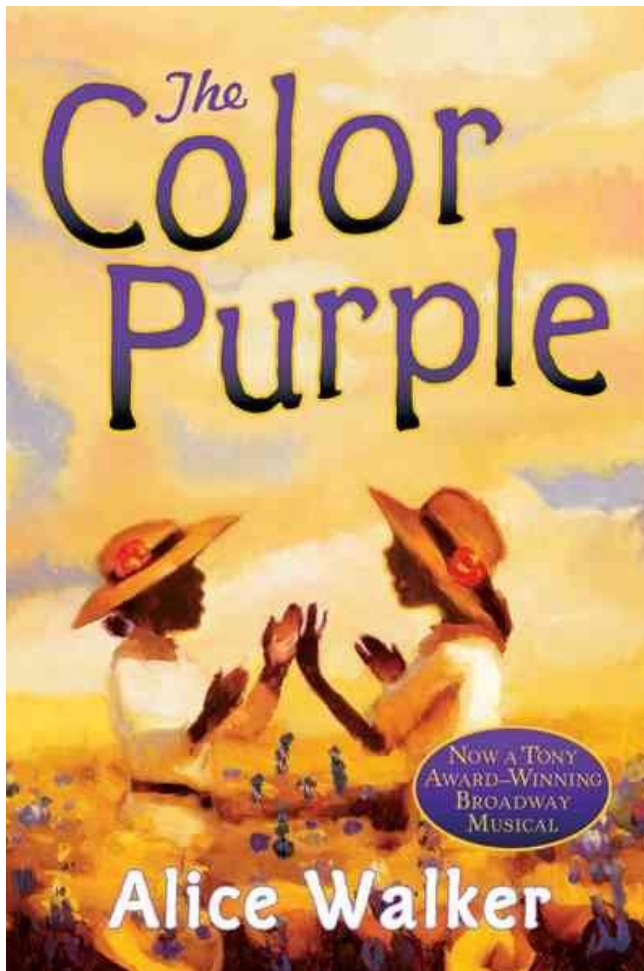


## About the book...



Celie is a poor black woman whose letters tell the story of 20 years of her life, beginning at age 14 when she is being abused and raped by her father and attempting to protect her sister from the same fate, and continuing over the course of her marriage to "Mister," a brutal man who terrorizes her. Celie eventually learns that her abusive husband has been keeping her sister's letters from her and the rage she feels, combined with an example of love and independence provided by her close friend Shug, pushes her finally toward an awakening of her creative and loving self.

## About the author....

(<http://www.luminarium.org/contemporary/alicew/>)



Alice Walker was born on February 9, 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia, the eighth and last child of Willie Lee and Minnie Lou Grant Walker, who were sharecroppers. When Alice Walker was eight years old, she lost sight of one eye when one of her older brothers shot her with a BB gun by accident. In high school, Alice Walker was valedictorian of her class, and that achievement, coupled with a "rehabilitation scholarship" made it possible for her to go to Spelman, a college for black women in Atlanta, Georgia.

After spending two years at Spelman, she transferred to Sarah Lawrence College in New York, and during her junior year traveled to Africa as an exchange student. She received her bachelor of arts degree from Sarah Lawrence College in 1965.

After finishing college, Walker lived for a short time in New York, then from the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s, she lived in Tougaloo, Mississippi, during which time she had a daughter, Rebecca, in 1969. Alice Walker was active in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, and in the 1990's she is still an involved activist. She has spoken for the women's movement, the anti-apartheid movement, for the anti-nuclear movement, and against female genital mutilation. Alice Walker started her own publishing company, Wild Trees Press, in 1984. She currently resides in Northern California with her dog, Marley.

She received the Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for *The Color Purple*. Among her numerous awards and honors are the Lillian Smith Award from the National Endowment

for the Arts, the Rosenthal Award from the National Institute of Arts & Letters, a nomination for the National Book Award, a Radcliffe Institute Fellowship, a Merrill Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Front Page Award for Best Magazine Criticism from the Newswoman's Club of New York. She also has received the Townsend Prize and a Lyndhurst Prize.

### **Awards:**

Pulitzer Prize: 1983

National Book Award: 1983

### **Reviews**

#### *Booklist Review*

The lives of two black women are put into a jolting and revealing perspective in Walker's latest novel. Sisters Nettie and Celie are separated from one another as young girls, Celie to become the child bride and wife to a widower, and Nettie to be taken by a black family to Africa as a missionary. Celie's marriage is a harsh and poverty-stricken arrangement, and she is sustained only by a series of trusting letters she addresses to God and to her sister. But eventually even this unhappy marriage proves to be a blessing, as it introduces Celie to a

woman with whom she can find love and security. When Nattie returns after a 30-year absence, the sisters' bond is once more made whole in a magical and moving climax, enhanced by Walker's exceptionally eloquent writing. Walker is also the author of *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*.. ((Reviewed April 15, 1982))

### *Magill Book Review*

At the center of this triumphant story is Celie, who gradually overcomes her disadvantages and achieves a sense of self-worth. Ranging from the early 1900's to the 1940's, the novel consists almost entirely of letters, many written in Celie's limited but highly expressive dialect.

