

## COLOR PURPLE NOTES

### SYMBOLISM OF THE COLOUR:

- Purple is the colour of a bruise: when Sofia has been beaten down by the police she is the colour of “an eggplant” (Page 77)
- Purple is also the colour of the robes of royalty and nobility, of Roman emperors and English lords. This is why Celie thinks Shug Avery should wear: Celie says “She like a queen to me, so I say to Kate [Albert’s sister], Somethin purple, maybe a little red in it too” (Page 20). Red goes with purple in stately robes.
- There is no purple in the store, and even red would be too expensive for Albert; but Celie later makes pants of purple, red and every other bright colour.
- However, it is the contrast between bruised and battered victims and the queenly, triumphant figures women can become when they are free that gives *The Color Purple* its basic structure. The colour of bruises has become the noblest of colours by the end of the novel.
- Shug gives new significance to the colour of purple when she explains her religious belief to Celie by saying “It pisses God off is you walk by the colour purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it” (Page 167)
- The very existence of purple is wonderful and therefore a symbol of the wonder of existence which is the core of the new faith Shug and Celie share.

## THEMES:

### 1. SLAVERY

- ✘ In 1865 the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution freed all slaves: the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, a year later, granted citizenship to former slaves.
- ✘ Although slavery was abolished, habits of mind formed under slavery continued to degrade human relations. )
- ✘ “Girl” (Page 76) as a form of address and “boy” meaning servant (Page 155) are terms that date back to the era of slavery
- ✘ Alphonso and Albert treat women like slaves and this is reflected in their speech: for example they say “I can let you have Celie”, “I got a fresh one in there myself”. (Page 9)
- ✘ Miss Millie, the mayor’s wife, treats Sofia as a slave and so provokes her indignant reply which leads the mayor’s intervention and Sofia’s arrest, beating and imprisonment
- ✘ The inability of men to see women as equals is akin to the old slave-owning mentality, which is far from having been eradicated from the world.

## 2. FEMINISM

- Alice Walker prefers the term 'womanist' for a black feminist. She said "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender, darker and stronger too".
- Alice Walker coined the term "womanism" as an alternative term to feminism, an alternative that offers many more shades and possibilities than "feminism," which, in the 70s, she and many other women of colour saw as a movement that was exclusively focused on the concerns of white women.
- The word "woman" in literature was "white women"
- Walker's purpose is to show the ill treatment black women have endured, especially in the early 30<sup>th</sup> century, in the southern US and also in Africa, and to show how they have struggled to free themselves.
- The injustice of white supremacy in the old South is forcefully demonstrated, especially in the sufferings of Sofia, but more space and emphasis are given to men's injustice to women, regardless of race, and to the gumption (spirited initiative and resourcefulness) of women who rebel.
- In contrast to the victims of male brutality, Shug Avery is a heroic figure, in Celie's eyes, deserving the colour purple, because she has won her independence and will not be any man's 'mule'. Celie has been taught all her life to fear men and to devalue herself, but Shug teaches her to value herself as a woman and helps to educate her out of her oppression.
- Walker herself asserted that she wanted to depict female characters who were not so burdened and unglamorous as most depictions of black women and thus Shug is quite a glamorous figure.
- She lives as she sings, boldly; and is indifferent to 'how people talk' – that is, to the prejudiced gossip and slander of patriarchal society.
- Like Sofia, she has learnt to fight, but more effectively, without using fists, and she teaches Celie to do the same.
- The theme of *emancipation* (the progress of being set free from legal, social or political restrictions) is present throughout the novel. Celie and Nettie progress from a state of near-slavery to independence and the power of self-expansion (Nettie as a wife and teacher, Celie as a clothes designer and business woman who needs to husband).
- The novel asserts that all women are sisters.
- Comforted and strengthened by Shug, Celie is ready to fight Albert when the discovery of the letters reveals the depth of his guilt.
- Shug gives Celie a home in Memphis and helps her set up her business.

## 3. SUPPRESSION and OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

- Many of the women in the novel suffer from "multiple jeopardy" – they suffer from a double or even triple oppression; race, class and gender. An example of this in *The Color Purple* is when Alphonso tells Celie – "you black, you ugly, you a woman, you nothing".
- Even the readings of the text and thus the critical comments on it engage in assuming a white readership and the critics themselves are mainly white academics who bring about their own assumptions on race, class and gender.
- Celie writes to God as she has no living person with whom to share her troubles.
- Celie gets a beating from 'Pa' not because of anything she has done, but just to remind her she is her 'father's property'.

