affair and subsequent murder is disregarded. We are led to infer that the real reason for the mother's (Mrs. Butler) unfaithfulness in Letter Twelve is down to the fact 'he just brought her home on running after Shug Avery. Nobody to talk to, nobody to visit. He be gone for days.'

In this society, it's not the men for men to be unfaithful, but women who stray are deserving of punishment. The mother-child bond prompts Harpo to view this situation differently. In his protests to Celie that his mother's death wasn't her fault, he articulates a point Celie can understand. Yet, for a male, this remark carries weight, as it contradicts the values he was raised with. The reader the importance of choice – Harpo can choose to think differently.

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Even 'Mr. ____' reveals genuine emotion and character in this segment, catalysed by Shug Avery. His meticulous grooming for his meeting with Shug amuses Celie, as such behavior is not typical of him. Shug's mere presence is enough to elicit this reaction from 'Mr. ____', even if it is magnified when 'Mr. ____' returns, too weary and despondent to subject Celie to further abuse. This foreshadows the eventual encounter between Shug and Celie.

The introduction of Sofia Butler also underscores women's influence on men. Sofia's strength in the narrative to successfully resist 'Mr. ____'s' attempts to dominate his surroundings emboldens Harpo to stand up to his father. Sofia's development unforeseen by many. She serves as an inspiration to Celie and a role model for the future. The support she receives from her family, especially her sisters, once again reinforces the power of sisterhood and femininity.

Following the birth of their child, Harpo and Sofia marry, with three sisters aiding in the process. Support is what Sofia relied on when confronting 'Mr. ____'. In response to Sofia's focus to Harpo, urging him to assert himself in the marriage. 'Mr. ____' employs tactics of subservience to Sofia and her dominant role. The events in this section divert attention from Harpo as he assumes a passive role in these occurrences, demonstrating her capacity for astute observation. For the first time, she becomes a confidante to both Harpo and 'Mr. ____'. Harpo surprises her, especially when 'Mr. ____' solicits her opinion. The emerging conflict introduces, finally, a sense of equilibrium to the narrative, allowing Celie to adopt a more active role. She remarks, with a tinge of contentment, that 'Harpo is no better at standing up to his father'. Her lack of attachment to Harpo prevents her from feeling distressed when witnessing the events. She is isolated as an abuse victim and yet refrains from intervening, allowing herself a sense of peace.

Themes

Love and sexuality; family; women; femininity and gender roles



Discussion Points (A02)



What is the reason that 'Mr. ____' gives Harpo for beating Celie? What back story does this suggest for his actions?

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Letters Nineteen to Twenty-one (page 85)

Summary

Harpo is perplexed by Sofia's refusal to obey his commands. In response, he administers a 'proper thrashing' to Sofia. Despite Celie's fondness for Sofia, she counsels physical punishment as well. During a subsequent visit, Harpo appears with conspicuous discomfort due to sore legs. After some time, Celie pays another planned visit to Sofia and encounters them engaged in a ferocious altercation. The fight leaves scars on Celie's face and prompts her to retreat back to her own abode. Consumed by remorse for encouraging Harpo with sleep troubles for nearly a month, her primary apprehension centres around Sofia. Eventually, Harpo confesses to Sofia that it was Celie who urged him to mistreat her, and Celie shares her lifelong struggle against adversity, expressing her love and unwavering stance against male violence. She queries Celie about her endurance of life, and Celie replies that she redirects her focus to an afterlife where 'Heaven endures eternally'. As a result of their conversation, they decide to repurpose the returned curtains into a quilt. This creative endeavor helps Celie to finally find restful sleep.

Analysis

Letters Nineteen to Twenty-one highlight the ways in which male violence and **patriarchal oppression** can impact the relationships between women.

Harpo's perplexity at Sofia's refusal to obey his commands and 'Mr. ____'s' advice to administer a 'proper thrashing' to Sofia reflect the **patriarchal norms** that permeate their society. Men are expected to be the dominant and authoritative figures in the household, while women are expected to be subservient and obedient. Sofia's defiance of these norms challenges the patriarchal status quo and threatens Harpo's sense of masculinity.

Celie's initial counsel to Harpo to subject Sofia to physical punishment is also influenced by patriarchal norms. Celie has been groomed to accept her own subjugation and to internalise the misogyny constantly reinforced around her. She is also motivated by jealousy of Sofia's strength, as she has never known a woman like Sofia before, and she is both drawn to and intimidated by her.

Harpo's subsequent appearance with conspicuous facial bruises and sore legs is a direct result of male violence. Sofia's fierce resistance to Harpo's attempts to control her has resulted in physical harm, which only further serves to solidify her resolve.

Celie's remorse for encouraging Harpo to harm Sofia is a testament to her growing awareness of that women face in their society. She recognises that her actions have contributed to Sofia's suffering, and she is deeply ashamed of her role in perpetuating that cycle of violence.

Sofia's confrontation with Celie reveals the depth of her pain and anger. She feels that Celie had begun to trust and admire her, and her willingness to listen to Celie's explanation is a sign of compassion and understanding.

Celie's admission that her actions were driven by jealousy is a sign of her growing self-awareness and her ability to understand the ways in which patriarchal oppression has shaped her own beliefs and emotions.

Sofia's decision to share her lifelong struggle against adversity with Celie is a significant moment. It reveals the deep pain that she has experienced, but she also affirms her love for Harpo and her commitment to resisting male violence.

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Celie's response to Sofia's story suggests that she has found solace in her faith. She is suffering she has endured, there is a better life waiting for her in the afterlife and of a better life in this one.

The decision to repurpose the returned curtains into a quilt **symbolises** the healing and reconciliation between Sofia and Celie. The quilt becomes a tangible reminder of their shared experiences and their **unwavering** support for each other and that even in the face of adversity, women can find strength and resilience in each other.

Themes

Family; women; community



Active Learning Task 5 (AO3, AO5)

Trudier Harris writes: the novel 'had done a great disservice through its... couldn't imagine Celie existing in any black community I knew... waiting rescue her.'¹¹

Referring to letters Thirteen to Twenty-one, would you agree with this p



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¹¹ 'On *The Color Purple*, Stereotypes, and Silence', Trudier Harris – <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29>

Letters Twenty-two to Twenty-seven (p

Summary

Letter Twenty-two opens with Celie writing about rumours that are about Shug Avery falling ill. Abandoned by her parents and rejected by the community without refuge. Adding to her distress, the town's residents seem to take a perverse delight. A town preacher delivers a not-so-subtle sermon, using thinly veiled language to chastise Shug. Although Celie is deeply angered by this mistreatment of Shug, she remains passive. She summons Harpo to prepare the wagon and horses for town. After five days, he returns to Celie to prepare the guest room. Despite Mr. ____'s attempts, Shug's frailty and despondency prevent connecting with him. As Shug's condition demands more care, Celie takes it upon herself, leading to Shug's gradual recovery. While bathing Shug, Celie experiences a newfound connection with the transformed man, a sensation she's never encountered before. Shug begins to encourage Celie to groom her hair, which triggers Shug's singing.

During Shug's convalescence, the owner of the farm they work on, 'Mr. ____'s' father, expresses displeasure about Shug's presence. Unexpectedly, Celie becomes an ally to 'Mr. ____' during their defence of Shug against 'Old Mr. ____'s' criticism. Celie and 'Mr. ____' find an unusual connection absent throughout their marriage. Shug's recovery progresses, and Celie imparts her knowledge. When a guest arrives at the house, Tobias, 'Mr. ____'s' brother, bearing a box of chocolates for Shug and as 'Mr. ____', Tobias, Shug and Celie engage in conversation, Celie articulates that Shug is just right.'

Analysis

After many instances of **foreshadowing**, Shug finally makes an appearance, but not in the way that Celie had imagined her. Instead of being bold and powerful, she is frail and ill. Celie finds out about the town's reaction to Shug's illness in the church, a place that Celie works hard to keep clean. The priest calls her 'sister Celie' for all of her hard work. There is a contrast between the hard work and submission of Celie that is 'rewarded' by the encouragement and the complete isolation of women who do not follow the same behaviour and for that they catch 'some kind of nasty woman disease'. There is an echo here from letters Thirteen to Eighteen – women who stray are seemingly deemed deserving of death.

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There is **irony** in that no one in the town comes to Shug's defence, despite many of them being the same type of judgement. It appears that Celie is the only one practising her religion and compassion towards others throughout these chapters.

There is a contrast between the morals of men and women in that Shug is chastised while 'Mr. ____' is free to behave in the same way without consequence. Despite this, Harpo defends Shug in church but tells Celie 'nobody fight for [her]' and uses this as a good example. Shug has a voice but does not use it.

The first meeting between Shug and Celie is **anticlimactic**. Celie had formed a very high opinion of Shug and this is crushed when Shug says 'I'm ugly'. It seems that yet another person has let Celie down. Shug's 'evil' and immoral behaviour is still forgiven and as Celie is so used to being unnoticed, the constant criticisms from Shug do not deter Celie from taking care of her.

Once again, there is a contrast between the behaviours and roles of men and women. Harpo is a nurse to Shug but is unsuccessful. Although he cares, he is not equipped to put someone in a position where he is heavily implied that he is incapable of running the farm: 'One good thing bout the way you run this place, us never miss him when he gone.' Shug states he's not 'a man' and '[a] little water come to his eyes.' The stereotypes of what an ideal man should be are clearly shown.

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gender roles of the time. It is also used here to show how strong and self-reliant Celie and Shug really are. Although these chapters **subvert** the expectations of gender roles, it is within these chapters we start to see 'Mr. ____'s' **character development** which is showing a more vulnerable, and perhaps honest, side. It is during this time when gender roles are subverted that there is common ground between Celie and 'Mr. ____': '[t]his the closest us ever felt.'

This is all tied together in Letter Twenty-one, when Shug learns how to quilt with Celie and tells Tobias 'I know I'm not alike... Believe it or not', to which he responds: 'C'mon, prove it... Just can't prove it to the world.' For the first time, the common ground between the men and women and the sense of peace: '[f]or the first time in my life, I feel just right.'

Themes

Love and sexuality; family; women; femininity; religion; spirituality; race and cultural reclamation

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Active Learning Task 6 (AO1)

In groups of three, consider the meaning of 'masculine' and 'feminine' stereotypes that 'Mr. ____', Celie and Shug demonstrate.

'Mr. ____'		Celie	
Masculine stereotypes	Feminine stereotypes	Masculine stereotypes	Feminine stereotypes



Discussion Point 4 (AO1, AO2)

How does the priest **characterise** Shug during his sermon?



Exam-style Question 1 (AO1, AO2)

Compare and contrast the relationship between 'Mr. ____' and 'Old Mr. ____'



Discussion Prompt 3 (AO4, AO5)

Considering the critical reception that *The Color Purple* received, would you black men as 'the villains' of the story within these letters?

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Letters Twenty-eight to Thirty-one (part 1)

Summary

Letter Twenty-eight begins with Sofia and Celie working together on a question to Celie about why men eat: Harpo has been consuming large amounts of food when he's not hungry. Neither of them can fathom the reason behind this behaviour, so he proceeds to rummage through the pantry, consuming whatever he can lay his hands on, particularly because Harpo doesn't appear to derive any pleasure from the food he's eating. He gains weight and, on one occasion, shows up at Celie's doorstep crying and sporting two black eyes from mistreating Sofia and questioning why he would hurt such an admirable woman. Harpo, who gave him the black eyes, but he's unable to comprehend her resistance to his wife's actions.

Celie prompts Harpo that 'Mr. ____' married her with the purpose of caring for her, but she had no say in the matter. Celie contrasts Harpo's behaviour with what Shug, the woman he intended to marry, would have done so by telling him the blunt truth. This revelation shocks Harpo; he cries and vomits, as if purging the emotional weight of his actions.

The following day, Celie visits Sofia and reveals Harpo's secret motivation for overeating: he is physically imposing as his wife to exert control over her. Sadly, Sofia acknowledges this and her weariness with Harpo. Though she still loves him, their marriage has been dominated by his thoughts. Sofia ponders the idea of visiting her sister, Odessa, who is now alone in the South. She confides in Celie that their intimacy has lost its emotional significance and she struggles with that fact. Sofia shares, 'He gets up there and enjoys it just the same. The fact he can't kill him.' While Sofia isn't certain about leaving yet, she jokes about needing a vacation.

Ultimately, Sofia makes the decision to depart. Her sisters arrive to collect her along with the quilt. To give Sofia the quilt they had been crafting, Celie supports her husband's new chapter.

Analysis

Letter Twenty-eight follows the theme of compromise between gender roles, and further explores the complex **power dynamics** and control in male relationships. Sofia and Celie's discussion of Harpo's overeating and abusive behaviour reveals the ways in which men can use their physical and (considered) emotional strength to dominate women.

Celie's observation that Harpo's overeating is a way for him to become 'as physically imposing as his wife' highlights the importance of physical appearance in patriarchal societies. Harpo's desire to be physically larger than Sofia suggests that he sees her as a threat to his masculinity. In order to maintain his sense of power and control, he feels the need to be physically superior to her.

Harpo's physical abuse of Sofia is a further demonstration of his need for dominance and control. When Celie accuses him of mistreating Sofia, he is unable to comprehend why she would resist his authority. This suggests that Harpo sees Sofia as a property, rather than as an equal partner. His need to control her body and her emotions is a reflection of the **misogyny** that is embedded in their society.

Celie's contrast of Harpo's behaviour with what Shug would have done is significant. An independent woman, Shug would have likely stood up to Harpo and refused to be controlled. Her rejection of Harpo for Shug suggests that she also longs for a more **equitable** relationship with men.

Harpo's emotional breakdown following Celie's revelation is a complex moment. On the one hand, he is capable of feeling remorse for his actions. On the other hand, it also suggests that he is more concerned with maintaining his power and control over Sofia than with her well-being – because the quilt is a symbol of her love for him.

