

**Reflections:**

*A Student Response Journal for...*

# *The Color Purple*

*by Alice Walker*

written by Peter Boysen

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## **Response Journal for *The Color Purple***

### **Background/Pre-Reading**

1. Alice Walker, the author of *The Color Purple*, was the youngest of eight children in her family. One might imagine that Walker, the child of poor sharecroppers, would spend her childhood in hand-me-down clothes and in a constant competition with her older siblings for attention, special treats, extra helpings of food, and enough room to sleep in a crowded bed.

Psychologists have conducted many studies on the various ways in which birth order affects the development of children. These ways include the formation of personality, the relative assertiveness of children, and the ways that children form relationships in their adult lives.

In your own family, where do you fall in the birth order? How many siblings do you have? Write a journal entry of at least two paragraphs in which you state your place in the birth order of your family, and describe at least one personal experience in which you feel that your birth order has affected you.

2. Share-cropping in the American South was an incredibly exploitative agricultural system. It arose during the Reconstruction era, when southern planters needed to keep their labor costs near where they had been during the time of slavery. However, since slavery no longer existed, planters had to find a way to compensate their laborers and still keep costs low.

The share-cropping system involved planters loaning plots of land to workers, and at the end of each growing season, collecting one-third of the harvest from each of them. Furthermore, the share-cropper had to use credit to buy things such as fertilizer, tools, and crop seed as well as his own food and clothing at the plantation store. At the end of the season, the share-cropper had to pay his store bill in addition to a share of the crop. Since the planter could set a fixed price for the crops, and the planter was the sole accountant, there was plenty of room for fraud. The planter could keep the share-croppers poor and dependent on him.

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Imagine that you are a young journalist for a New York City newspaper, traveling around the South in the 1940s, looking for stories to write. You interview an elderly African-American who, like his father, has been a sharecropper for thirty years. Use the experience you think the sharecropper would have, and write an article of several paragraphs that explains your opinion of the share-cropping system in the South. As a reporter, make sure you mention who, what, where, when, and how.

3. When Alice Walker was eight years old, one of her brothers accidentally shot her. This blinded her in one eye and left her with visible scarring. Walker felt ashamed by what had happened to her and spent a great deal of her childhood indoors, away from other children, reading and writing instead of playing.

Think of a time when you have seen someone with a visible disfigurement. This could be facial scarring or another deformity. If you cannot think of a visual disfigurement, think of a time when you have heard someone speaking with an obvious speech impediment.

Write a journal entry of several paragraphs in which you describe the situation. How did it made you feel, and how did you react?

4. When Alice Walker returned from her student exchange year in Uganda before her senior year of college, she was surprised to discover that she was pregnant. This was in the early 1960s, when birth control options were much more limited than they are now, and unplanned pregnancies were, depending on the circumstances, much more of a source of shame and scandal. Because of this, Walker contemplated suicide.

Think about a time when someone you know had something shameful happen to him or her. How did that person handle the situation?

Then, write a letter to Alice Walker when she was so embarrassed with the news of her pregnancy, she considered ending her own life. What advice would you offer her?

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### **Letters 1-10**

5. As you read, note the extensive use of dialect—language that is written as it sounds, and reflects how the characters actually talk instead of using conventional English. Dialect is used to make first-person narration seem more realistic and poignant.

Consider how your conversations with your friends, whether in person, over the phone, in text messages, or instant messaging differ from standard English in the ways that grammar is used and how spelling of words are changed or shortened to make popular abbreviations in those conversational contexts.

Using one of the methods listed above, write a dialogue that you and a friend might have about something important that happened to you. The dialogue should be approximately a page long and sound authentic, using your own unique way of speaking.

6. Despite the traumatic events she has witnessed in her young life, Nettie finds a boyfriend who is her father's age and who seems to have many of the same impulses as her father when it comes to choosing a mate.

Think about how Nettie must have felt watching her sister get raped by their father. Look at the situation from Nettie's perspective: what motivation would she have to marry the first man she could find, no matter what his age or circumstances?

Now, imagine how Nettie would feel after coming home from her first meeting with this man. Write a diary entry as Nettie, explaining your feelings for him and; about your situation in general.

7. In Nettie's community, girls are expected to engage in sexual activities we would consider abusive. These girls are too young, however, to know anything about physical intimacy and the impact sexual behavior has on their future lives. There is even a naïveté about what actually has to happen for a woman to (get big.)

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Consider the education you have received about health and sexuality. This could include health classes you have had at school, conversations you have had with your parents/guardians, and instruction you have received from religious institutions. It could also include information you have learned through conversations with your friends.

Reflect on the differences in education about health and the human body between the time Celie was growing up and our own time. Write a letter addressed to the editor of a newspaper that would have been published when this story was told. Give your opinion about the way health education was handled when Celie was growing up compared to how it is handles now. You should use specific evidence from the text to support your opinion.

8. When Celie first sees a picture of Shug Avery, she is overcome by the differences in appearance between Shug Avery and other women. Celie says, "Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty than my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier than me. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail. She grinning with her foot up on somebody motocar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some."

At night, Shug Avery fills Celie's dreams because of how unique she is and how much more beautiful she is than everyone else in Celie's life.

Think about a model you've seen in a magazine advertisement or a beautiful celebrity. Write a short paragraph identifying the characteristics of the person that you find attractive and which, in your mind, may have inspired Celie to admire Shug Avery's appearance in the novel.

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9. Celie and Nettie's father refuses to give permission for Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ to marry Nettie. However, their father indicates that he would let Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ marry Celie instead because she is older. The list of Celie's qualities that he gives the suitor could be either compliments or insults.

Make a list of the various character traits that Celie's father mentions to recommend Celie to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Next to the ones that are lies or exaggerations, write what you think the reasons are behind those lies. One possible reason, for example, could be that Celie's father is trying to cover up signs that he abused his own daughter.

10. Miss Beasley, sees signs of intelligence in Celie and wants her to obtain as much education as possible. This is apparent in her attempts to get Celie's father to keep her in school. Celie is smarter than she gives herself credit for.

In our time, the public school system spends a great deal of time and resources trying to keep pregnant, young women caught up with their studies so they can earn a high school diploma. However, in the time when this book was written, Miss Beasley's well-intentioned visit appears to have been the only intervention the school system attempted.

How might Celie's life have been different if she had still been able to go to school? Write a newspaper article commemorating an accomplishment that you think Celie could have made had she received a complete education.

### **Letters 11-21**

11. When Nettie comes to live with Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, one of the things that Celie notices is how calm and unshakable Nettie appears in the midst of a highly chaotic household. She says, "Patient her middle name."

Consider one of your brothers, sisters, or best friends. What adjective would you choose for his or her middle name? This word should summarize the person's personality in one word.