

The Color Purple

Study Guide Student Copy

Letters 1-8 (Pages 1-12)

1. Briefly identify the author of the letters. What is her age, name, and family status?
2. What does Celie believe happens to her two babies?
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?
4. Who is Shug Avery? How does Celie first learn about her?
5. Find a passage in these letters supporting the idea that Celie willingly sacrifices herself to protect her little sister from her father.

6. This novel is an example of an epistolary novel; that is, a novel written in the form of a series of letters. How does this literary form enhance the believability of Celie's story? Hint: Consider why you think Alice Walker decides to have Celie address her letters to God.
7. How old is Celie when her father offers her in marriage to Mr. _____? Briefly review the quality and length of the letters from the beginning of the book through page 12. In what ways have the letters changed? What do you think this change in the letters reveals to the reader about the changes in Celie?
8. Celie's father is trying to convince Mr. _____ to marry Celie instead of Nettie. List three reasons he believes Celie will be a better wife than Nettie. Then list four insulting comments her father makes to Mr. _____ about Celie's appearance and character. How do you feel about Fonzo's description of Celie?
9. Find an example of a flashback in this group of letters.
10. Cite incidents from the story to prove or disprove the following statement: In these first letters, Celie suffers many abuses, but does not express anger or outrage at these acts.

Letters 9 -17 (Pages 13 –34)

1. In what sense is Celie's new life as Mr. _____'s wife no different from her life with her father?
2. Why does Celie believe the little girl she sees at the dry good store is her daughter?
3. Why does Nettie come to live with Celie and Mr. _____? Why does Mr. _____ decide Nettie must leave? Where does Nettie go?
4. On page 19, Celie writes that the Reverend's wife is "the only woman I even seen with money." This story takes place from around 1910 – 1940. What does this statement reveal to the reader about the lives of women at the time?
5. In what ways does Mr. _____'s sister, Kate, try to help Celie? In what ways is Kate different from Celie?
6. What evidence is there in these letters that Mr. _____ treats Celie like one of his children?

7. Alice Walker writes these letters using a Southern dialect. Most of the time Celie's speech pattern is easy to interpret. Sometimes, she uses figurative language to describe her feelings. Find an example of a simile describing how Celie feels about Shug Avery coming back into town.
8. Why does Sofia's father say Harpo is not good enough to marry his daughter?
9. How does Celie feel about Harpo and the other children?
10. Describe Sofia's physical appearance and her character.

Letters 18 – 31 (Pages 35 – 70)

1. Celie admires Sofia; yet when Harpo asks Celie how to make his wife obey him, she tells him to beat her. Why do you suppose Celie does this? How does she feel about herself afterwards?

2. State a theme for this novel based on the following passage where Sofia describes her family:

Six boys, six girls. All the girls big and strong like me. Boys big and strong too, but all the girls stick together. Two brothers stick with us too, sometime. Us git in a fight, it's a sight to see. (Pg. 43)

3. Why does Celie never feel mad?
4. One of the symbols in this book is the quilt Celie is making. On page 44, Sofia suggests they add the ruined drapery material to the quilt. Later Shug contributes material from a yellow dress to the quilt. What do you think the quilt might represent or symbolize in this novel?
5. Describe Shug Avery when Celie first meets her. What is Shug's reaction when she meets Celie?

6. How does Celie explain Shug's ill humor?
7. Why is Celie surprised to hear Shug refer to her husband, Mr. _____, as Albert?
8. How does Celie persuade Shug to eat?
9. What is the nature of the relationship between Mr. _____ and Shug?
10. Some critics believe that bright colors in the story represent liberated people or moments of deliverance for the characters from the oppressive forces in their lives. Find a passage in this section to illustrate and support this idea.
11. Briefly describe Harpo and Sofia's marriage. Why is Harpo unhappy in his marriage with Sofia? For what reason does he deliberately try to gain weight?
12. How does Sofia feel about Harpo and their marriage?