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Sofia's decision to leave Harpo is a powerful act of self-preservation. She recognises abusive and that she needs to create a new life for herself and her children. Her choice and Celie have been working on is symbolic of her willingness to leave her past behind. It demonstrates that Celie, with the right network, can leave (this is something we see

The letters also explore the themes of female friendship and sisterhood. Celie's support for Harpo is a testament to the strong bond between the two women. Sofia has the strength to understand the importance of self-love, self-respect and the power of sisterhood. Sofia's decision to leave Harpo is affirming her own worth and dignity. The quilt that Celie gives her is a symbol of the

Symbolism

Working with fabric – Walker uses the activity of working with fabric, be it dressmaking or quilting, as a metaphor for peacemaking, bonding and friendship. When Celie is sewing, it represents the development of a positive relationship.

Clothing, quilting and the protection it provides – as working with fabric is symbolic of different people, the finished product represents the friendship and protection that these letters, it represents the reconciliation between Sofia and Celie.

Themes

Family; women; femininity and sisterhood; dresses and dressmaking

Clabber: raw milk that has soured and thickened. Originally an Irish Gaelic word taken to America by both Irish immigrants and Irish slave owners.



Active Learning Task (A01, A02)

In pairs, identify and consider the chores that Harpo has to do. What instructions does he receive in respect to these chores?



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Letters Thirty-two to Thirty-six (page 85)

Summary

Half a year after Sofia's departure, Harpo undergoes a profound transformation of his former residence and collaborates with his partner, Swain, to construct a **juke joint**. The established venue doesn't attract any patrons, prompting Harpo to implore Shug to perform. Once her recovery is nearly complete, she agrees to the request. The prospect of her performance at the club to fill up rapidly in anticipation.

Celie is elated by the opportunity to finally hear Shug's performance. However, 'Mr. ____' forbids her from attending the event. Nevertheless, Shug insists that Celie be present. At the gathering, Celie and 'Mr. ____' are together. Shug initiates her performance with a song meant for 'Mr. ____', a revelation that causes an immediate emotional tension. Eventually, Celie grasps that Shug's affections for 'Mr. ____' are directed at her.

Amid the performance, Shug calls out Celie's name and makes a special announcement of a new song titled 'Miss Celie's Song', the same melody Shug was humming while Celie was humming the tune, reflecting on how it marks the first time someone has created something for her.

With Shug's restored health, she confides in Celie about her impending departure. Harpo expresses his apprehension. In response, Celie discloses her fear that 'Mr. ____' will resume his physical abuse. In promise, Shug asserts her commitment to staying until she's certain 'Mr. ____' won't encounter Celie again.

Shug goes on to ask if Celie is troubled by Shug's intimate involvement with her husband. Celie explains her indifference, explaining that her sexual encounters with 'Mr. ____' are devoid of pleasure. Shug reacts with surprise upon learning this: 'Do his business. Why, Miss Celie, you're not going to the toilet on you.' She inquires whether Celie has ever observed her own nakedness. Celie explains that women possess a sensitive area that becomes intensely warm during intimate activities. Shug explores her own body, gingerly touching this 'hot spot' and encounters a sensation previously unknown to her.

In Letter Thirty-six, Sofia returns with a boyfriend named Buster Broadnax at Harpo's residence where her children are. Harpo replies that they're 'at home'. Sofia implies that 'Mr. ____' is not of his own accord. Harpo replies that 'Mr. ____' is 'two unnamed girls live elsewhere (where they are) and Bub has been in and out jail'. It is the first time we are given any insight into how Harpo is doing. Harpo asks Buster if he can dance with Sofia. They dance until Harpo's new girlfriend, 'little yellowish girlfriend', comes over and asks to cut in. Harpo tells her that he wants Sofia, and Squeak becomes angry. She slaps Sofia, but Sofia does not retaliate with a slap. Squeak punches Sofia in the face, knocking out two of her teeth and bloodying her. Harpo holds onto Sofia and goes to help Squeak.

Language used by Celie

Juke joints: juke joints¹² were important spaces for blues music and audiences, especially after the Emancipation Proclamation (a significant part of African American history). They were not just places where people could go to drink and dance, but also places where people could go together to celebrate and enjoy the music they love.

Scandless: scandalous.

Euphemism: a polite or an indirect word or phrase used to avoid saying something considered offensive or unpleasant.

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¹² <https://mississippencyclopedia.org/entries/juke-joints/>

Analysis

In letters Thirty-two to Thirty-six, there are themes of transformation, collaboration and anticipation in this narrative. Harpo's transformation can be seen as a **metaphor** for personal growth and taking control of his own life. The collaboration between Harpo and Swain shows the power of partnerships and working together to achieve a common goal – something we have only seen other women able to achieve so far. The anticipation generated by Shug's performance reflects the impact and influence of a well-known individual in a community. An additional interpretation is that, with Sofia's departure, Harpo reverts to the old stereotypical behaviour: he does not take Shug credit for his success and remains with a girlfriend who dominates him, leaving Sofia.

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The behaviour of Harpo echoes that of 'Mr. ____': 'Mr. ____' loves Shug but oppresses her, but oppresses Squeak. This repeated cycle serves to demonstrate how the expectation of an unnecessary unhappiness.

When Celie expresses her fear of 'Mr. ____' resuming physical abuse, Shug reassures her, and she is certain 'Mr. ____' won't harm her again. For the first time, Celie is protected.

Amidst Shug's performance, she calls out Celie's name and introduces a new song that Shug had been humming while Celie styled her hair. This moment is significant for Celie as someone has created something and named it after her, symbolising a newfound identity.

Letter Thirty-six illustrates the transformation of the juke joint into a space of liberation for Celie. Through her visits to the juke joint, Celie witnesses women who possess agency and live on their own terms, challenging the traditional patriarchal boundaries that segregate the sexes. Celie, a character reminiscent of a youthful Celie, though her timid and submissive nature, as she attempts to assert herself, she is further oppressed by Sofia.

Despite the progress made in this society, physical violence continues to dominate as a strategy of controlling women. Paradoxically, Sofia's new boyfriend, who is a gentlemanly character, grants Sofia the space to freely express her emotions and respects Sofia's ability to defend herself.

Celie's attraction to Shug is reignited when Sofia discusses the notion that life does not always go as planned. Celie perceives her love for Shug as a catalyst for a new beginning. When she approaches the table to greet Sofia, Celie becomes aware of her sensuality, particularly as Shug arouses her desires and creates a yearning for Shug.

Themes

Love; sexuality; family; women; femininity; race/cultural reclamation; self-empowerment

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Discussion Point 5 (AO1, AO2)

Harpo appears to be completely controlled by Shug. Referring to letters Thirty-two to Thirty-six, why this is the case.



Letters Thirty-seven to Forty-one (pages 134-140)

Summary

In Letter Thirty-seven, Celie is telling Squeak that Sofia is in jail for defending her father, the mayor who slapped her after she refused his wife's offer to become their maid. Buster is defending Sofia because he knew he would be shot by the police. Celie then explains the terms with the white sheriff, convinced him to let Celie visit Sofia in jail. Celie was heartbroken when she found out Sofia was after being beaten by the police.

Letter Thirty-nine sees 'Mr. ____' come along with the rest of the family at the dinner table, telling Squeak that Sofia will die from her backbreaking labour before they can get her out of prison sooner, since they are poor. Squeak tells the prison warden, whose family has hidden the secret of its heritage. 'Mr. ____' tells Squeak that she needs to go to the warden, who is technically Sofia's behalf.

Shug, 'Mr. ____' and Celie dress Squeak up to resemble a white woman, applying extra makeup to her skin. They tell her to tell the warden that Sofia doesn't really mind her punishment and would hate would be to serve as maid to a white woman. 'Mr. ____' and Shug believe that Squeak's psychology, will cause the warden to do exactly that – to release Sofia as a maid to a white woman. 'Mr. ____' hope, will save Sofia's life. Buster says this sounds like a bit of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' but Shug jokes to the family that, after all, the warden is actually Squeak's uncle to be.

Letter Forty-one tells of Squeak's traumatic encounter with the warden, bruised, and tells Harpo and the others that, first, the warden made her talk about her family, and then he raped her. The warden repeated to her that he is not her uncle – he seemed related to a black woman – and that, since he is not her uncle, their having sex would be a disgrace. In this story, Squeak asks Harpo if Harpo really loves her, or if he just loves the fact that she is white. Harpo loves Squeak, and Squeak replies that, if this is true, Harpo ought to call her Mary.

Analysis

Letters Thirty-seven to Forty-one explore themes of racism, power dynamics and gender roles through the experiences of the characters Celie, Sofia and Squeak. It reveals the injustice faced by Sofia, who is imprisoned for defending herself against the white mayor. This incident highlights the racial discrimination prevalent in society and the violent consequences of challenging white authority. Celie's visit to Sofia in jail further exposes the brutality Sofia endured at the hands of the police.

In Letter Thirty-nine, the focus shifts to finding a way to free Sofia from prison. The revelation of Squeak's relation to the prison warden adds a new layer of complexity. The plan to disguise Squeak as a white woman and manipulate the warden demonstrates the lengths to which some characters are willing to go to challenge the system and save Sofia's life. The concept of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' is brought up, highlighting the internal conflicts and compromises individuals make while navigating oppressive systems.¹³

The traumatic encounter between Squeak and the warden is described in Letter Forty-one. This scene exposes the systemic exploitation that Squeak faces. This scene exposes the dehumanising effects of white supremacy. Squeak's demand for justice, questioning his love for her beyond her skin colour, challenges societal expectations. Despite having so much power taken away from her, Squeak becomes resilient.

'Uncle Tom's Cabin'
The act of being a white woman, cooperating with the system, particularly derived from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

'White authority'
The power and influence that white people have in society, often used to oppress and control them and others.

'Yellow skin'
Used in reference to mixed-race individuals, often used to describe those who are perceived as being 'half-white'.

Societal expectations
The norms and standards that society expects individuals to follow, often leading to oppression and discrimination.

¹³ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343674>

Letters Thirty-seven to Forty-one shift the focus on the dynamics between men and women on the pervasive racism and power dynamics present in society as a whole, while highlighting the kinds of strength and resilience of the characters as they navigate and resist oppression. It is that everyone works together to fight an oppressive system. As Sofia's character is defined by self-reliance and resilience, her downfall is used to demonstrate how truly oppression was. What saves Sofia are the joint efforts of Harpo, Celie and Squeak but not without the help of 'privilege'. It takes Squeak, whose father is white, for even Celie to feel they have a chance.

Themes

Race and cultural reclamation; femininity and sisterhood; self-empowerment



Discussion Point 6 (AO1, AO2)

Using quotes from letters Thirty-seven to Forty-one, explore and explain



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Letters Forty-two to Forty-four (page

Summary

In Letter Forty-two, six months pass and Squeak begins to sing around the house, unusual and high, but everyone, including Celie, comes to appreciate it. Harpo is taken aback but he allows her to continue. It is also revealed that Sofia is now responsible for the mayoral election, although traumatic for her, were successful. In Letter Forty-three, Celie visits Sofia with her children on his property (which is close to the town). Sofia half-jokingly asks if black people should kill the white people who oppress them. But Celie says this wouldn't be possible or effective. She wants more white people to come and retaliate against the African-American population. Billy, the mayor's son, comes to playfully kick Sofia near where she and Celie are sitting but ends up kicking a rusty car. Miss Millie, the mayor's wife, comes over and asks Eleanor Jane, the little girl Sofia is with, if she did this, but Eleanor Jane says that Billy did it to himself.

In Letter Forty-four, Sofia shares her experiences with Celie. The mayor had purchased a car for Sofia but failed to teach her how to drive it, which led to Sofia teaching Miss Millie how to drive. Sofia visits her family, whom she had not seen in five years since her altercation with Miss Millie. Due to **segregation**, Miss Millie insisted that Sofia sit in the back of the car. Upon arriving at her family's home, Sofia's children barely recognised her. Sofia's time with her children was cut short when Miss Millie did not know how to put the car in reverse and had damaged it while refusing to ask for help.

Analysis

In Letter Forty-two, we learn that Squeak has begun to sing around the house. Her singing is appreciated by everyone, including Celie, comes to appreciate it. It is a thinly veiled metaphor that Celie (and Agnes) is beginning to find her own voice and assert her individuality. She is no longer just a slave; it means being different.

Harpo's reaction to Squeak's singing is also noteworthy. He is initially taken aback but then allows her to continue. Not only does this indicate that he is becoming more open-minded and accepting, but it also shows that he does not feel the need to oppress Miss Millie – he is allowing her to express herself.

Sofia's half-joking question about killing the white people who oppress black people is a reflection of her anger and frustration at the racism she has experienced. It is also an indication of her desire for justice and a way to end the oppression of black people. This resonates with her initial reaction to the racism she experienced.

Celie's response to Sofia's question is realistic and insightful. She knows that killing white people would not be possible or effective. There would always be more white people to come and replace the ones who were killed. This resonates with the African-American population.

The incident with Billy, the mayor's son, is a reminder of the dangers that black people face in the South. Billy's injury is a metaphor for the physical and emotional harm that racism can cause.

Eleanor Jane's honesty in telling Miss Millie that Billy kicked himself is a sign of her growing confidence and independence. She is not afraid to stand up for what is right, even if it means challenging a white person.

Sofia's experiences with Miss Millie are a reminder of the hypocrisy and racism that exist in the segregated South. Miss Millie relies on Sofia to teach her how to drive, but she is disrespectful and discriminatory. She insists that Sofia sit in the back of the car, even though she is a guest.

The fact that Miss Millie does not know how to put the car in reverse and damage it is a metaphor for her incompetence and privilege. She is used to being served and taken care of, and she lacks the knowledge to do things for herself.

Themes

Spirituality; men; women; gender roles; self-discovery



Learning Task 8 (A01, A02, A03)

In groups of two or three, create a five-minute presentation on the symbols in the text. You may wish to talk about irony, racial segregation, white privilege and self-discovery.

