

Opportunities to Affect: In Reading Groups

By: Jo Ann Sharkey

The Color Purple

By Alice Walker, copyright 1982

Before you read:

In 1982, Alice Walker published her most famous book, *The Color Purple*. This novel, awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award, addresses issues of racism, sexism, classism, poverty, violence, and spirituality. *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel that narrates Celie's struggle to gain independence and dignity. Alice Walker, like her character Celie, was born and raised in rural Georgia. She graduated from Sarah Lawrence College in 1965 and became an advocate for civil rights in the 1960s.

The Color Purple, through a collection of letters primarily written by Celie to God, tells the story of Celie's early abuse by her father. At the age of fourteen, Celie is forced to leave her beloved sister Netter and is married off to "Mr. ____." Abused and criticized for being ugly and dumb, Celie learns that the best way to survive is to stay silent. She survives years of abuse by remaining invisible. Throughout the novel, various characters are introduced who teach Celie about her own value. She eventually sees herself as an independent woman of worth, a mother, and a beautiful creation of God.

For group reflection and discussion:

- When *The Color Purple* was first published, it was highly controversial. Several themes, especially the abuse of women and the negative representation of men in the hierarchy of familial relationships, contributed to the controversy. Do you feel that Walker created a fair and reasonable history for Celie?
- The first line of the novel is, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy." With these words, Celie's father Alphonso essentially attempts to silence Celie, and therefore God becomes the only recipient of confession that Celie has and can trust. Thus begins her series of letters to God that recount the years of abuse and demoralization, but which finally will lead to her eventual discovery of strength, self-worth, and love. Discuss how the letters to God serve as an opportunity for Celie to speak honestly about her conditions of abuse and suffering.
- Although Shug Avery is first presented as an immoral and depraved woman, she is actually revealed to be a character who brings about Celie's growth and self-respect. Discuss your first impressions of Shug and how they changed (or did not change) throughout the novel. What role does nurturing play in the development of character for both Celie and Shug?
- What is the importance of sewing for Celie? How does this household chore become a means for her empowerment? Discuss how women are often isolated by their conditions and how financial opportunities lead to independence.
- At the start of the novel, Celie imagines God in a traditional, patriarchal, Anglo-Saxon image as an old, bearded white man. Celie begins as if God is simply a listening ear who is on the other end of her letters, writing, "...long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along" (26). Why does Celie eventually stop writing letters to God? How does Celie's image and understanding of God change throughout the novel? What factors contribute to her changing views of God? How are these factors represented?

- Towards the end of the novel, Celie finally speaks up for herself and tells Mr. _____ of all the wrongs he has committed against her. Apparently, Mr. _____ goes through some kind of personal change and regrets the abuse and harm he caused her. Why do you think he stops?
- The mayor's wife, Miss Millie, asks Sofia to be her maid. Why? What relationships develop between these two families? How does the relationship between Sofia and Miss Millie's daughter, Eleanor Jane, highlight deep-seated racism?
- Celie's younger sister Nettie leaves Georgia and begins to travel with Corrine and Samuel, the missionaries. She first travels to Harlem where she is exposed to well-educated African-Americans owning wealthy-looking houses. She then travels to Senegal and Liberia where she eventually ends up in a small village doing missionary work. Discuss the opportunities and cultural views experienced by Celie and Nettie. How are these evidenced through their letters, perspective, and religious views?
- Nettie's letters from Africa share her exposure to a broader experience of oppression – oppression experienced between genders, races, and cultures. Discuss Nettie's experience on the mission field and what she learns about oppression. Do you think that Nettie becomes disenchanted with missionary work? Why?
- Although Walker's story is set in Georgia during the early part of the 20th century, her novel *The Color Purple* is similar to the novel *Push* by Sapphire, which was made into the recent film "Precious." Precious is a teenage girl who is living in Section 8 housing in Harlem in the 1980s. She's been impregnated twice by her father and is physically and emotionally abused by her mother. Discuss the unending cycle of poverty, abuse, and racism that these authors attempt to address with their novels. Do you think novels such as these make a difference? How?
- At the start of *The Color Purple*, Celie appears to be a helpless character with no control over her life. With the help of family and friends, she is able to gain control and to learn to love herself. She also finally encounters God and begins to see God as one who loves her and created her. Discuss the role of relationships (with family, friends, and church) in alleviating the injuries of poverty.

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Relating to our mission:

- Celie's story demonstrates how people in poverty are often isolated and can even feel helpless to improve their conditions. There are Americans living in poverty all over this country with stories similar to Celie's. Discuss encounters with poverty that you've experienced.

next month:

In *Untouchables* by Narendra Jadhav, Reading Groups will uncover the compelling account of the author's family struggle to break free from the lowest rung of the Hindu caste system.