- Some believe it is through education and the process of acquiring written language that Celie begins to raise herself to a more powerful position.
- Writing is a means of finding freedom for Celie. It is not only a means to self-expression and freeing of the 'captive imagination' (as it is in *The Yellow Wallpaper*), but the telling of stories is a way of presenting self in opposition to a language which is not your own (as English was not Celie's language). The use of language is to do with breaking out from the 'underclass' imposed on them by racism and the imperial imposition of the English language.
- For Celie the letters are not only a form of communication (after all many of them she does not send), but rather a way of thinking out loud, quietly and safely. It is a means of exploring her thoughts by convincing herself that she is not alone by imagining a reader.
- Letter writing is a creative act: something Celie does consciously, deliberately and in order to reach beyond her domestic life. It is a means of escape by crossing a border between the real and the imagined.
- Celie's journey towards self-discovery is enhanced by a lesson which Shug teaches, a lesson in sexuality. She teaches Celie to enjoy sex.

#### 4. CREATIVE EXPRESSION

- 🌈 When Africans were taken from their homelands to America, they usually were denied education by their slave owners and were not allowed to speak their own languages, but were forced to speak English. This meant that the slaves had to create their own forms of communication and expression.
- 🌈 Through this, the African-American oral tradition began, with style and content often rooted in the stories and tales they had grown up with in Africa.
- 🌈 They communicated through dance, song and gesture, passing on their stories of woe and of freedom from one generation to another.
- 🌈 In a similar way, although Celie is forced into silence by Alphonso, by writing her letters she engages in creative expression and communication.
- 🌈 Her example of persistence in writing to God is her way of persistence in being heard, in writing instead or orally.
- 🌈 Although she does not realise it at the time, every word she writes is an assertion that she deserves to be heard.
- 🌈 Likewise, her sister Nettie, who never knows if her letters will reach Celie, writes religiously to her, and their communication is eventually granted to them.
- 🌈 The success is an example of the hope in human struggle.
- 🌈 During the novel several characters find their voices and their own expression; Shug recovers from her illness and continues singing, Mary-Agnus starts signing and writing songs, Celie and Sofia make quilts and Celie eventually runs her own business making pants. Starting small, each enterprise is an example of courage and hard work that pays off in the end.

## 5. LETTER WRITING

- Walker uses the novels epistolary form (letter writing form) to emphasise the power of communication.
- Celie writes letters to God, and Nettie writes letters to Celie. Both sisters gain strength from their letter writing but they are saved only when they receive responses to their letters.
- Therefore, although writing letters enables self-expression and confession, it requires a willing audience.
- When Celie never responds to Nettie's letters, Nettie feels lost because Celie is her only audience. Nettie is disillusioned with her missionary work because the imperialists will not listen to her and because the Olinka villagers are stubborn. Only after Nettie returns home to Celie (an audience guaranteed to listen) does she feel fulfilled and freed.

### CELIE'S LETTERS

- Walker's use of Celie's own voice, however undeveloped, allows Walker to tell the history of black women in the rural South in a sympathetic and realistic way.
- Unlike a historian's perspective, which can be overly analytical, Celie's letters offer a powerful first-person account of the institutions of racism and sexism.
- Celie's simple narrative brings us into her isolated world with language that reveals both pain and detached numbness.
- Celie's faith is prominent but underdeveloped. She relies heavily on God as her listener and source of strength, but she sometimes blurs the distinction between God's authority and that of Alphonso.
- She confesses that God, rather than Alphonso, killed her baby, and she never makes any association between the injustice she experiences in her life and the ability of God to overturn or prevent this injustice.

#### **COMPARING LETTER WRITING HERE TO LETTER WRITING IN THE YELLOW WALLPAPER:**

- The narrator transforms what she refers to as "dead paper" into a powerful narrative that engages the symbolic significance of the wallpaper. The journal's power is intimately connected to the paper on the wall and reveals the narrators oppression and John's deceitfulness throughout the examination of the wallpaper. It is essential for the narrator to believe that she is writing on 'dead paper', but she writes for an audience regardless of the paper's lifelessness and brings another consciousness into the bedroom.
- But even before the narrator introduces a real or an imagined audience, John's presence and access to the bedroom is enough to complicate matters and force us to question whether the narrator is indeed writing in secret.