Active Learning Task 9 (A01, A02)

In pairs, look up the definition for 'foil' in the context of literary analysis. Which characters act as a foil for each other?

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Letters Forty-five to Forty-eight (page 26)

Summary

In letters Forty-five to Forty-eight, Shug has become very successful. She tells Celie, 'Mr. ____' and Celie, saying that she will be coming home for Christmas with a big surprise: Grady, Shug's new husband. Although Celie does not like Grady (likely due to jealousy, especially by 'Mr. ____', who spends most of the holiday drinking with him).

This enables Celie to spend the majority of the holiday with Shug, who now owns a house. Celie wonders whether 'Mr. ____' has stopped abusing her and whether their sex life has improved. Celie feels 'don't git nowhere.' It is from this topic of conversation that Celie confides in Shug about her feelings for 'Pa'. Her relationship with 'Mr. ____' makes her feel that she has always been complete. Shug responds by telling Celie that she loves her. This is the first time that they have ever been able to talk about her trauma with someone who has never felt loved, and Shug responds by telling her that she loves her. This affirmation has a profound impact on Celie. It is the first time that she has ever felt loved.

When everyone gathers for a party, Shug compliments Mary Agnes on her singing and her singing career (which Harpo objects to). Shug notices that Grady is attracted to Mary Agnes.

Analysis

It is in these letters that Celie finally begins to break free from the abuse and oppression of her entire life.

Shug's return home is the **catalyst** for Celie's transformation. Shug is a confident, independent woman who refuses to be defined by the men in her life. She is also a talented singer who has achieved success on her own terms. Shug's presence inspires Celie to start thinking about herself in a new way.

When Shug asks Celie if 'Mr. ____' has stopped abusing her, Celie is finally able to open up about the trauma she has experienced. Celie's confession to Shug about her sexual abuse she endured from 'Pa' is a significant step. It is the first time that Celie has ever been able to talk about her trauma with someone who has never felt loved, and Shug responds by telling her that she loves her. This affirmation has a profound impact on Celie. It is the first time that she has ever felt loved.

Shug's encouragement of Mary Agnes' singing career is also significant. It is a sign of Shug's empowerment of other women. She knows that Mary Agnes has talent, and she wants to help her achieve her dreams.

Grady's presence, however, creates a sense of **tension**. He is a reminder of the past and the pain that Shug and Celie are trying to escape. However, Shug's refusal to let Grady control her is a sign of her growing independence. Shug and Celie are creating their own space where they can be free to be themselves.

Themes

Men, women and gender roles, childhood, self-empowerment and discovery



Discussion Point 7 (AO1, AO2)

How does Shug's independence and success challenge the patriarchal norms that Celie lives?



Reading and Interpretation Task 2 (AO1, AO2)

How does Celie's relationship with Shug help her to heal from the trauma of her childhood?



Active Learning Task 10 (AO3)

What role does music play in the empowerment of women in the novel?

Catalyst
sets the events in motion

Tension
nervousness or difficulty used to create suspense

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Letters Forty-nine to Fifty-one (pages

Summary

Letter Forty-nine is a huge turning point in the story – Celie is told that Mr. _____ is still alive, who has been writing to her for years. Celie believes that 'Mr. _____' has just been throwing her away out of no interest in Nettie, asking Celie all about her, saying that she had seen a letter when 'Mr. _____' states the reason why she wants to know so much is that Nettie was the only person Mr. _____ ever loved.

Upon discovering this, Shug gets close to Mr. _____ again, which upsets both Grady and Celie. However, though, that Shug's feelings have not changed when Shug gives Celie a letter from Nettie found in her coat pocket. Celie learns that Mr. _____ had been hiding the letters all this time. This revelation about killing Mr. _____ and she approaches him from behind with a razor. Shug manages to convince Celie about how different Albert was when they were young. She also provides some backstories and physical affection from her parents which Albert provided. Shug had three children when her mother kicked her out. Albert's family never approved of Shug and even though Shug loves him, she doesn't want Albert to herself. This led her to be cruel to Annie Julia, 'Mr. _____'s' previous wife, as she could not believe that someone she loved could become a monster. As there might be a chance, Celie opens 'Mr. _____'s' trunk, steam open the letters and place the envelopes back into 'Mr. _____'s' trunk to arrange the letters and begin to read them.

Analysis

In the early letters of the novel, Celie has recurring dreams about her sister Nettie and the importance that Nettie will play in Celie's life.

The letters from Nettie are symbolic and represent Celie's connection to the outside world and a better future. The act of reading the letters symbolizes Celie's growing strength and independence, which have been unlocked with the help of her mother-in-law – virtues that 'Mr. _____' took from Celie. Shug shows Celie compassion and understanding, which helps Celie to realize her worth and also validates Celie's feelings and encourages her to stand up for herself.

Celie's transformation is triggered by her realisation that 'Mr. _____' has been hiding the truth. This revelation forces Celie to confront the truth about her abusive situation.

Themes

Violence and suffering; self-discovery

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Letters Fifty-two to Sixty (pages 12

Summary

Nettie's letters to Celie chronicle her journey of self-discovery and she reveals that Albert attempted to rape her, and she escaped to the home of Reverend. Celie quickly learns that she is not alone in her experiences of oppression, and she begins to assert her identity as a black woman.

In her subsequent letters, Nettie describes her life in Africa with Samuel and Corrine, the language and culture of the continent, and she witnesses the challenges that Africans face in the process. She realises that black men can be kind and gentle, a revelation that challenges her preconceptions.

Nettie's letters provide Celie with a glimpse of a world beyond Albert's abuse and the journey inspires Celie to reflect on her own life and to begin to imagine a different future.

Shug and Celie continue to sleep together but Celie feels that she has no desire, which makes her feel angry. Shug tells Celie she should wear pants because it's too hard to work in dresses. They get their hands on some army material and make some.

Analysis

After the build-up and 'half-cathartic' revelation that Celie has been written to all her life, there is a change of narration.

Nettie's letters serve as a powerful vehicle for exploring themes of identity, oppression, and transformation from a timid and subservient young woman to a confident and self-aware woman. The power of self-awareness and the importance of community. Nettie's letters also provide narratives about Africa, which often portray the continent as a place of savagery and violence, contrasting with the rich culture and history of Africa. Nettie challenges these stereotypes and offers a different perspective.

As Corrine and Samuel reveal the positive, protective aspects of the Church, and the role of the adopted Olivian, there is a sense that this protection is now extended to Celie.

The readers are offered a glimpse into 'what could have been' for Celie, had she been given the same protection and same level of education. Nettie's first instinct is to share all of her experiences as she had done when they were children. The most significant is her understanding of how she is treated and how they treat her. Her questions on slavery makes it hard for her to find a sense of unification – something we see the power of later in the story.

Themes

Violence and suffering; self-discovery; love and sexuality



Reading and Interpretation Task 3 (A01, A02)

What is Shug's real name? Why is she called Shug? What is the significance of her true name?



Active Learning Task 1 (A02, A03)

Compare and contrast the behaviour and parenting styles of 'Mr. ____' and 'Shug'. What are the parenting styles of 'Mr. ____', Shug and Celie's parents? Use the following table to show how the cycle of oppression is continuing between the generations.

'Mr. ____'s upbringing	Shug's upbringing	Shug's children's upbringing	Celie's upbringing

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Letters Sixty-one to Sixty-three (page

Summary

Celie is really happy to find out that Nettie is alive and wants to escape. In the letter, she talks about their journey to Africa, meeting a guy named Joseph, and reaching the village. She talks about the villagers, their customs, and their problems. Nettie also talks about Olivia's experience with a girl named Tashi. However, Nettie faces challenges with the village's views on women.

Analysis

At first, Nettie, Corrine and Joseph experience a bit of culture shock in Africa. But they find that life is not as different as it is in America. Letters Sixty-one to Sixty-three show us the contrast. In Africa, having multiple spouses is legal, but it's not like 'Mr. ____' and Harpo do. Women in Africa are often treated as second-class citizens. Nettie doesn't like it, it doesn't make her doubt her beliefs. Unlike Celie, even when she's in Africa, Nettie doesn't lose her sense of self-worth.

Tashi's story is used to show what might happen if she continues to be repressed and abused, like Celie. Nettie doesn't want Tashi to go through the same mistreatment. Tashi's father to be her protector. Tashi's father argues that oppressing women is for the prosperity, but it results in men lacking independent skills, similar to 'Mr. ____'s' in America.

In these letters, we also see Corrine belittling Nettie for the first time because she's not equal. Apart from Celie betraying Sofia, it's the first instance of women actively dealing with social pressures.

Themes

Race and cultural reclamation; self-discovery; the role of women; and gender roles



Interpretation Task 4 (A01, A02)

How do the cultural and gender-related challenges do Nettie and Celie face in Africa provide a parallel to their lives in America?



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Letters Sixty-four to Sixty-nine (pages

Summary

Nettie writes about the construction of a road through the Olinka village and the consequences it brings, including the loss of land and the imposition of rent and taxes. She also writes about the children's resemblance, leading to strained relationships. Samuel reveals his parentage and Celie's real father. Celie visits her stepfather and learns about her real father. He reveals that the children were taken away by their stepfather's wife. Celie searches for her mother, but finds nothing. Shug comforts Celie, and they go on to start a new family.

Analysis

The stability of Nettie's and Celie's lives is destroyed by events beyond their control (the destruction of the Olinka village is followed by a rift in Corrine and Nettie). The process of change plays important roles within these letters.

Progress is symbolised by the road that is being built, something that the Olinka people, with a broader world view, is surprised that the town has such a 'centre of the universe'. The village is split in half, both literally and metaphorically. As the Olinka people have never before, they struggle to adapt to this sudden change. The Olinka people also struggle to study, showing they struggle to adapt to a sudden change in ideas as well. Their traditions are ripped away from the Olinka people, creating a sense of betrayal deep through their home.

The sense of betrayal is mirrored by Celie discovering that Alphonso is not her biological father. This opens up many old wounds and creates a deeper sense of injustice in the fact that she was in the advantage of Celie's mother's poor mental state. This flood of emotions leads Celie to see a God that ignored her problems. From here, she begins to realise that she has power. Her journey toward this self-empowerment is visiting her mother's prayer to find out where her real father is.

We are given the opportunity to gauge Celie's character development by comparing her to Adam. Her discovery of her parentage leads to her harassing Nettie. The fear and anxiety also leads to her questioning her faith in God. The more that fear and anxiety overtake her, the more physically ill she becomes. The letters serve as an allegory for the consequences of not supporting your fellow woman.

Themes

Race and racism; spirituality



Discussion Point 8 (A02)

Considering the symbols of weather in Nettie's letters, how do they differ from the atmosphere in Celie's location?



Reading and Interpretation Task 5 (A01, A02)

Analyse the legend of the Great Sea. How does the story establish the place of the sea in the novel?



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Letters Seventy to Seventy-three (page 85)

Summary

We discover in a series of letters, Nettie reveals to Corrine that she is pregnant, that Adam is her son, and that their mother is Celie. Corrine initially refuses to believe it, but Nettie shows her an old quilt. Corrine dies shortly after, but before her death, she expresses her love for Nettie. Nettie also writes about the burial of Corrine, the need for clothing in the African climate, and her relationship with Celie, now writing to Nettie instead of God, discusses her frustrations with God and her spirituality with Shug. Shug introduces the idea that God is neither male nor female and is within oneself. Celie's perspective begins to shift, but she still struggles to let go of her past.

Analysis

These four letters serve to present the conflict of two women who are experiencing different interactions with what is commonly understood by Christians as a patriarchal figure. The ideas introduced in these letters reflect Walker's beliefs that are based upon naturalism.

As Corrine's faith slips, so does her trust in others. Nettie tries to prove to Corrine she is pregnant by showing her stomach. It takes Nettie to remind Corrine of the quilt (a quilt she had made for Olivia that Adam and Olivia are Celie's children, not Nettie's).

With Celie's rejection of understanding of God, Shug becomes a symbol for spiritual awareness. Churchgoers equated sex with immorality. Shug had never felt that way. Sex is a force, not a person, and that church is a place where people go to share, not to hide. In her experiences of their church, Celie points out there is not much of a God to share with. Shug introduces the idea that God should be worshipped through enjoying what it creates. Sex should be enjoyed (something that is echoed when Shug tells Celie about noticing her own body).

From here, Celie is able to let go of feeling guilty for her emotions and having her heart broken. She begins to love God, but the God she knew was false. All her life, she has been betrayed and lied to.

Themes

Spirituality; women and gender roles; self-discovery

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Letters Seventy-four to Seventy-seven (p

Summary

Sofia, who has been away for more than 10 years, comes back home and does not recognise her anymore. Harpo and Mary Agnes have their own relationship, making Sofia's place in their lives anymore.

Shug announces that she and Celie are leaving for Tennessee. 'Mr. ____' is surprised, and Celie keeps her sister Nettie away. Celie promises to stay when her children return from Africa, but she is against him.

Celie shares her feelings about how 'Mr. ____'s children have treated her. He slaps her with a knife. Shug advises that women shouldn't care about others' opinions, while Grad affects her chances of finding a man.

Sofia tells Harpo that his favourite child, Henrietta, isn't actually his own. Mary Agnes has a singing career, but Harpo opposes the idea. Suzie Q, their daughter, forms a strong bond with her to leave. Sofia offers to take care of Suzie Q while Mary Agnes is in Memphis and

In Letter Seventy-five, 'Mr. ____' verbally abuses Celie, calling her ugly and comparing her to a dog, asking if any more letters from Nettie have arrived and cursing him. Shug pulls Celie away

Celie is finally free from 'Mr. ____'; Shug reads newspapers to Celie, expanding her knowledge. Celie develops a passion for making pants and receives positive feedback. Shug creates a business plan, she finds happiness. Darlene tries to teach Celie to sew

Analysis

These letters are a powerful example of the resilience of women in the face of oppression. Celie and Mary Agnes are all strong and independent women who refuse to be defined by others. Celie's argument with 'Mr. ____' serves as the climax of the novel – it is the peak of her journey, finally able to defend herself.