Letters 32 – 42 (Pages 71-104)

1. In what ways does Harpo change after Sofia and the children leave?
2. Shug decides to sing at Harpo's new jukejoint. How does she show her friendship and love for Celie while she is performing?
3. When Celie first meets Shug she compares Shug to her mother. Find a passage in these letters where she also compares Shug to her sister Nettie.
4. How does Shug react when she learns that Mr. _____beats Celie? What reason does Celie give Shug to explain Mr. _____'s behavior?
5. Why does Shug begin to address Celie as "Miss Celie"?
6. Celie says that she does not care if Shug sleeps with Albert. Why then does she pull the quilt over her head and cry when she hears them making love?

7. One of the themes of this novel is that men and women do not always fit into traditionally defined gender roles. Find a passage in this group of letters which illustrates that Shug does not follow a traditionally female path. In what ways does Sofia fail to follow the female gender path?
8. Why does Harpo call his girlfriend “Squeak”?
9. Millie says she wants Sofia to be her maid because Sofia’s children are so clean. What other reason might she have for offering the job to Sofia?
10. The Mayor slaps Sofia because she says “Hell no” to his wife’s job offer. (Pg. 90) Sofia does not let anyone slap her, so she fights back. What consequences does Sofia suffer when she decides to fight back? State a theme for this story based on this incident.
11. Describe Celie’s vision of God at this point in the story.
12. Why is Squeak selected to go see the Warden to help Sofia?

13. What is Squeak supposed to say to the Warden when she sees him?
14. Why does Squeak insist that Harpo must now call her Mary Agnes instead of Squeak?

Letters 43 – 51 (Pages 105 – 130)

1. Describe Sofia's attitude toward Billy and Eleanor Jane.
2. List the ways Sofia lives like a slave in the Mayor's house.
3. Why does Sofia say on page 111 that; "white folks is a miracle of affliction"?
4. How does Celie feel about Shug's new husband, Grady? What is the one aspect of Grady's behavior that Celie cannot stand?

5. Why do you think Shug first kisses Celie on the mouth?
6. How does Shug help Mary Agnes?
7. Why does Shug ask Celie to tell her about Nettie?
8. Many critics believe that Celie's anger over learning that Mr. _____ has been hiding Nettie's letters is the climax of the story. Why do you think this is?
9. Why did Albert marry Annie Julia instead of Shug? How did Shug react to the marriage?
10. How does Celie get all of Nettie's old letters?

Letters 52 – 59 (Pages 131 – 151)

1. What happens to Nettie when she leaves Celie and Albert's house?
2. Why does Nettie continue to write letters to Celie even though she knows Albert is preventing Celie from receiving them?
3. For what reasons does Nettie believe it is a "miracle" that Celie's children are being raised by Corrine and Samuel?
4. List three observations Nettie has about New York City.
5. What is the attitude of the white missionaries toward the African people? How do Samuel, Corrine, and Nettie respond to this attitude?
6. The English refer to the trouble in Africa as "hard times." For what reasons, according to Nettie, are the Africans having a "hard time"?

7. Why is Monrovia different from other African country's?
8. How does Celie's visit to the country of Senegal help her to appreciate the beauty of black people?
9. In what ways are the field workers in Africa similar to the workers in America?
10. Find a passage in these letters that describes how Nettie feels when she first sees the African coast. Why do you think she has this reaction?
11. Compare Celie's letters to Nettie's letters by listing three characteristics of each writing style. For example, Celie's letters are much shorter than Nettie's. Which do you enjoy reading more? Why?

Letters 60 -67 (Pages 152 – 182)

1. Shug suggests that Celie make herself a pair of pants to help distract her from wanting to kill Albert for hiding Nettie's letters. Similarly, making the quilt helps Shug feel better when she is recovering from her illness. State a theme for this story based on the importance of sewing in the lives of the women.
2. Oral tradition is the term for the transference of stories and songs from one generation to another or from one culture to another. Why do the Olinka people continue to tell the story of the roofleaf?