## **THE POWER OF NARRATIVE AND VOICE IN THE COLOR PURPLE**

- ✓ Walker emphasises throughout the novel that the ability to express ones thoughts and feelings is crucial to developing a sense of self.

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- ✓ Initially Celie is unable to resist those who abuse her. Remembering Alphonso's warning that she "better not tell nobody but God" about his abuse of her, Celie feels that the only way to persevere is to remain silent and invisible. Celie is essentially an object, and entirely passive party, who has no power to assert herself through action or words.
- ✓ Her letters to God, in which she begins to pour out her story, become her only outlet.
- ✓ However, because she is so unaccustomed to articulating her experience, her narrative is initially muddled despite her best efforts at transparency.
- ✓ In Shug and Sofia, Celie finds sympathetic ears and learns lessons that enable her to find her voice. For instance, in renaming Celie a virgin, Shug shows Celie that she can create her own narrative, a new interpretation of herself and her history that counters the interpretations forced upon her.
- ✓ Gradually Celie begins to flesh out more of her story by telling it to Shug. However, it is not until Celie and Shug discover Nettie's letters that Celie finally has enough knowledge of herself to form her own powerful narrative.
- ✓ Celie's forceful assertion of this new-found power and her subsequent cursing of Mister for his years of abuse is the novel's climax. Celie's story dumbfounds and eventually humbles Mister, causing him to reassess and change his own life.
- ✓ However, though Walker clearly wishes to emphasise the power of narrative and speech to assert selfhood and resist oppression, the novel acknowledges that such resistance can be risky. For instance Sofia's forceful outburst in response to Miss Millie's invitation to be her maid costs her 12 years of her life. Sofia regains her freedom eventually, so she is not totally defeated, but she does pay a high price for her words.

### **MOTIF OF QUILTS AND PATCHES:**

- Both quilts and patches are symbolic of how the black women in this novel, as well as all black people whose families have been torn to scraps by the white man, must unite to fight against the whites.
- Just as pieces of separate garments are joined together and used to make a warm and enduring patchwork quilt, a sense of strong, patchwork unity strengthens the women as they attempt to try and save Sofia.
  
- ✿ With Shug's pivotal encouragement, Celie later learns to control her rage when she begins to work outside of the home making and selling trousers.
- ✿ Unlike Gilman's narrator in the yellow wallpaper, the character of Celie is not isolated. Neither does she possess the choice of deviating from the norm. She is in fact, in a more basic and worse situation than Gilman's middle class narrator.
- ✿ Celie suffers the effects of 'multiple jeopardy' in that not only is she oppressed by her gender but also by her social class and her race. But Celie is a strong character at heart. Her social class situation, her 'slave status', the endless round of domestic chores, especially the rearing of Mr's many children, leave her no time for abstractions. She would not have time to entertain dark imaginings in wallpaper patterns even if she had any wallpaper. Her fears are for her very survival rather than any thoughts of thwarted ambitions.
- ✿ Her journey away from the restrictions on women's lives is a very different and arduous one, not least because Mr is a physical threat to her.

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- The character of Sofia is confrontational in contrast to Celie's general quiet forbearance. Sofia is a very independent woman who rebels when she can no longer tolerate the oppressive marital situation and leaves her husband. She is not at all deferential and hates being dominated by whites, men or anybody else for that matter.
- Due to the incident with the mayor, Sofia's rebelliousness lands her in jail where she suffers terribly. She is deprived of her beloved children but her sentence is commuted to twelve years of labour as the mayor's wife's skivvy.
- The hardship Sofia endures serves as a stark reminder of the difficulties of escaping institutional racism and culturally induced patriarchal power structures. The long oppression almost kills Sofia's spirit as we witness on her release. She is a shadow of the larger than life character that she used to be.
- The women in *The Color Purple* provide each other with love and morale support. This is the big difference between Gilman's nameless narrator. The narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* has no companions, no moral support, nobody to restore her balance and nobody to understand her feelings.
- Shug in particular, acts as a catalyst for Celie. Shug's moral support and Celie's learning to trust and to read Nettie's long-lost letters help to bridge the gap between oppression and liberation through the process of education and language acquisition which eventually lead to self-expression and self-awareness via an understanding of socio-political concepts.
- The quilt in the novel is symbolic of the power women can gain by raising their awareness by collective affinity.
- The difference is that *The Yellow Wallpaper* disturbs the soul and depletes the reader of all hope whereas the very moving *Color Purple*, although disturbing, and perhaps having a rather contrived happy ending, depicts great love and courage.