Celie's fight for freedom permanently changes the relationships between the men in her home also serves as a disruptive event that forces everyone to confront their own roles. The revelation that Henrietta is not Harpo's child is a particularly powerful moment, as it challenges notions of family and paternity.

Celie's decision to leave 'Mr. ____' and start a new life with Shug is a sign of her newfound independence. She is finally free to be herself and to pursue her own dreams. She begins her prayers (something that is built up from the previous letters). There is also a return to education being a tool for freedom with Shug telling Celie about the wider world.

This strength is symbolised in the pants she makes for everybody. Clothes have always been a source of protection within the novel; the women make dresses and quilts as an extension of their identity. Celie makes pants (something only men would traditionally wear) for anybody who wants them, and they are especially important for the power they give to the female characters. Celie does not use this power to men and women equally, indicating that her world has dramatically changed. Celie is able to make gender roles meaningless by loving all. This unifying love is named, 'Folkspants Unlimited'.

Themes

Men; women and gender roles; self-discovery; love and sexuality



Active Learning Task 12 (A01, A02)

In pairs, consider whether or not Shug has always lived her life according to her own rules. Use quotes and examples to help you.

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Letters Seventy-eight to Seventy-nine (p

Summary

Celie visits Harpo and Sofia after hearing about Sofia's mother's passing. It is significant that 'Mr. ____' doesn't recognise her. Sofia and Harpo argue about having white children, but Sofia insists on being one. They discuss Mary Agnes, who is now a singer and smokes marijuana. At her funeral, Sofia and her sisters serve as pallbearers without causing a scandal. 'Mr. ____' has a fatal blood disease and expresses concern for Sofia. Sofia reveals that Harpo took care of her when she was in a bad state. Sofia and Harpo seem to have reconciled, and 'Mr. ____' improves after Harpo's visit. Celie's remaining letters from Nettie.

Analysis

The letters begin with Celie literally and metaphorically 'wearing the trousers'. It is for the first time that 'Mr. ____' is able to see Celie as her own person rather than property. She also shows her power when she shares a marijuana cigarette with Harpo and Sofia. Their experience with the drug feels like something more powerful than anything they have experienced before, an almost spiritual experience. Celie's philosophy is to use the drug 'to feel closer to God' and that abuse of the drug has left Grady and Mary Agnes 'feeble-minded'. The experience that the three share has similarities to the spiritual practices in African cultures.

Pallbearers
carry a coffin at a funeral or burial.
pallbearers are the people who carry the coffin.

Anachronistic
something that is out of its proper time or place.
particular.
Some

There is a sense that we have now come into the 21st century as well: Celie is wearing trousers and occasionally smoking marijuana. Social rules no longer look down on Sofia and her values that 'Mr. ____' and Harpo held on to have finally been proven **anachronistic**.

Themes

Religion and spirituality; racial and cultural reclamation; men, women and gender roles

Marijuana: In the United States, marijuana wasn't widely used for recreational purposes until the early 1900s. Immigrants from Mexico to the United States during the tumultuous Mexican **Revolution** introduced the recreational practice of smoking marijuana to Americans.



Discussion Point 9 (AO3, AO5)

Based on Celie's relationship with marijuana, what do you think Walker's message is? You may use research to help form your answer.



Active Learning Task 13 (AO5)

What 'blood disease' is Henrietta suffering from? Outline the clues throughout the text that lead to your proof of your answer. You may wish to discuss your findings with your class.

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¹⁴ <https://www.history.com/topics/latin-america/mexican-revolution>

Letters Eighty to Eighty-one (pages 2

Summary

Nettie begins Letter Eighty by announcing that she and Samuel got autumn. The Olinka's village had been completely displaced by headquarters for a rule currently living in a gigantic shelter which they had to pay for themselves. As Samuel this, they decided to go to England to receive some help and – hopefully – justice.

On their travels, they meet a wealthy former missionary (Doris Baines) who had used town by herself. The chief of the tribe sent her a couple of women as wives (as they educate the women and she always being the 'grand-mama' of their children.

The Missionary Society in England appears to be more interested in finding out why Corrine died rather than the plight of the Olinka. Samuel feels that the only thing left mbeles who live isolated in the forest.

Samuel and Nettie tell Adam and Olivia about their real mother. Adam is disturbed to wife. Samuel reassures him that when they return to America, they will find her. Adam (who he is in love with) welfare as she will be part of the **coming-of-age ritual** (involve return to the Olinka village, Adam is disturbed by Tashi's facial scars.

Analysis

The loss of the roofleaf for the Olinka carries profound symbolic and practical significance. The roofleaf, revered as a deity, symbolises religious authority on earth, much like Celie's original idea of a god being 'big and old and tall and greybearded and white'. Its removal evokes a sense of divine abandonment, jeopardising the tribe's very existence. Samuel and Nettie's missionary endeavours face an uncertain future, as the Olinka's survival hangs in the balance. While the Olinka struggle to adapt, Celie is liberated and becomes self-reliant.

Doris embodies a woman who challenges traditional gender roles, forging her own path in a society often constrained by convention. Her accomplishments, however, are perceived through the lens of the African tribe's patriarchal norms, limiting her recognition to 'manly' rather than simply 'successful' achievements. Despite societal expectations, Doris leads a fulfilling life, unburdened by the societal pressures of marriage and biological motherhood.

Corrine and Samuel hail from a burgeoning black upper-middle class, emerging in during the novel's time frame. Educated African Americans in Harlem and Georgia universities, embarked on global ventures, and undertook missionary work worldwide eagerly embraced the opportunity to participate in these missions.

Tashi's realisation that her facial markings will be perceived as a 'savage' by some in awareness of Western cultural perceptions. Her choice to **assimilate** into one culture from another, leaving her caught between two worlds.

Themes

Religion and spirituality; race and cultural reclamation; family; men, women and gender

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One of the most important centres of African-American culture during this time was New York City. In the 1920s and 1930s, Harlem experienced a cultural renaissance as writers and musicians expressed their creativity and challenged racial stereotypes. The Renaissance produced some of the most important and influential works of African-American literature and art.

Jim Crow laws Jim Crow laws were a system of state and local laws that enforced racial segregation in the southern United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They mandated that people in public facilities and services, such as schools, transportation, restaurants and



How does the loss of the roofleaf for the Olinka tribe symbolise both a p and what impact does it have on Samuel and Nettie's missionary efforts

Letters Eighty-two to Eighty-five (page

Summary

Celie receives news from Daisy that Alphonso, Celie's stepfather, has died. Celie has inherited the house and dry goods store. Celie wants to give up the house but Shug tells her to stay 'for good' (Walker, A, page 246). Celie has a new store to sell her pants, with her fortune teller. While she is renovating her home, Shug breaks up with Celie. Shug tells her that she will be touring with him. Shug tries to make Celie understand that this new musician. While Shug is gone, Celie helps Sofia find a husband for Henriette. She recalls Nettie talking about yams and refuses to eat them. 'Mr. ____' comes up with some recipes to hide the taste of yams and he has become at home. It seems that 'Mr. ____' has changed his ways when he has become at home. However, it is a tragedy saying that Nettie and Samuel's ship has sunk off the coast.

Analysis

Letters Eighty-two to Eighty-five serve as the **denouement** of the novel: when Alphonso dies, Celie learns for the first time that her stepfather's house, land and store really do belong to Nettie and her, for they were the property of their real father. Alphonso had simply 'stolen' them from the girls; fortunately Daisy, Alphonso's teenage wife, tells Celie the truth. At first Celie does not want to move into the house where Alphonso has lived, but Shug convinces her to do so, also suggesting a spiritual cleansing (**smudging**) with cedar sticks. Not only is this symbolic of chasing out the evil that lingered there, it also demonstrates how Celie has truly embraced her newfound spirituality and understanding of God. Once she sees the place, she grows excited with the possibilities it offers. Celie writes to Nettie that there is plenty of room in the house for all of them, including Olivia and Adam. Walker is shadowing the resolution of the plot, when Celie will finally be united with her family. The place of abuse and heartbreak will become a scene of harmony and love.

Denouement
where the story comes together and the conflicts are resolved

Smudging
cleansing with smoke or with smol

Poetic justice
and evil is

Redemption
or correct

In the early part of the novel, Celie suffered unbelievably with the sexual and emotional abuse of her stepfather, Alphonso. Now she learns that he has also kept the house, land and store from her. Ironically, the gravestone of this evil man and businessman. Celie, however, is gaining her **poetic justice**. During the novel, she has experienced emotional and spiritual growth; now she has the opportunity to live well. The fact that it will come in Alphonso's house and store forms a neat circle in the story. The end of the story will take place where it began.

However, in Letter Eighty-three, before the novel reaches its final conclusion, Celie experiences unhappiness. Shug falls in love with a nineteen-year-old man in her band. It breaks Celie's heart. This is essential this time as it motivates her to make the final move to Alphonso's house and store, demonstrating her newfound self-respect, strength and, most importantly, resilience.

Another part of the reconciliation, or denouement, in the novel involves Celie meeting her mother, Nettie. Celie helps to care for the sick Henrietta. She also helps to care for Albert, who is now a much softer person and has been through a lot. He now works and keeps his own business. He is also helping to care for Henrietta. He has a good relationship with Harpo. When Celie stops by to see his shell collection, Albert talks to her. He does not appreciate her when they first married. Then he reminds her that they are still friends. He hopes that they might get back together. Not for labour, but for friendship this time. Celie's interest in men.

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As one thread is resolved, another test comes along for Celie: the devastating new test Celie's newfound stability and sense of self. Although it seems she will now be sister throughout her life, she knows that Nettie will always live in her mind. She and Nettie were reunited through the mail. When Celie finds out that Nettie has not received her letters, she is crushed; she wanted her sister to know her. Celie's undelivered letters to Nettie and the letters she wrote to God, which could not be delivered either.

Themes

Religion and spirituality; family; women's rights; community and sisterhood



Discussion Prompt 4

What do you think would happen to Celie had Shug abandoned her before she met him? How would this affect her relationship with Memphis together?



Exam-style Question 2 (AO1, AO2)

The text discusses Albert's transformation and Celie's reconciliation with him. How does Albert's changed behaviour contribute to the overall theme of the text?



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Letters Eighty-six to Eighty-seven (page 85)

Summary

Nettie writes to Celie, telling her that Tashi has run away with her. She feels that there is nothing more she or her family can do: the rest of the tribe is dying of malaria. Nettie's family decide to return to America in the hope that Nettie will find Celie. It has been 30 years since she had last seen Celie. She hopes that 'Mr. ____' has not destroyed her. Nettie tells Celie that Adam is currently searching for Tashi.

Celie, feeling that her sister is still alive, continues to write to her. Shug has been away for a long time and has met one of her children in Arizona. Her other children refuse to see her. Some of her friends still write to Celie once a week. Celie has accepted that Shug is not coming back, but she will one day.

Celie spends a lot of her time with Harpo and Sofia. Eleanor Jane, believing Sofia care for her, which has started to become a nuisance. Eleanor Jane is hurt to hear that Sofia is tired of her and has begun to reconcile with 'Mr. ____'. She asks about Celie's childhood and is shocked to hear that she endured. He admits he used to beat her out of frustration of the loss of Shug. Celie tells him about her business and that 'anybody can wear them.' 'Mr. ____' remembers how he enjoyed sewing with her. Celie starts to feel that 'he begin to be somebody I can talk to.'

Analysis

There is a strong sense of **disillusion** in the letters from Nettie – the tragedy of the Olinka tribe has destroyed their sense of the world completely, leaving Samuel and Nettie to decide to leave Africa.

Spiritual realisation is also mirrored with Nettie and Samuel (coming to the same conclusion as eventually Celie) that God is a free spirit. From their distance and separate lives Nettie and Samuel discover the same sense of God.

We see the struggle of finding and quilting being mirrored in these letters with Tashi, who is torn between both the Olinka and Western world, feels that she must choose between allowing her body to be cut on her bare skin. The village have lost their roofleaf and protection and stability.

Adam initially rejects Tashi, the only person who she feels loves her. This mirrors the rejection Nettie left. The difference here is that Adam quickly sees the error of his ways and does something that his mother also ends up doing with Shug (an indication that Adam is not as bad as he seems).

Letter Eighty-seven finally discusses Celie's sexuality openly: Celie never identifies herself as a lesbian. Albert presses her why she does not like men, she simply discusses her aversion to the and abusive treatment she has received. Albert will never understand the relationship. Harpo and Harpo want to actually change Celie, constantly trying to set her up in a heterosexual relationship. Celie sees her sexuality is open to interpretation, as Walker believes it should be, for a woman.

Themes

Love and sexuality; women, feminism; sisterhood; family

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¹⁷ <https://www.washingtonblade.com/2022/04/28/alice-walker-sets-the-record-straight-in-new-b>

Racism: The relationship between Eleanor Jane and Sofia exemplifies a common occurrence in the Deep South during the early 20th century, wherein black nannies were brought up to the white South for the upbringing of their white charges. Despite Eleanor Jane's enduring affection for Sofia, her role as a nanny and confidante for numerous years, Sofia harbours deep bitterness stemming from her experiences, rendering her incapable of harbouring any affection for the young woman. This becomes evident when Eleanor Jane brings her newborn baby boy for a visit in the hope of eliciting love and acceptance, but is instead met with crushing rejection. Sofia's explanation for her refusal to embrace the child is that he will inevitably grow up to perpetuate the oppression of black individuals.



Discussion Prompt 11 (AO1, AO2)

After reading the letters from Nettie, the tragedy of the Olinka tribe has a profound impact on the characters. How does the Olinka tribe influence Nettie and Samuel's decision to leave Africa? Discuss the themes of disillusionment and spiritual realisation in their experiences. Use specific evidence and analysis to support your answer.