3. Nettie writes that the Olinka people worship the roofleaf:

The white missionary before you would not let us have this [roofleaf] ceremony, said Joseph. But the Olinka like it very much. We know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God? (Pg. 160)

In what ways is the roofleaf like God?

4. In what way is Tashi different from the other Olinka girls?

5. Why does Corrine suggest to Nettie that she and Samuel should refer to each other as brother and sister?
6. Briefly describe Nettie's hut. What aspect(s) of the hut does Nettie want to change?
7. State a theme for this novel based on the following passage describing Tashi's problems at home. Tashi's mother tells Nettie:

Tashi works harder than most girls her age. And is quicker to finish her work. But it is only because she wishes to spend her afternoons with Olivia. She learns everything I teach her as if she already knows it, said the mother, but this knowledge does not really enter her soul.

The mother seemed puzzled and afraid.

The father, angry.

I thought: Aha. Tashi knows she is learning a way of life she will never live. But I did not say this.

The world is changing, I said. It is no longer a world just for boys and men....We understand that there are places in the world where women live differently from the way our women do, but we do not approve of this different way for our children.

But life is changing, even in Olinka, I said. We are here. (Pg. 166-167)

8. In what ways does the behavior of the Olinka men remind Nettie of Pa?
9. Find an example of sarcasm in this group of letters describing how Nettie feels about the views Tashi's father has about women.
10. What evidence is there that Olinka stories are part of African-American culture?

11. What is the one thing Nettie does not like about the Olinka people?
12. How does Catherine, Tashi's mother, change after her husband dies of malaria?
13. Describe the unity Nettie observes between the Olinka women.
14. Why does Nettie believe the men are childlike and that this childishness is dangerous?
15. What evidence is there that the Olinka people are superstitious and believe in witchcraft?
16. In what way does Nettie believe the Africans are like the white people in America?

17. The Chief of the Olinka is upset when he learns that the road is being built right through the Olinka village and farms. He travels to the coast for “explanations and reparations.” (Pg. 175) What terrible news does he learn on this trip?
18. In what way are the rubber manufacturers like the greedy Chief in the story of the roofleaf?
19. Why does Nettie feel sorry for Corrine? Why does Samuel originally let Nettie join their household?
20. Briefly relate the story Samuel tells Nettie about her mother and Pa. What surprising information does she discover about Pa from listening to this story?

Letters 68 -78 (Pages 183 – 228)

1. Letter 68 on page 183 is addressed to God. The next letters from Celie are all addressed to Nettie. Why do you think that is?
2. Describe Pa's new house.
3. How does Nettie convince Corrine that she is Olivia and Adam's aunt, not their mother?
4. Cite incidents from the letters to support the following theme: People must strive to understand each other's lives because failure to do so results in much unhappiness.
5. In the following excerpts, Shug describes her views about God to Celie. Based on these views, state a theme for this novel.

God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for....I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It....But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed....God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like.

I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. (Pg. 202, 203)

6. Based on the references to the color purple in these letters, what is the significance of the title of this novel?
7. How long did Sofia spend working for the Mayor's wife? What is her life like, now that she is free?
8. In what way do Shug, Celie, Mary Agnes and Sofia express independence from the men in their lives?
9. Who is Henrietta? What is Suzie Q's relationship to Sofia?
10. Why does Celie put a curse on Albert before she leaves?
11. Briefly describe Shug's house. What is significant about her bed?

12. Some critics believe the lives of the African-Americans in some ways parallel the lives of the Olinka people living in Africa. Cite an incident from this chapter to support this idea.
13. One of the reasons Shug and Mary Agnes are independent women is that they are capable of earning a living for themselves singing. How do you think Celie might accomplish becoming independent?
14. Sofia's mother dies. How are Sofia and her sisters going to defy tradition at the funeral?
15. How would you describe the tone of Celie's letters to Nettie at this point?
16. Why does Mary Agnes act as if she is drunk when she comes to visit the children?

