

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**The Color Purple**

by Alice Walker

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Item No. 200909

# The Color Purple

## Introduction

*The Color Purple* is the winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for Fiction. Alice Walker's genius is evident in every page of this interesting epistolary novel chronicling the life of a young black woman in the first half of the twentieth century. There is no doubt that this novel is destined to be an enduring literary classic. However, teachers must be aware that the story does address many adult themes such as human sexuality, sexual abuse, physical abuse, drug use, and alternative life styles; additionally, profanity and strong racial epithets are used. All of these topics are well presented in a gripping story of Celie's rise from her abusive background to become a strong, self-actualized woman. However, it may not be appropriate for immature readers. Even though the vocabulary of this novel is not challenging, the content of the story is such that *The Color Purple* is recommended for mature students in grades eleven and twelve. Overall, the message of the book is a positive one, the novel addresses universal themes, and the beautiful story is interesting and poignant. This novel is a wonderful piece of literature that is highly recommended in the proper classroom setting.

All references come from the Harcourt, Inc., First Harvest Edition of *The Color Purple*, copyright 2003.

# The Color Purple

## Objectives

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

1. discuss the significance of the title of the novel.
2. discuss the pros and cons of Walker's decision to write this novel in an epistolary format.
3. cite incidents from the story to illustrate the following themes:
  - Men and women do not always fit into traditionally defined gender roles.
  - People in a minority culture must learn to adapt to the ways of the dominant culture or face extinction.
  - Physical and emotional abuse in families can be passed down from one generation to another.
4. point out instances of irony in the story.
5. relate incidents from the story to illustrate the following themes about women:
  - Women must work together to overcome the hardships in their lives.
  - A woman's place in the world is changing, so she is no longer content to assume traditionally female roles.
6. discuss the following overall theme of the novel: It is up to each individual to learn to understand and accept the differences in others.
7. cite incidents from the story to trace Celie's emotional growth.
8. relate incidents from the story to illustrate the parallels between the culture of the Olinka people and the lives of African-Americans in Georgia.
9. point out instances of flashback in the text.
10. discuss Celie's relationship with God and how her emerging beliefs are illustrated in the way she addresses her letters.
11. relate significant details about Celie's life and Nettie's experiences in Africa.

# The Color Purple

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Celie inherits a beautiful yellow house when Pa dies. Why does she paint her bedroom purple?
2. What theme(s) for the novel do the following incidents suggest?
  - Celie begins to make and then wear pants instead of dresses. Note: Remember that in the first half of the twentieth century women rarely wore pants.
  - The Olinka people do not think there is any need for girls to get an education.
  - Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ does not approve of Harpo's marriage to Sofia, just as his father did not approve of his marrying Shug.
3. How did Celie's biological father die? What effect did his death have on Celie, and how does Shug handle it?
4. What is Samuel's story about Olivia and Adam? What is Nettie's reaction and to whom does she respond? Why?
5. Some critics believe that the male characters in the book are unfair representations of men at the time. Others point out that Albert does grow and change by the end of the story. Which position do you think the incidents in the story support?
6. List three ways the lives of African-Americans parallel the lives of the Olinka people. Why do you think this is?
7. Why does Celie first address her letters to God and then address her letters to Nettie? Why is the last letter addressed "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God"?
8. How does Celie feel when she learns that Pa is not her biological father. What impact does this information have on her life?
9. List three things Nettie likes about living with the Olinka people. In what way are she and Samuel disappointed in them?
10. Why is Nettie worried about returning to America with Olivia, Adam, and Tashi?

# The Color Purple

## Letters 1 – 8

### Vocabulary

- billfold** – a wallet
- dote** – show fondness for
- dresstail** – the bottom edge of a lady's garment
- duck** – move quickly into
- rouge** – blush
- safe** – a cooled cupboard for perishable items
- spoiled** – sexually used by a man

1. Briefly identify the author of the letters. What is her age, name, and family status?

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2. What does Celie believe happens to her two babies?

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3. In what way is Celie physically damaged by her father's sexual abuse? What evidence is there in these letters that Celie no longer is interested in or relates to men?

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4. Who is Shug Avery? How does Celie first learn about her?

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**Letters 52 – 59**

Vocabulary

- boater – a stiff straw hat
- cacao – the type tree that produces cocoa beans
- coddle – to spoil; pamper
- downtrodden – poor and trampled on
- dredged – dug up
- droves – great numbers
- garlands – decorative wreaths of flowers, leaves, or braids
- gored – sown in a way to make a skirt flare
- knickers – a type of short pants that are tight at the knees
- luminous – full of light
- ministering – preaching to; caring for
- overrun – crowded
- riddled – filled with
- sanctified religious – genuinely pious
- thimble – a small, metal finger protector used in sewing
- tramp – to walk aimlessly
- vespers – a religious service in the evening

1. What happens to Nettie when she leaves Celie and Albert's house?

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2. Why does Nettie continue to write letters to Celie even though she knows Albert is preventing Celie from receiving them?

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19. Why do you think Celie paints her room purple and red with a yellow floor?

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20. The last letter in this novel is addressed “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God.” Why do you think Celie addresses her letter in this way?

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21. Cite incidents from the story to support or refute the following statement:

At the end of this novel, all of the conflicts which divide people have been resolved, illustrating that, through love and acceptance, people can overcome their differences.

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22. State an overall theme for this novel. Consider what you think Walker wants the reader to understand about life after reading this story.

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