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Letters Eighty-eight to Ninety (pages

Summary

Nettie writes that Adam and Tashi have returned. While they were in America, they discovered a huge hidden city full of displaced tribe members. Adam asks Tashi to marry him – he says that her facial scars will make her look savage in America and that Adam will become ashamed of her. Tashi agrees that he will always be with her and proves it by having his face scarred as well. Samuel and Nettie's family then immediately set out for home.

While Celie awaits Nettie's return, she sets up her store and hires Sofia as the clerk. Harpo, with Eleanor Jane's help, asks Celie to marry him again, to which Celie offers no resistance. She receives a letter from Shug, telling her that she is coming back.

While Shug, Harpo and Celie are sitting on the porch, they see a car pulling up to the house. It is Olivia, Adam and Tashi. Celie and Nettie recognise each other straight away and fall in love.

There is a gigantic barbecue to celebrate the Fourth of July and the family reunion. Celie is happy and enjoying each other's company. She marvels that she is finally reunited with her mother. She is 'the youngest [Celie] ever felt.'

Analysis

The last three letters provide the essential **closure** and **conflict resolution** that Celie and her family need. We see all the character arcs coming together with the more obvious observations of what they have learnt: Celie learns to enjoy her own company without Shug. This shows emotional independence, the final piece in Celie's journey of self-acceptance and reliance.

Walker, however, does not provide a sense of closure when it comes to the problems of internalised racism, which occurs when people begin to believe the lies and stereotypes told about them (as we have seen with Mary Agnes and Old Mr. _____'s disdain for dark skin). Tashi recognises that in America, light-skinned African Americans are valued over those of darker skin. She has seen advertisements for a cream to allow blacks to bleach their skin to a lighter colour. She worries that she will be rejected because her skin is so dark. Olivia is wise enough to know that the best way to combat internalised racism and feelings of inferiority is to assert **solidarity**, to love one another. Adam shows his love for Tashi by having his own face scarified, so she will not feel so different in America. His plan works, for Tashi agrees to marry him. Sofia's life has also changed. She is now working as a clerk in Celie's store with Harpo's blessing. He has obviously changed and escaped the normal **matriarchal** role of mother and housekeeper. She has also accepted her place and has ironically hired her to help care for Henrietta. The white townsfolk, however, have not changed and are outrageous that a white woman should do work for blacks.

The letters reveal a number of reversals from earlier in the novel. Celie is a totally successful and she is self-sufficient. Although gentle as always, she is able to forgive and move on from her relationship with him; she forgives him because of their mutual love for Shug.

The letters show the completed **redemption arc** in Albert. He is trying to help Celie and is treating her with respect; he also philosophises about life's wonders and the little things. This is the lesson that Shug taught Celie years earlier when she saw the beauty of creation like the colour purple. Because Albert has learned to appreciate his feminine qualities, he also feels loved and accepted.

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It is significant to note that in Letter 89, one of the most complex in the novel, is when she has been told that her sister is dead, the faithful Celie refuses to believe it and she writes to God. It is also important to note that the kind and sensitive Celie has remembered to pray for her mother.

Even though the story comes to an end, there is a strong sense of renewal which allows Celie to start young again. As the terrible chapters of her life come to a close, she begins anew. We can feel that the ending of the novel is not a close, but a new beginning.

Themes

Men, women and gender roles; self-empowerment and discovery; family; religion



Discussion Point 12 (AO1, AO2)

What is the significance of celebrating the Fourth of July at the end of the novel?



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Whole-text Analysis

Characterisation

Primary Characters

Celie

Celie, the protagonist, is a young African-American woman who experiences a remarkable transformation throughout the novel. Initially portrayed as meek and submissive, she endures various forms of abuse and oppression but eventually finds her voice, strength and freedom. Celie starts the story as a teenager living in rural Georgia during the 1900s.

Deuteragonist
character
affects

Lynched
an alle
course

Nettie

Nettie, the **deuteragonist** and Celie's younger sister, is intelligent, educated and passionate about justice. Nettie's character is defined by her unwavering love and support for Celie, acting as her confidante and source of emotional solace. Nettie's experiences as a missionary provide her with a broader perspective on gender and racial inequalities, inspiring her to challenge societal norms for justice and equality.

Celie and Nettie's mother

Although Celie and Nettie's mother, often referred to as 'Ma' or 'Ma Dear', does not appear in the novel, her impact on Celie's life is profound. Her early death leaves a lasting void. Nettie's biological father is **lynched**, she loses her mind, and in her vulnerable state, her marriage to Alphonso, she often falls pregnant, and during her last pregnancy

Alphonso

Alphonso, also known as Celie and Nettie's father (referred to by Celie as 'Pa'), is a central character. He is responsible for subjecting Celie to sexual abuse and forcing her into a marriage. His presence in the story serves as a catalyst for Celie's journey of self-discovery, resilience, and escape from a cycle of abuse.

Corrine

Corrine, Reverend Samuel's wife, becomes a significant figure in Nettie's life. Corrine is a caring woman, driven by her faith and her desire to help others. However, her character is somewhat rigid and resistant to change, particularly when confronted with challenging truths about her own family history. Despite her flaws, Corrine's presence in the story adds depth to the complexities of religion, cultural clashes, and the limitations of well-intentioned but misguided beliefs.

Reverend Samuel

Reverend Samuel is the local reverend before he, his wife and Nettie travel to Africa. Samuel plays a pivotal role in Nettie's life. He is portrayed as a compassionate and wise man whose teachings embrace love and acceptance. He provides Nettie with a safe haven and a sense of purpose in her mission work. His character represents a positive and inclusive interpretation of religion, contrasting with the oppressive and judgemental practices that Celie and Nettie have encountered.

Olivia

The daughter of Alphonso and Celie, who was given away immediately after her birth, Olivia is a young African and African-American heritage. Raised by Corrine, Reverend Samuel and Nettie, she is a symbol of hope, bridging cultural gaps and embracing diversity. Throughout the novel, Olivia's character highlights the potential for unity and healing across racial and cultural boundaries.

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Adam

The son of Alphonso and Celie, who was also raised by Reverend Samuel and Corrine. He represents the continuation and celebration of African and African-American heritage. His marriage to Tashi, a white woman, symbolizes that connection. His relationship with Tashi also serves as a contrast to Celie's marriage to Mr. ____.

Tashi

Tashi is a friend of Olivia's. She is an Olinka woman who has been engaged to Adam. Tashi is initially depicted as a traditional and obedient young woman, conforming to the norms and expectations of her tribe. However, as the story progresses, Tashi's character evolves, and she begins to challenge societal norms and embrace her own autonomy. Tashi's journey represents the complexities of **cultural assimilation**, the discovery and the empowerment of women.

Cultural
minority
take on
dominant

'Mr. ____' (Albert)

'Mr. ____', also known as Albert, is a complex character. He is initially depicted as a man who serves as Celie's abusive husband. 'Mr. ____' represents the oppressive and patriarchal system that other women endure. However, as the story progresses, 'Mr. ____' undergoes a transformation, showing signs of vulnerability and remorse. His character arc reflects the potential for growth and redemption, as well as the themes of **redemption** and the capacity for individuals to learn from their mistakes.

Harpo

Harpo is 'Mr. ____'s son and Celie's stepson. Harpo initially embodies the traditional expectations of his community, seeking dominance over women and conforming to societal norms. As the story progresses, Harpo's character evolves as he questions and challenges these norms. He learns valuable lessons about love, respect and the importance of equality in relationships, ultimately demonstrating personal growth and transformation.

Sofia

Sofia is a strong and resilient character and wife to Harpo. She is Celie's stepdaughter and defies the oppressive systems and her refusal to conform to societal norms. Her emotional strength and refusal to be submissive to anyone. Her unwavering spirit and defiance in the face of mistreatment inspires Celie to find her own voice and assert her independence. Sofia's character represents the power of resistance and self-determination, challenging the oppressive structures of patriarchy as a woman.

Shug Avery

Shug Avery is a blues singer and Albert's mistress. She is a charismatic and unconventional woman who acts as a catalyst for Celie's transformation. Shug is portrayed as a talented singer and a woman of sensuality. She serves as Celie's mentor, confidante and lover, encouraging Celie to challenge her to question societal expectations. Shug's character represents the power of unconditional love and acceptance.

Squeak (Mary Agnes)

Squeak, whose real name is Mary Agnes, is Harpo's girlfriend. After his marriage to her, she is a young woman who initially conforms to societal expectations but later finds her own voice. She is initially timid and submissive, but her relationship with Harpo and her experiences with him lead her to challenge traditional gender roles. She undergoes a personal transformation, finding the courage to assert her independence. Squeak's character highlights the potential for growth and the pursuit of one's own identity and dreams.

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Miss Millie

Miss Millie is a white woman who represents the privileged and condescending attitudes towards African Americans during the time period. Miss Millie hires Sofia as a maid but fails to empathize with Sofia's struggles and the injustices she faces. Miss Millie's character serves as a symbol of inequality, highlighting the stark contrast between the lives and experiences of African Americans and their white counterparts. Her interactions with the black characters in the story reveal the deep-seated prejudices and power dynamics of the time.

Eleanor Jane

Miss Millie's daughter. She was primarily raised by Sofia and sees her as a mother figure. Eleanor is surprised when Sofia does not fully reciprocate, not understanding the years of hardship she has endured at the hands of her parents. As a way to repair the relationship, Sofia encourages Eleanor to spend time with her for Sofia.



Minor Characters

May Ellen

Also known as 'New Mammy' in Celie's initial letters. May Ellen is not much older than Celie and struggles to adapt to her new married life. We do not find out about her name until much later in the novel.

Kate and Carrie

Kate and Carrie are Albert's sisters who come to 'inspect' Celie and her household. They are condescending and look down on her for herself and defy 'Mr. ____'s' abuses.

Grady

Grady, Shug's first husband, is depicted as a caring and affectionate individual, yet he is also a man who indulges in lavish spending using Shug's money and regularly engages in marijuana use. He provides some relief when Grady embarks on an affair with Celie, as it alleviates her from the monotony of their marriage.

The Mayor

Miss Millie's son-in-law. A pompous, arrogant and racist, he is responsible for putting Sofia in prison for her role in the riot.



Germaine

Shug's nineteen-year-old 'last-fling' lover.

Please note this is not an exhaustive list of characters that are mentioned in The Color Purple.



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Relationships

The relationships depicted in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are complex and multifaceted, involving themes of love, oppression, redemption and personal growth. The novel primarily revolves around Celie, and her connections with various individuals, each contributing to her journey.

Celie and Shug Avery

One of the pivotal relationships in the novel is between Celie and Shug Avery. Shug, a blues singer, becomes a catalyst for Celie's transformation. Initially in awe of Shug, Celie's relationship with her evolves into a deep, intimate connection that challenges societal norms and liberates Celie from oppression. The two women share a deep bond of friendship and love.

Celie and 'Mr. ____' (Albert)

Celie's relationship with 'Mr. ____' (Albert) begins as one of brutality and domination. At a young age, Celie endures years of abuse and mistreatment. However, as the narrative progresses, the relationship undergoes a transformative shift. 'Mr. ____' transitions from oppressor to a supportive partner, and Celie finds empowerment and independence within the relationship.

Celie and Nettie

Celie's connection with her sister, Nettie, is a source of solace and hope throughout the novel. Although physically separated for a significant part of the story, the sisters maintain a deep connection through the exchange of letters. Nettie's letters offer Celie a glimpse into the outside world and provide her with emotional support as they navigate life's challenges.

Celie and Sofia

The relationship between Celie and Sofia, Harpo's wife, is marked by mutual respect and defiance. Sofia, a strong and resilient character, becomes a role model for Celie. Through Sofia, Celie learns to challenge societal expectations and stand up to oppression. Their friendship contributes to Celie's growing understanding of herself and the world around her.

Harpo and Sofia

Harpo, 'Mr. ____' and Sofia's son, embarks on a journey of self-discovery throughout the novel. Initially struggling with traditional gender roles and expectations, he seeks guidance from Sofia. However, as the narrative unfolds, Harpo learns to appreciate and value Sofia's strength and resilience, leading to a more egalitarian and loving partnership.

Celie and Mary Agnes

Squeak initially appears as Harpo's girlfriend but later emerges as an independent character with her own narrative arc. Her relationship with Celie is influenced by shared experiences of oppression and a desire for freedom.

Squeak's relationship with Celie is influenced by shared experiences of oppression and a desire for freedom. Celie becomes a source of support for Squeak as she navigates her own aspirations. Squeak's journey echoes Celie's in many ways, as both women seek to break free from societal expectations.

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Themes, Attitudes and Values

Violence and Suffering

Physical violence throughout the story is used to dominate others. There is an element of control that someone is, the more control they wish to gain. Some are successful, as in the case of Mr. _____, who realises the loss and pain it brings in the case of Harpo. There are also other different

Emotional Violence: Silencing Voices and Eroding Self-worth

Emotional violence is equally insidious, eroding the characters' self-worth and silencing their voices through repeated experiences of abandonment and betrayal, coupled with the harsh words that leave her feeling isolated and powerless. The emotional scars she bears run deep, affecting her ability to form healthy relationships and trust others.

Psychological Violence: Shattering Self-esteem and Distorting Reality

Psychological violence is a potent weapon used to manipulate and control the characters. Celie and her sisters, in particular, are subjected to gaslighting and manipulation, leading them to question their own identities. The psychological scars they bear can lead to feelings of worthlessness and a distorted sense of reality.

The Cycle of Violence / Generational Violence

The cycle of violence extends beyond just 'Mr. _____', perpetuating a legacy of trauma across generations. Celie, having witnessed and experienced violence throughout her life, internalises these patterns, making it difficult for her to be free from the cycle of abuse. This intergenerational transmission of trauma highlights the long-lasting impact of violence on individuals and communities.

Suffering and Resilience

Despite the violence and suffering they endure, the characters exhibit remarkable resilience and empowerment amidst their struggles. Celie's connection with Shug Avery awakens her desire for a life free from abuse. Sofia's unwavering spirit and refusal to be silenced challenge the oppressive forces they face.