Letters 79 – 82 (Pages 229 – 253)

1. List the changes Celie notices in Mr. _____ when he returns home for the funeral.
2. How does Sofia explain the changes in Mr. _____'s behavior and attitude?
3. List three ways Jared Hunt is different from other European women of her class. In what way is she different from the other missionaries?
4. One of the themes of this novel is that men and women do not always fit into traditionally defined gender roles. Cite an incident from the story of Jared Hunt to illustrate this idea.
5. How does the Bishop react to the news that the Olinka are being forced off their land and made to live in terrible metal buildings by the rubber plantations?
6. How do Corrine and Samuel meet? Briefly describe Corrine's heritage or family background.

7. Why does Nettie say that their relationship with the Olinka is “like that of flies on an elephant’s hide.” (Pg. 242)
8. What upsets Samuel about the way the Olinka treat the missionaries?
9. Why does Tashi agree to have the tribal marks cut into her face? For what reason must some Olinka parents force their children to undergo the traditional facial scarring?
10. How does Samuel react when he learns that Celie is his biological mother and that Nettie is his aunt?
11. In what way is Alphonzo’s death ironic?
12. What do Celie and Nettie inherit when Alphonzo dies?

Letters 83 – 90 (Pages 254 – end)

1. What bad news does Shug have for Celie when Celie returns to Memphis?
2. What kind of life do Grady and Mary Agnes make for themselves?
3. One of the motifs of this story is that the lives of the Olinka people sometimes parallel the lives of their descendants living in America. Cite incidents from these letters to support this motif.
4. In what way has Celie's relationship with Mr. _____ changed? What do you think happens to bring about this change?
5. One of the themes of this novel is that to be happy a person must learn to appreciate the beauty of God's world. Find an incident in this story to support this theme.
6. Who are the *mbles*? Why do Tashi and her mother run away to join them?
7. Why is Nettie worried about how Adam and Olivia will adapt to life in America?

8. Why does Celie say she does not hate Mr. _____?
9. Find a passage in these letters illustrating the idea that Celie is not now, and never will be, romantically interested in men.
10. One of the themes of this novel is that abuse is cyclical and can be passed down from one generation to another. For example, Mr. _____'s father refuses to let him marry Shug. He in turn tries to prevent Harpo from marrying Sofia, the woman he loves. In addition, Mr. _____ beats Celie and he encourages his son to beat Sofia. Find an additional illustration of this theme in these last letters.
11. Another theme in this novel is that sometimes men and women vary from the traditional gender roles imposed by society. Find a passage in these letters to illustrate this idea.
12. At one point in his conversation with Celie, Mr. _____ asks her about her children who are living in Africa. She tells him about the long robes the Africans wear and that both men and women wear these robes. He replies:

Men and women not suppose to wear the same thing, he said. Men spose to wear the pants. (Pg. 278)

Based on the above quotation and what you have read in this story, what do you think pants symbolize or represent in this novel?

13. Why do the Olinka believe that “white people is black peoples children”?
14. What evidence is there, according to the Olinka, that oppression and prejudice are cyclical and are perpetuated from one generation to another?
15. Why does Tashi reject Adam’s marriage proposal? How does he solve the problem?
16. How does Celie help Sofia to achieve economic independence?
17. In what way is Eleanor Jane working for her “salvation”?
18. Explain the life lesson Celie is referring to in the following passage:

And then, just when I know I can live content without Shug, just when Mr. _____done ast me to marry him again, this time in the spirit as well as in the flesh, and just after I say Naw, I still don’t like frogs, but let’s us be friends, Shug write me she coming home.
Now. Is this life or not?
I be so calm.
If she come, I be happy. If she don’t, I be content.
And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn. (Pg. 290)

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

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