

The Color Purple by Alice Walker

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 13

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Discussion questions

How do many of the characters, female and male, undergo reformations of the heart? What does Sophia learn? Harpo? Albert? Celie? Shug? How does the behavior of these characters change as the novel progresses?

What does the color purple have to do with Shug's notion of spirituality? How do Shug's lessons about God help heal Celie?

Additional readings

Alice Walker. *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, 1973.

Zora Neale Hurston. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937.

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The Color Purple

by
Alice Walker

"The black woman," says Alice Walker, "is one of America's greatest heroes. . . . Not enough credit has been given to the black woman who has been oppressed beyond recognition." Alice Walker was an activist in the 1960s while attending Spellman College in her home state of Georgia, and later at Sarah Lawrence College in New York. After college, she moved to Mississippi to teach and in 1967, married Melvyn Leventhal, a Jewish civil rights lawyer. They became the first legally married interracial couple in Jackson, Mississippi.

Almost all of Walker's novels, short stories, essays, and poems focus on issues of civil rights, emphasizing especially the plight of black women, who suffer the dual oppression of racism and sexism. Walker's writings are motivated by her conviction that literature, while it may not effect swift political and social change, can announce the truths of human suffering and help set the world straight. An admirer of the work of black women authors of earlier generations, especially Zora Neale Hurston, Walker campaigned to bring Hurston's work, which was out of print and neglected by literary scholars, back to popular and critical recognition. She launched a Hurston revival with "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," an influential article in *Ms.*, and the editing of a collection of Hurston's works.

Like Zora Neale Hurston, Walker has desired most of all in her writing to depict the inner strengths of black women, who—in spite of the great odds against them—manage to survive and blossom spiritually. Her third novel, *The Color Purple*, is the quintessential story of a black woman rising from racist and sexist oppression to locate and articulate a sense of self and to formulate a life that is under her own direction. It won both great critical acclaim, including the Pulitzer Prize, and great popular acclaim, especially after being transformed into a film directed by Steven Spielberg.

Some critics have argued that Walker's novels and stories are biased against males. "Men in 'The Color Purple' are generally pathetic, weak and stupid, when they are not heartlessly cruel, and the white race is universally bumbling and inept," said one critic. Others point out that although Walker may treat her

female characters with more sympathy, both males and females in her works undergo character reformations—often ironic and triumphant outcomes of great suffering and injustice. Her male oppressors suffer the consequences of their own evil, becoming isolated, dehumanized, and fearful as their injustices towards others inevitably turn back upon them.

Such is the case in *The Color Purple* when Celie finally says to Albert, "The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot Anything you do to me, already done to you." Albert and others like him are humbled by the end of the book. In this light, *The Color Purple* may be seen as a story of transformation—not the kind of change pressed on society by political movements, legislation, and law enforcement—but something more difficult and vital: the transformation of individual hearts away from brutality and meanness and toward strength and self-direction.

The book is composed as a series of letters written primarily by the central character, Celie, and addressed to God. It opens with Celie as a young girl and spans 30 years, taking her into a hard-earned womanhood. When Celie is just a child, her mother dies, and she is left with only her younger sister, Nettie, and their abusive stepfather, who rapes and brutalizes her repeatedly. He impregnates her twice, steals the babies from her, and gives them up for adoption. Eventually the stepfather remarries and forces Celie to marry Albert, a local widower with children, who would have preferred to marry Nettie. When the stepfather makes advances toward Nettie, she escapes to live with her sister. She sees Albert beat and mistreat Celie, and he tries to force himself on her as well. Nettie and Celie are firmly bonded sisters, supportive and loving of one another, so it is a heartbreaking day when Nettie must leave to escape Albert.

For the balance of the novel, Celie writes her letters to Nettie. Although Albert cruelly withholds Nettie's letters from Celie, she continues to write, having no address to post the letters to and no knowledge of whether her sister is living or dead. The tragic separation of the sisters and their eventual reunion is the single most powerful emotional thread running through all the events of this novel. The triumph of Celie and Nettie represents the victory of love and the durability of blood connections.

There are several surprising twists in the plot of this story. Perhaps the most important is the arrival of Shug Avery, Albert's mistress, who lives for long months in Albert's and Celie's home. Shug, a renowned blues singer, is everything Celie is not—beautiful, willful and self-possessed. Albert openly displays an obsessive love interest in Shug, calls her the "Queen Bee," and berates Celie in front of her. Shug is ill, and Celie, although she might be expected to resent Shug's presence, warmly and willingly assumes the task of nursing her back to health. The two women learn to love each other deeply as Celie restores Shug's physical health. Shug builds Celie's self-esteem, teaching her she is lovable, attractive, and deserving of sexual pleasure. She protects Celie from Albert, threatening to withhold her affections from him unless he treats Celie more humanely. Shug is also instrumental in reuniting Celie and Nettie. Nettie, too, brings a number of surprises to the story, but to say more would spoil the dramatic and heartwarming final few episodes of this deservedly acclaimed work.

About the author

Alice Walker was born in Eatonton, Georgia, the daughter of a sharecropper. In the essay "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self," Walker writes about how her eye was permanently disfigured during early childhood when she was wounded by a pellet from one of her brother's guns. She credits the blindness in this eye for nudging her toward becoming a writer. The wound set her apart, drove her to meditative solitude, taught her to become a keen observer of the world should she go completely blind. In another now famous essay about her childhood, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Walker praises her mother for managing a well-kept garden amidst extreme poverty and other disadvantages. Her mother's character became a model for the strong women in her work. Alice Walker now lives in northern California.