Religion and Spirituality

Walker uses the image of the church throughout the novel as a symbol of the collective faith and hope within, but most importantly it goes against the hope that Celie gets from writing. The events that happen around the church: Celie is slapped for winking at a boy in church (Letter 1), the death of her mother as she was leaving church, and all marriages are abusive and unhappy. The characters' journey towards liberation serve as a testament to the power of faith to transform lives, foster resilience, and challenge oppressive norms.

Celie's Journey from Traditional Faith to Spiritual Liberation

Celie's journey through the novel is marked by a gradual transition from a traditional, external faith in God to a more personal and liberating spiritual identity. Initially, Celie addresses God as an external, distant figure, seeking solace and guidance in the face of her hardships. Through her relationship with Shug Avery and experiences the transformative power of love and self-acceptance, she begins to see God as a force of love and compassion present in the world around her and in her own and human relationships.

Shug Avery's Role in Celie's Spiritual and Emotional Liberation

Shug Avery's presence in Celie's life introduces a radical and liberating approach to spirituality. She encourages Celie to embrace her own desires and express her authentic self, challenging the societal norms that have stifled her. Shug's spirituality is deeply rooted in self-love and acceptance, as she celebrates her sexuality, defying societal expectations and embracing her true identity.

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Nettie's Spiritual Connection to Nature and African Heritage

Nettie's letters from Africa reveal a deep connection to nature and African spirituality, finding solace and inspiration in its rhythms and power. She finds a sense of belonging and cultural identity in African traditions and rituals, finding a sense of belonging and cultural identity grounded in a reverence for nature and a celebration of her African heritage.

The Role of Music and Storytelling in Spiritual Expression

Music and storytelling play a significant role in the characters' spiritual expression with African-American musical traditions serving as a conduit for her emotions and experiences. Celie's letters, initially addressed to God, evolve into a form of self-expression and a way to process her experiences through her voice.

Religion and Spirituality as a Source of Strength and Resilience

Despite the challenges and hardships they face, the characters find strength and resilience in their spiritual beliefs. Celie's newfound connection to a more personal and inclusive God provides her with hope. Nettie's spiritual grounding in nature and African heritage helps her navigate her journey. Shug's unconventional spirituality, rooted in self-love and acceptance, empowers her to challenge societal norms and embrace her true self.

Religion and Spirituality as a Tool for Social Commentary

Walker's exploration of religion and spirituality is not without its critical edge. The text critiques the patriarchal and often oppressive nature of traditional religious structures, highlighting the characters' inclusive and liberating understanding of faith. The characters' journeys towards spiritual growth serve as a powerful critique of societal norms and a call for greater self-acceptance and social justice.

Race and Cultural Reclamation

Walker delves into the profound themes of race and cultural reclamation by navigating the characters' experiences amidst racial oppression, discrimination and cultural erasure.

Reclaiming African Heritage

Throughout the novel, the characters – particularly Celie, Shug Avery and Nettie – embrace and reclaim their African heritage, a legacy largely suppressed or lost under the weight of pervasive racism they encounter in America. They explore their roots through emulating African styles of dress, clothing, folklore and spirituality. This reclamation of African culture serves as a powerful act of resistance to assert their identity and resist the dehumanising effects of racism.

Language as a Vehicle for Self-expression and Cultural Preservation

Language plays a pivotal role in the characters' journey of cultural reclamation. Celie's journey from a woman with limited literacy to a more expressive writer is a testament to her growth. Her letters to God and her sister Nettie serve as a form of self-expression and cultural preservation, documenting her experiences and safeguarding her cultural heritage. Shug Avery's blues songs, infused with African-American musical traditions, further exemplify the reclamation of cultural expression.

Rejecting Eurocentric/Westernised Beauty Standards

The characters boldly challenge the Eurocentric beauty standards that have been imposed on them. Celie, in particular, learns to reject these external norms and embrace her natural beauty. Her transformation and self-acceptance mirror the broader struggle for African Americans to reject imposed standards of beauty and embrace their own.

Resistance Against Racism

The characters exhibit acts of resistance against the racial discrimination and violence they face. Celie, Sofia and others refuse to accept the status quo and challenge the white power structure that seeks to subjugate them. This resistance is a form of self-empowerment that rejects the dehumanisation and oppression perpetuated by white supremacy.

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Racism

The theme of racism is a pervasive and central element of the narrative. The story is set in the early 20th century, primarily in the rural American South, and it vividly depicts the racial injustice and discrimination faced by the African-American characters. The theme of racism is explored through various characters and events, highlighting the systemic and personal dimensions of racial oppression.

Systemic Racism

The novel portrays the broader context of systemic racism, where African Americans face institutionalized discrimination and violence. The characters are denied basic human rights and opportunities based on their race. For example, Sofia's brutal arrest and imprisonment are clear examples of the systemic racism faced by African Americans at the time, reflecting the power structure of the era.

Economic Exclusion

Economic racism is a significant aspect of the story. African-American characters are often trapped in cycles of poverty and exploitation. For example, their father was lynched for owning a goods store. This economic exclusion is a direct result of systemic racism.

Internalised Racism

Some characters, like 'Old Mr. ____', have internalised racist beliefs, perpetuating the cycle of discrimination. This internalised racism is a reflection of the pervasive influence of racism on society.

Racial Segregation

The novel portrays the physical segregation of black and white communities in the South during the early 20th century, e.g. when Sofia must sit in the back of Miss Millie's car. This segregation extends to public spaces, reinforcing the racial divide.

Violence and Injustice

Racism is depicted through acts of violence and injustice committed against African Americans. Key events include the confrontations with white individuals, Sofia's abuse at the hands of Albert, and the threat of violence that looms large in the lives of the characters.

Redemption and Reconciliation

The novel also explores the possibility of redemption and reconciliation between races, as seen in the relationship between Eleanor Jane and Sofia.

Intersectionality

The theme of racism intersects with other forms of oppression, such as sexism and classism, creating a complex and interconnected nature of discrimination.

Love and Sexuality

Love and sexuality emerge as complex and transformative forces in the lives of the characters, challenging societal norms and offering pathways towards healing, empowerment and self-discovery.

Love as a Source of Healing and Transformation

Love, in its various forms, plays a crucial role in the characters' journeys of healing and transformation. Celie's relationship with Shug Avery represents a radical departure from her experience of oppression. Shug's love awakens Celie's sense of self-worth and ignites her passion for life, challenging the patriarchal norms and societal expectations that have limited her. Shug's love allows Celie to experience joy, intimacy, and self-discovery, shattering the isolation and self-doubt that have defined her life.

Self-love and the Ability to Love Others

As Celie's self-love blossoms, her ability to love others deepens. Her love for her sister, Nettie, and her relationship with Shug, becomes even more profound. She also begins to recognise her own resilience and strength in the face of adversity.

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The novel's exploration of self-love and its connection to the ability to love others is a central theme in Celie's personal journey. Walker highlights the importance of self-love as a prerequisite for healthy relationships, emphasising that one cannot truly love others without first loving oneself. Celie and Harpo, they realise that the need for control and the inability to express love are detrimental to their relationships. This realisation marks a turning point in their journey towards self-love and the ability to love others.

Sexuality as a Vehicle for Self-expression and Empowerment

Sexuality, particularly female sexuality, is explored with honesty and sensitivity in the novel. Celie's encounters with sexuality are marked by fear, coercion and a sense of powerlessness. Through her relationship with Shug, Celie learns to explore her own desires and express her sexuality. The novel's exploration of sexual liberation is not merely about physical pleasure; it is about self-expression, autonomy and control over one's own body and desires.

Challenging Societal Norms and Redefining Love Relationships

The novel challenges traditional notions of love and sexuality, particularly the patriarchal system and long defined women's roles and experiences. Celie and Shug's relationship subverts traditional power dynamics, as Shug encourages Celie to embrace her own desires and assert her independence. The novel explores the complexities of polyamory and non-traditional relationships, highlighting the diverse human experiences of love and intimacy.

Family and Friendship

Family dynamics and the complexities of kinship play a central role in shaping the characters' journeys towards self-discovery and empowerment. The novel explores various forms of family, including biological, chosen and surrogate, highlighting the importance of love, support and understanding. Relationships are marked by social and personal struggles.

The Redefinition of Family: Embracing New Forms of Kinship

The novel challenges traditional notions of family, expanding the definition beyond biological ties. Celie's friendship with Shug Avery develops into a deep, loving bond that transcends conventional boundaries. Shug's love and acceptance awaken Celie's desire to embrace her own desires and sexuality. Shug becomes Celie's chosen family, challenging the limitations of traditional family structures.

The Complexities of Motherhood: Navigating Love, Loss and Sacrifice

The novel explores the complexities of motherhood, highlighting the challenges, sacrifices and joys of nurturing and caring for others. Celie's experiences as a mother figure to her children, as well as her relationship with her supportive and understanding mother figure, demonstrate the diverse ways in which motherhood is experienced and expressed. The novel also delves into the impact of societal expectations on motherhood, highlighting the challenges faced by women in fulfilling their maternal duties while maintaining their own identities and aspirations.

The Legacy of Family: Intergenerational Trauma and the Path to Healing

The novel explores the impact of intergenerational trauma on family dynamics and the path to healing. Celie's experiences of abuse and oppression, passed down from her grandmother, shape her initial view of family and relationships, initially limiting her ability to form healthy and supportive connections. Through her connection with Shug and Nettie, Celie begins to heal and reimagine her family, finding empowerment and mutual respect.

Family as a Source of Strength and Resilience

Despite the challenges and often painful family dynamics, the characters find family to be a source of strength and resilience in their lives. The enduring bond between Celie and Shug, the friendship between Celie and Shug, and the maternal love and guidance Celie receives from her mother figure demonstrate the transformative power of family connections. The novel highlights that family, in its various forms, provides individuals with a sense of belonging, support and unconditional love, empowering them to overcome challenges and find their place in the world.

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Women, Femininity and Sisterhood

Walker portrays female friendships as a means for women to summon the courage to resist oppression and dominance. Relationships among women provide a space for reciprocal love in a world filled with male violence.

Female bonds and sisterhood play a vital role in the characters' journeys of healing. The strong connection between Celie and Nettie, despite their physical separation, serves as a source of support. Their letters, filled with love, encouragement, and shared experiences, provide a lifeline, allowing them to navigate their individual struggles and find solace in their shared bond.

Female ties take many forms; some are motherly or sisterly, some are in the form of romantic, sexual, and even platonic friendships. Sofia claims that her ability to fight comes from her sister. Nettie's relationship with Celie anchors her through years of living in Africa. Samuel notes that the strong relationships among Olinka women are the only comfort bearable for them. Most importantly, Celie's ties to Shug bring about Celie's gradual attainment of a sense of self.

Sisterhood and the Power of Connection

The strong bonds of sisterhood in the novel, particularly between Celie and Nettie, are crucial in preserving and reclaiming cultural identity. Nettie's letters from Africa provide a glimpse into her world and highlight the profound connection between African and African-American cultures. These bonds serve as an anchor of strength and cultural continuity for the characters.

Empowerment through Education

Education, both formal and informal, empowers characters like Celie and Nettie, fostering a sense of cultural awareness. Education empowers them to challenge stereotypes and reclaim their voices through knowledge and self-confidence.

The Power of Female Connection and Sisterhood

The bonds of sisterhood and female connection serve as a source of strength and resilience, particularly in a world marked by male dominance. The unwavering connection between Celie and Nettie, despite their physical separation, provides a lifeline of love, encouragement and support. Their letters emphasize the importance of female companionship and the power of shared experiences and understanding.

The Enduring Bond of Sisters: Celie and Nettie's Unwavering Connection

The unbreakable bond between sisters Celie and Nettie serves as the novel's emotional core. Despite physical separation, their connection transcends time and distance, providing a lifeline through shared experiences. Their letters, filled with intimate details, dreams and fears, connect their two worlds, allowing them to maintain a sense of unity and shared identity. Nettie's presence, even from afar, is a constant source of strength and hope, reminding Celie of her worth and the power of female connection.

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Men, Women and Gender Roles

The novel paints a vivid picture of a patriarchal society where men wield power and control through physical abuse, emotional manipulation and economic coercion. Celie's sisters, Nettie and Shug, and 'Mr. ____', represent the epitome of this oppressive male power, subjecting her to physical and emotional abuse, silencing her voice. The characters' experiences highlight the pervasiveness of patriarchy, which silences women's voices, limit their opportunities, and reinforce their subordinate status. Celie's adherence to patriarchal expectation is also damaging to 'Mr. ____', Harpo, who struggle to live up to the male role and it is only when they are at peace with both the masculine and feminine elements of themselves that they are able to love and be loved.

Women's Struggles for Empowerment and Self-determination

Despite the numerous oppressive forces they face, the women in the novel exhibit remarkable resilience and strength for self-determination. Celie's journey is particularly transformative, as she evolves from a timid, oppressed woman who embraces her own voice and desires. Her connection with Shug Avery, another woman, awakens Celie's sense of self-worth and ignites her passion for life.

The Challenge of Gender Stereotypes and the Redefinition of Femininity

The novel challenges traditional gender stereotypes and explores the fluidity of gender. Celie's relationship with Shug, a woman who defies societal expectations of femininity, challenges the prescribed definition of womanhood. Shug's embrace of her own sexuality and her rejection of traditional gender roles inspire Celie to question the limitations imposed upon her.

The Path Towards Gender Equality and Social Justice

Through the exploration of gender roles and the challenges faced by women, the novel paves the way for equality and social justice. Celie's journey towards self-discovery and empowerment serves as a model for other women seeking to break free from the constraints of patriarchal norms and achieve their own desires. The novel challenges readers to confront the realities of gender inequality and strive for a more just and equitable society.

Many characters in the novel blur the boundaries of traditional male or female gender roles. Shug's sass, Harpo's femininity, and Celie's strength and resilience are major examples of this. The novel challenges the character's gender and the traits he or she displays. This blurring of gender traits is a key theme of the novel, as we see in the sexual relationship that develops between Celie and Shug.

Disruption of gender roles sometimes causes problems. Harpo's insecurity about his masculinity and his attempts to beat Sofia. Likewise, Shug's confident sexuality and her rejection of traditional gender roles cause her to be labelled a tramp. Throughout the novel, Walker wishes to emphasize that gender roles are not as simple as we may believe. Her novel subverts and defies the traditional gender roles of women to be women and men to be men, and it is only when both parties are accepted for who they are that there is a sense of unity.

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Childhood

The theme of childhood is explored with nuance and complexity, revealing the profound experiences on the characters' lives and their journeys towards self-discovery and empowerment.

The Loss of Innocence: Childhood Tarnished by Trauma and Abuse

For many of the characters, childhood is not a time of innocence and joy but rather one of abuse and deprivation. Celie's experiences of abandonment, sexual assault, and physical abuse by her stepfather and her husband shatter her sense of security and leave deep emotional scars. Her childhood is marked by poverty, discrimination, and the constant threat of violence, which shape the characters' perceptions of the world, their sense of self-worth and their capacity for resilience.

The Yearning for Nurturing and Unconditional Love

Despite the harsh realities they face, the characters crave nurturing and unconditional love. Celie's desire for her father's love is repeatedly thwarted, leaving her feeling insignificant. Shug Avery, with her unconventional lifestyle and fierce independence, offers an alternative to the traditional maternal figures the characters have known. However, Shug's love is not unconditional, leaving Celie with a glimpse of the unconditional love she has always yearned for.

Self-empowerment and Discovery

Walker emphasises throughout the novel that the ability to express one's thoughts and feelings is crucial in developing a sense of self. Initially, Celie is completely unable to resist those who oppress her. Alphonso's warning that she 'better not never tell nobody but God' about his abuse reinforces her belief that the only way to persevere is to remain silent and invisible. Celie is essentially an object without agency; she has no power to assert herself through action or words. Her letters to God, in which she expresses her pain and anger, become her only outlet. However, because she is so unaccustomed to articulating her thoughts, her narrative is initially muddled despite her best efforts at transparency.

In Shug and Sofia, Celie finds sympathetic figures and learns lessons that enable her to assert herself. Celie a 'virgin', Shug shows Celie that she can create her own narrative, a new interpretation of her history that counters the interpretations forced upon her. Gradually Celie begins to tell her story in her own words. However, it is not until Celie and Shug discover Nettie's letters that she gains the knowledge of her true identity and the power to form her own powerful narrative. Celie's forceful assertion of her identity, cursing of 'Mr. ____' for his years of abuse, is the novel's climax. Celie's story culminates in her marriage to 'Mr. ____', causing him to reassess and change his own life.

Though Walker clearly wishes to emphasise the power of narrative and speech to resist oppression, the novel acknowledges that such resistance can be risky. Sofia's forced marriage to Miss Millie's invitation to be her maid costs her twelve years of her life. Sofia regrets her decision, but she is not totally defeated, but she pays a high price for her words.

Recommended further reading

Read more about the power of language as a theme in the context of other texts. For example, Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*.

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The Writer's Use of Language

Steven Weisenburger¹⁸ discusses the use of letters in Alice Walker's novel, portraying it as an 'Errant Narrative'. The novel employs an epistolary form, presenting the story as a series of letters. Celie initially addresses her letters to God, then to her sister Nettie, and ultimately to the man she loves, Mr. T. This narrative technique serves multiple purposes for Walker. Firstly, it allows her to depict the passage of time in the form of fleeting moments. Moreover, it provides a voice for Celie, who is initially unable to articulate her thoughts due to her lack of education and the oppressive environment she lives in.

By employing letters, Walker also presents multiple perspectives. Readers are exposed to the world through Celie's perspective as a woman residing in the South, as well as through Nettie's perspective as a woman residing in the North, highlighting the cultural roots of African Americans. The epistolary form intensifies the sense of urgency and isolation for the reader. Initially, Celie's letters reveal the atrocities she endures, serving as confessions to a God who seems distant. As no one besides her abusive father is aware of Celie's plight, she feels isolated and unheard. Her letters to Nettie, who is also unable to assist her, further underscore her desperation. Through her letter writing, the protagonist undergoes a transformative journey of self-discovery, finding her voice and becoming self-reliant, content with her life choices.

Dialect

The second unfamiliar element in the novel is the southern black dialect employed by the African American characters. The rules of grammar in Black English (BE) often contradict those of Standard American English (SAE). For instance, a sentence such as 'She goes to the market' in SAE becomes 'She go to the market' in Black English. Pronunciations and spellings likewise differ between BE and SAE. Walker uses Black English throughout the novel to accurately represent the language her characters speak. If the novel were written in Standard American English, it would have failed to capture the essence of the characters' lives. Walker skilfully portrays the appropriate dialect, allowing readers to acclimate to its unique sound as they read aloud, as they progress through the initial chapters.

Non-standard English: Authenticating Voices and Experiences

The use of non-standard English, particularly in Celie's letters, reflects the characters' diverse backgrounds, and levels of education. This use of non-standard language adds authenticity and grounding to the narrative, situating it within their specific social and historical contexts. It also highlights the voices of marginalized groups, emphasising their struggle to be heard and understood within a predominantly white, standardised language.

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¹⁸ Errant Narrative and *The Color Purple*, Steven C Weisenburger – <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3015111>

Symbolism

Dresses, Dressmaking and Pants

The symbolism of dresses, dressmaking and pants plays a significant role in conveying Celie's identities, societal expectations, and their quest for self-expression and empowerment.

Dresses as Symbols of Conformity and Restriction

Dresses, particularly the starched and uncomfortable Sunday dresses Celie is forced to wear, symbolize societal expectations and constraints placed upon women. The dresses serve as a visual representation of Celie's lack of agency and her confinement to a prescribed role. The discomfort and restriction of the dresses also symbolize Celie's stifled voice and suppressed desires.

Dressmaking as a Form of Expression and Empowerment

In contrast to the restrictive nature of dresses, dressmaking becomes a source of self-expression for Celie. Through her sewing, she is able to create something beautiful and unique, asserting her creativity and individuality. Her skills as a seamstress eventually become a source of pride and a sense of self-worth.

Pants as a Symbol of Rebellion and Liberation

Pants, particularly the pair Shug Avery encourages Celie to wear, represent rebellion and a new-found sense of liberation. Pants symbolize Celie's rejection of the constraints of traditional femininity and her assertion of her own desires and identity. Wearing pants allows Celie to move freely and express her new-found sense of self-expression and empowerment.

The Transformation of Celie's Relationship with Clothing

Celie's relationship with clothing evolves throughout the novel, reflecting her journey towards self-empowerment. From the initial discomfort and restriction of Sunday dresses to the comfort and freedom of pants, her clothing choices become a visible manifestation of her personal growth and liberation.

The Significance of Clothing in Defining Identity

The symbolism of clothing extends beyond Celie, encompassing other characters as well. Shug Avery's flamboyant and unconventional attire reflects her independent spirit and rejection of societal norms. Celie's insistence on wearing overalls challenges gender stereotypes and asserts her right to comfort and authenticity.

Clothing as a Catalyst for Social Commentary

Walker's use of clothing symbolism serves as a powerful tool for social commentary. It highlights the ways in which clothing can both reflect and reinforce societal expectations and gender roles. Celie's journey towards self-expression and empowerment through their clothing choices challenges the status quo and advocates for greater freedom and individuality.

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Genre and Form

The Color Purple is an **epistolary novel**, consisting entirely of letters written by Celie to create a sense of intimacy and immediacy, drawing readers into the characters' inner experiences. The letters, often raw and unfiltered, provide a direct window into their struggles. This directness allows readers to connect with the characters on an emotional level, fostering empathy and understanding. Additionally, the novel can be described as a confession, as the letters written by the protagonist, Celie, are intimate and disclose her deepest thoughts and feelings.

The novel follows certain conventional narrative expectations, such as the rising action and **denouement** (falling action), which Walker's novel adheres to.

Feminist Fiction

The novel falls under the feminist fiction genre for its critique of gender roles as well as the resilience the women in the novel are given. The women in the story are all given their own character growth.

African-American Fiction

The novel is firmly rooted in the African-American literary tradition. It directly addresses the experiences of African-American women in the early 20th-century South, tackling themes such as racism, poverty, and the search for identity and empowerment.

Narrative Gaps and the Reader's Active Participation

The novel includes significant gaps in time between letters, leaving room for the reader to infer the characters' experiences and the progression of events. These gaps demand active participation, encouraging them to fill in the blanks, draw connections and create their own interpretations. This fosters a deeper engagement with the narrative, allowing the reader to become an active participant in the story's unfolding.

The Power of Silence and Unspoken Communication

The novel explores the power of silence and unspoken communication, particularly Celie's silence, which is a reflection of her oppression and lack of agency, gradually leading to her resistance and self-assertion. The gaps between her letters and the unspoken emotions highlight the profound impact of unspoken communication and the power of silence to convey deep meaning.

In terms of genre, *The Color Purple* can also be classified as historical fiction, as it is set during the early 20th century.

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Structure

The unconventional narrative structure as discussed previously serves as a powerful vehicle for sharing the characters' innermost thoughts, emotions and personal experiences with remarkable honesty. The letters, often raw and unfiltered, provide a direct window into the characters' minds, allowing readers to connect with them on a profound level and develop a deep understanding of their inner worlds.

Multiple Narrators: Unveiling Divergent Perspectives

The novel's epistolary form extends beyond Celie's letters, incorporating the perspectives of other characters such as Nettie and Sofia. These multiple narrators offer diverse and often contrasting views on the events and relationships portrayed in the story. Their letters provide a more comprehensive understanding of the characters and the world they inhabit, revealing hidden intricacies and complexities that remain concealed in Celie's primary narrative.



Non-linear Chronology: Reflecting the Characters' Journeys of Self-discovery

In a departure from traditional linear narratives, *The Color Purple* employs a non-linear sequence of letters spanning several decades. This unconventional approach disrupts the chronological flow, creating narrative gaps that demand active engagement from the reader. As they piece together the characters' experiences and personal growth, the reader is encouraged to draw connections, make their own interpretations, fostering a deeper level of engagement with the narrative. This fragmented structure mirrors the characters' complex journeys of self-discovery and transformation, emphasizing the non-linear nature of personal growth and the gradual unfolding of identity.

Time Gaps and Development: Unveiling Hidden Truths

The gaps in time between the letters are significant, serving as a potent narrative device that encourages the reader to become an active participant in the story. These gaps invite the reader to infer what transpires during these intervals, drawing connections and creating their own interpretations of the characters' development and evolving relationships. The truths that become evident through these gaps are often revealed through the characters' language, tone and perspectives, reflecting their individual growth and transformation over time.

Interweaving Stories: Expanding the Novel's Scope

The letters from Nettie, Celie's sister, introduce the reader to a parallel narrative that details her experiences in this foreign land, offering a striking contrast to Celie's life. The interweaving of these two storylines broadens the novel's scope, highlighting the shared struggles, such as the struggle for identity and the impact of oppression. It also underscores the universality of human experiences, demonstrating how individuals' lives can be profoundly affected by forces occurring far beyond their immediate surroundings.

Climactic Revelation: A Catalyst for Change

The novel's structure builds toward a climactic revelation that significantly affects the characters and the trajectory of the plot. This revelation, hinted at through the gradual uncovering of secrets in the letters, serves as a catalyst for change, prompting the characters to confront their past, make altering decisions. It also provides a sense of closure and resolution, as the characters grapple with the implications of the revelation and begin to forge new paths forward.



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Contextual Analysis

Alice Walker's essay 'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens', written for *Ms.* magazine, expresses her discovery and admiration of Zora Neale Hurston, an African-American writer known for her novel *Watching God*. Walker, who also hailed from Eatonville, albeit in Georgia rather than Florida, felt a strong resonance with Hurston due to their similar backgrounds. While attending college, Walker found joy from reading Hurston's works. Although Hurston's novels were well-known at the time, they had subsequently gone out of print. However, in the 1970s, as feminist and civil rights movements gained momentum, students and scholars began actively seeking out works by women and people of colour, leading to the rediscovery and re-evaluation of Hurston's *Watching God*. Walker states that Hurston enjoyed 'racial health' and was not oppressed by racism and sexism. Walker states that Hurston enjoyed 'racial health'.

Unlike protest writers such as Richard Wright, Hurston celebrated the essence of the richness of African-American culture, including folklore, spirituals, work songs, and blues. Her cultural heritage deeply impacted Walker, who resolved to do the same in her own writing. In her novel *The Color Purple*, she explores the challenges faced by African-Americans as they navigate their experiences. Walker fearlessly examines domestic abuse within families, including physical abuse and exploitation. Equally significant, she portrays the African-American church and the extended family and its unique music. Moreover, she depicts the resilience of African-Americans to endure hardship and still possess the capacity for love and care towards others. Walker expresses hope that individuals have the ability to change and grow despite adversity.

Upon its publication, *The Color Purple* unleashed a storm of controversy. It instigated debates about cultural representation, as a number of black American male critics complained that it perpetuated racist stereotypes about pathology in black communities and of black men in particular. Walker, with her focus on sexism at the expense of racism, was criticised for glossing over the realities of race. *The Color Purple* also had its ardent supporters, especially among black women who saw it as a feminist fable. The heated disputes surrounding *The Color Purple* are a testament to the impact the work has had on cultural and political discourse in the United States (please also see Context on page 7).

Further reading

- 'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South' – [zzed.uk/12528-in-search](https://www.zzed.uk/12528-in-search)
- 'Still Searching Out Zora Neale Hurston' – [zzed.uk/12528-still-searching](https://www.zzed.uk/12528-still-searching)
- 'Strength in Numbers, A Feminist Analysis of *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker'

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Literary Approaches

The novel lends itself to several literary approaches and critical perspectives due to its rich themes and innovative storytelling techniques. Here are some key literary approaches that can be used to analyse *The Color Purple*:

Feminist Literary Approach: *The Color Purple* is often examined through a feminist lens, exploring themes of female empowerment, identity, and the struggle for autonomy in a patriarchal society. The novel explores the growth and self-discovery of its female characters, particularly Celie, and the importance of women's relationships in achieving personal and collective liberation.

African-American Literary Theory: The novel is situated within the African-American literary tradition and is often analysed in terms of its representation of African-American culture, identity and history. It is seen as a work of African-American literature that explores issues of race, racism, and the struggle for justice and equality.

Postcolonial Literary Theory: Nettie's letters can be examined from a postcolonial perspective, exploring the legacy of colonialism, the impact of imperialism on African communities, and the complex relationship between African Americans and their African heritage.

Queer and Gender Studies: The novel also offers rich material for queer and gender studies. Celie and Nettie are often considered in discussions of queerness, as their relationships and sexual experiences challenge traditional norms. Additionally, the novel explores the fluidity of gender roles and the impact of societal expectations on individuals.

Critical Race Theory: Critical race theory can be applied to analyse the novel's portrayal of race and the intersectionality of race and gender. It helps readers examine how race and gender play a significant role in shaping the characters' experiences and identities.

Narrative and Epistolary Analysis: A literary approach that focuses on the novel's narrative structure and use of letters. This approach explores how the storytelling technique of epistolary narrative contributes to the novel's thematic depth and engagement.

Language and Style: Analysis of the novel's use of non-standard English, dialect, and colloquialisms provide insight into how language is employed to reflect the characters' backgrounds and social contexts. This approach delves into how language is a tool for cultural expression and identity.

Symbolism and Imagery: The novel is rich in symbolism and imagery, providing a rich ground for analysis. Symbols such as the colour purple, pants and the quilt are frequently explored for their thematic and cultural relevance.

Reader-Response Theory: Examining how readers engage with the text and construct meaning through their interpretations. The novel's narrative structure and use of personal letters invite the reader to become an active participant in the storytelling, making their reactions and interpretations an integral part of the reading experience.

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Comparisons with Other Texts

Teacher's Note

Both AQA A and Edexcel specifications use *The Color Purple* as a set text with questions under the heading 'Texts in shared contexts'. Both AQA A and Edexcel exams are open book, allowing students to refer to the text.

The chosen theme for 'Texts in shared contexts' for Edexcel is 'Childhood', where the questions are broader: 'areas that can usefully be explored include: wars and the legacy of war; identity; changing morality and social structures; gender, class, race and ethnicity; resistance and rebellion; imperialism, post-imperialism and nationalism; engagement with the personal and the public; issues which have helped to shape the latter half of the 20th century and the 21st century'.

The following practice essay questions aim to encourage students to consider the comparisons across texts. Edexcel provides two options: *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Henry James. The list AQA A provides is outlined below:

Prose

Spies

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

The God of Small Things

The Color Purple

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit

Drama

Translations

All My Sons

Our Country's Good

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

Poetry

Tony Harrison, *Selected Poems*

Seamus Heaney, *New Selected Poems*

Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters*

Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*

In this instance the questions will not specify the second text, allowing for greater flexibility in the questions.

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Practice Essay Questions

Exam-style Questions (Whole text)

1. Discuss the interactions of different genders and race in *The Color Purple* and another text you have studied. Consider the influence of historical context.
2. Explore the relationships between men and women in *The Color Purple* and another text you have studied.
3. Compare and contrast the experiences of childhood in *The Color Purple* and another text you have studied.
4. Examine the importance of evolving societal perspectives in two additional texts you have studied that you have not discussed in your response. Discuss how meanings are crafted within the texts you have studied, involving one dramatic work and one prose piece.

Extended Essay Questions

1. In your two chosen texts, how do the writers portray the challenges and triumphs of seeking independence? How do these portrayals reflect the social and historical contexts in which the texts were written?
2. How does the theme of sacrifice compare to two other texts you have studied? Discuss how the meanings are shaped in the texts you are comparing.
3. How do changing societal attitudes shape the meanings in two other texts you have studied? Refer to the texts in your comparison.
4. In what ways do the authors of your two selected texts use their writing techniques to elicit sympathy from their audience? Please include in your answer an analysis of the connections between the texts and relevant contextual factors.

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Glossary

Anachronistic	Used to describe something that is out of place in a particular time or context.
Anaphora	The repetition of or reference to a previously mentioned word or phrase to clarify and cohesion in the text.
Anticlimactic	Not as exciting or dramatic as expected or desired.
Catalyst	An event or incident that sets the plot of a story into motion.
Character development	The process of creating fictional characters with depth and growth, often over the course of a story.
Closure	The process of accepting and moving on from a difficult situation.
Conflict resolution	The process of resolving a dispute between two or more parties in a constructive manner.
Cultural assimilation	Cultural assimilation involves individuals or groups who adopt the language and customs of a different culture, often resulting in a blend of the two.
Deep South	The Deep South is a region in the south-eastern part of the United States, including Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida. The term often has connotations of slavery and segregation, which are rooted in the area's history and social dynamics.
Denouement	The final part of a story where the narrative/plot comes to a resolution and all loose ends are resolved.
Deuteragonist	A deuteragonist plays a secondary role to the protagonist. They are often a central character and the focus of the narrative, the deuteragonist is often used to contrast to the main character.
Discrimination	The unfair treatment of an individual or a group of people based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or any other characteristic.
Epistolary novel	A novel written in the style of letters between two or more characters, often used to develop the narrative.
Equity	Fairness and justice in the way people are treated. While equality means everyone gets the same opportunity, equity provides the adapted tools and resources needed to ensure everyone has a fair chance of success.
Euphemism	A polite or an indirect word or phrase used to avoid saying something that is harsh or unpleasant.
Foil	A character who contrasts with another character in order to highlight their qualities and weaknesses. This contrast helps to develop and deepen our understanding of the main character.
Foreshadowing	Dropping subtle hints or clues about future events in a story to prepare the reader or audience for what is to come, and it can add suspense, interest, and depth to the narrative.
Infer/inference	To make a deduction based on evidence or reasoning. It involves using what is known to make a guess or understanding about something that is not explicitly stated.
Intersectionality	A concept that describes how different social identities, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, intersect to create unique experiences and forms of discrimination.
Irony	A literary and rhetorical device that involves the use of language to convey a meaning that is opposite to what is expected or intended. It often conveys a sense of unexpectedness, and can be used for various purposes, such as humor, criticism, or dramatic effect.
Juxtaposition	Placing two contrasting or incongruous elements close together to highlight the differences between them. This technique is often used to create a sense of tension or to emphasize a particular point.
Lynched	Lynching is a term that refers to a violent act of extrajudicial killing carried out by a mob, where an individual is put to death typically without a trial or legal process.
Matriarchal	A social system in which women hold positions of dominance and authority, often in contrast to patriarchal systems where men hold the primary power.
Metaphor	Compares two things that are not alike in a way that suggests a similarity or a deeper meaning.
Misogyny	A hatred of or an aversion to women or girls.

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Motif	A motif can be a repeated phrase, a particular object, or a re-emphasise certain ideas or emotions, throughout a work as
Patriarchal norms	Behaviours that reinforce the power and dominance of men
Patriarchal oppression	The systematic subordination of women by men, enshrined in
Poetic justice	When good is rewarded and evil is punished in a satisfying
Power dynamics	The distribution and exercise of power within social groups in which individuals and groups exert influence or control over
Prizefighter	A professional boxer who fights for money.
Protagonist	A protagonist is the main character of a story and is at the centre of the
Redemption	A redemption involves finding forgiveness, atonement or absolution for transgressions. Redemption often entails a change in behaviour, personal growth and transformation.
Redemption	The act of making up for or correcting past wrongs or mistakes
Redemption arc	A narrative arc in which a character changes from being flawed to
Segregation	The separation of groups or individuals based on certain characteristics such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion or sexual orientation
Sharecropper	A farmer who rents land and provides labour in exchange for a share of the produce they produce.
Smudging	The act of purifying or cleansing a person, a place or an object using sacred herbs.
Societal expectation	The unwritten rules that society expects us to follow.
Solidarity	A feeling of united or mutual support within a group.
Subvert expectations	To surprise and challenge the audience by doing something unexpected
Symbolism	The use of words, images or objects to represent something else
Tension	A feeling of anxiety or nervousness that is caused by a difficult situation or serves to create conflict in a story.
'Uncle Tomming'	A term that refers to the act of behaving in a subservient or obedient way towards particularly white authority. The term is derived from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> .
'White authority'	The power and privilege that white people have in society, which is often used to oppress and harm people of colour.
'White privilege'	
Womanist	A philosophy and movement that centres the experiences of Black women. Womanism is broader than feminism, which focuses on women in general. It takes into account the intersections of race, class and sexual orientation.
'Yellow skin'	Meaning white skin. Often used in reference here to someone who is white.

Language used by Celie

Cuss	To curse, swear or insult
Daidies	Diapers or nappies. In this case, they were washable, much like a handkerchief.
'Fall on each other neck'	To be hugging tightly and putting their heads on each other's necks
Hankser	Handkerchief
Her friend	Friend or menstruation
Miration	Admiration
Scandless	Scandalous
Two berkules	Tuberculosis

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Further Reading

Websites

- 'Sexism, racism and black women writers' – zzed.uk/12528-sexism
- 'Alice Walker: Writing What's Right' – zzed.uk/12528-guernica
- 'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South' – zzed.uk/12528-in-search
- 'Still Searching Out Zora Neale Hurston' – zzed.uk/12528-still-searching
- 'Strength in Numbers, A Feminist Analysis of *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker'

Novels

- Walker, Alice – *The Color Purple: A Pulitzer Prize-winning Classic* published by OUP
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher – *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
- Hurston, Zora Neale – *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
- Cisneros, Sandra – *The House on Mango Street*
- Morrison, Toni – *The Bluest Eye*
- Morrison, Toni – *Beloved*
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi – *Purple Hibiscus*
- Angelou, Maya – *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*
- Plath, Sylvia – *The Bell Jar*

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Answers and Indicative Content

Please note that these answers are not prescriptive and serve merely as a suggestion, be

Discussion Points

Discussion Point 1 (AO1, AO2)

Please note: The following example is not an exhaustive answer.

The death of Celie's mother marks a pivotal turning point in Celie's relationship with God and her spiritual trajectory. We make the assumption that Celie's perception of God is deeply rooted in her spirituality and God.

Celie's mother's passing leaves her feeling abandoned and adrift, deprived of a crucial maternal figure in her search for a fundamental understanding of spirituality. The loss of this anchor, coupled with her experiences of abuse and hardship, casts a shadow of doubt over her belief in a benevolent God.

The juxtaposition of her mother's death with her own experiences of abuse and hardship challenges her faith in divine justice and benevolence. Initially, it appears that she views God as a distant, punitive force rather than a source of comfort and retribution.

Discussion Point 2 (AO1, AO2)

Please note: The following example is not an exhaustive answer.

The deliberate withholding of 'Mr. ____'s real name serves as a powerful symbolic tool to convey themes of power and messages to the reader. By stripping this character of his identity and reducing him to a title, the text highlights the dehumanisation and objectification of women within the context of the story. This anonymity also underscores the pervasiveness of male dominance and patriarchal structures in society: why does Celie need to know his name?

As the novel is written in the form of letters, and Celie is the main narrator and protagonist, the use of 'Mr. ____' is significant. Since Celie does not refer to 'Mr. ____' by his real name but rather as 'Mr. ____', it emphasises his role as a figure of authority and power. The absence of his name reflects Celie's initial state of being disempowered and subjugated by him. The absence of his name reflects Celie's initial state of being disempowered and subjugated by him. The absence of his name reflects Celie's initial state of being disempowered and subjugated by him.

Discussion Point 3 (AO1, AO2, AO3)

'Mr. ____' gives various justifications for beating Celie; one of the primary reasons he provides is that Celie is a product of the patriarchal society in which they live. He argues that Celie's role is to be subservient and obedient, and that her actions are a reflection of the gender roles expected of women. This justification is rooted in a primary patriarchal belief system where men are the primary providers and women are the primary caregivers.

'Mr. ____'s character serves as a representation of the toxic masculinity and patriarchal values depicted in the novel. His justifications to Harpo for beating Celie are a reflection of the societal norms and expectations that women that were common in the era and culture in which the story is set.

Ultimately, however, he beats Celie because he has no example of a healthy, loving relationship with a woman. He only woman he appears to have ever loved (page 54) and he takes this frustration out on Celie.

Discussion Point 4 (AO1, AO2)

The priest characterises Shug Avery in his sermon in a way that reflects the conservative, traditional attitudes of the church community in the story. The priest's portrayal of Shug is highly critical, contrasting her liberated, free-spirited character with the conservative religious values of the community. Here's how the priest characterises Shug during his sermon:

- **As a Sinner:** The priest characterises Shug as a sinful woman who has led an immoral life. He lists her supposed sinful behaviour, including her unmarried relationships with men and her consumption of alcohol and cigarettes. This characterisation is meant to shame and judge her based on the church's moral code. He refers to her as a 'streetcleaner' (page 43).
- **As a Threat to Morality:** The priest suggests that Shug's presence in the community is a threat to the moral values and traditions of the church. He views her lifestyle and choices as corrupting and dangerous to the values of the community.
- **As a Woman without a Soul:** Shug's independence, her career, and her refusal to conform to traditional gender roles make her a target of criticism from the priest. He portrays her as a wayward and lost soul who has strayed from the righteous path.
- **As an Unrepentant Sinner:** The priest's characterisation implies that Shug is unrepentant of her supposed sins. He likely uses her as an example to warn the congregation about the consequences of living an unrepentant life.

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Preview of Answers Ends Here

This is a limited inspection copy. Sample of answers ends here to stop students looking up answers to their assessments. See contents page for details of the rest of the resource.