The first letters, those of the young Celie, are addressed to God: she does not know where else to turn. Raped repeatedly by her stepfather (she believes him to be her natural father), Celie is delivered of three children by him: the first is taken out and killed; the second and third, a boy and a girl, are given to a local couple. Celie's stepfather forces her to marry Albert, who beats her and badly mistreats her. Strangely, Albert's mistress, a blues singer named Shug Avery, frees Celie from Albert's bondage, first by loving her, then by helping her to start a custom sewing business. From Shug, Celie learns that Albert has been hiding letters written to her from Africa by her sister Nettie, a missionary.

These letters, full of educated, firsthand observation of African life, form a moving counterpoint to Celie's life. They reveal that in Africa, just as in America, women are persistently oppressed by men.

Not a feminist tract, this novel nevertheless shows how black women are the victims of black men, themselves locked into destructive cultural myths concerning the nature of masculinity. In Celie's relationship with the stubbornly independent Shug Avery, "sisterhood" becomes more than a cliché. From Shug, Celie gains not only self-respect but also a pantheistic faith in a God that is in everything and everyone. This faith is Alice Walker's as well, and it gives her unflinching portrait of racial and sexual oppression a transcending hopefulness.

**Kirkus Reviews** /\* Starred Review \*/

Walker (In Love and Trouble, Meridian) has set herself the task of an epistolary novel--and she scores strongly with it. The time is in the Thirties; a young, black, Southern woman named Celie is the primary correspondent (God being her usual addressee); and the life described in her letters is one of almost impossible grimness. While young, Celie is raped by a stepfather. (Even worse, she believes him to be her real father.) She's made to bear two children that are then taken away from her. She's married off without her consent to an older man, Albert, who'd rather have Celie's sister Nettle--and, by sacrificing her body to Albert without love or feeling, Celie saves her

sister, making it possible for her to escape: soon Nettle goes to Africa to work as a Christian missionary. Eventually, then, halfway through the book, as Celie's sub-literate dialect letters to God continue to mount (eventually achieving the naturalness and intensity of music, equal in beauty to Eudora Welty's early dialect stories), letters from Nettle in Africa begin to arrive. But Celie doesn't see them--because Albert holds them back from her. And it's only when Celie finds an unlikely redeemer--Albert's blues-singer lover Shug Avery--that her isolation ends: Shug takes Celie under her wing, becomes Celie's lover as well as Albert's; Shug's strength and expansiveness and wisdom finally free up Nettie's letters--thus granting poor Celie a tangible life in the now (Shug's love, encouragement) as well as a family life, a past (Nettie's letters). Walker fashions this book beautifully--with each of Celie's letters slowly adding to her independence (the implicit feminism won't surprise Walker's readers), with each letter deepening the rich, almost folk-tale-ish sense of story here. And, like an inverted pyramid, the novel thus builds itself up broadeningly while balanced on the frailest imaginable single point: the indestructibility--and battered-ness--of love. A lovely, painful book: Walker's finest work yet.

### **Discussion questions**

([http://www.litlovers.com/guide\\_colorpurple.html](http://www.litlovers.com/guide_colorpurple.html))

1. In Celie's first letter to God, she asks for a sign to let her know what is happening to her. Discuss the way confusion and deception become powerful tools for those characters who want to take advantage of Celie. Unravel the layers of lies that are told to her throughout the novel, perhaps making lists that compare the fiction she is expected to believe with the truth about her world. These can be concrete (Celie's impression that Pa is too poor to provide properly for her, and the later realization that he had more resources than he ever lets on) or abstract (the assertion that Celie is unintelligent, though she demonstrates constant intelligence in planning for her safety and that of her sister). Ask the students to recall their own experience with a revelation: when in their lives has the truth set them free?

2. What is the effect of not knowing Albert's last name? In early novels, it was not uncommon for authors to use a blank in place of a character's name, to create the illusion that the character was someone the reader might know—someone whose identity had to be kept secret. What does it mean that Celie must call her husband Mr. \_\_\_\_\_? When does she at last begin calling him by his first name?

3. Why does Albert tell Harpo to begin beating his wife, Sofia? Why is it so important to Harpo that his wife have no will of her own? Is his relationship with Squeak (Mary Agnes) fulfilling? What do these scenes

tell us about the nature of abusive cycles? Is cruelty something that is taught—something that is unnatural? In your opinion, what does it take for someone (male or female) to deserve true respect?

4. Just as Celie grew up being told she was inferior, Shug Avery was always told she was evil. What are your impressions of Shug, from the photo Celie sees early on, to the end of the novel, when Celie and Albert have united in their devotion to Shug? What does Shug teach Celie about being loved, and about finding one's true self? What price does Sofia pay for being her true self?

5. What does it take for Celie to finally reach her boiling point and reject oppression?

6. What is Celie's opinion of Grady and his haze of addiction?

7. Why is it difficult for Shug to commit to the people who love her? In what ways does Shug bring both pleasure and heartache to them?

8. Nettie's life with Corrine and Samuel gives her the first semblance of a healthy family life she has ever known, but Corrine's jealousy taints this. Only the memory of that crucial early scene, when Celie lays eyes on her daughter at the store, absolves Nettie just before Corrine dies. *The Color Purple* brims with these intricate turns of plot. List the seemingly minor



scenes that turn out to be pivotal in the lives of the characters.

Read Alikes:

**Source:** Margara Averbach, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1999.

- Maya Angelou's autobiographical *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published in 1970, describes her childhood in segregated Arkansas. The book paints a vivid picture of life in the rural South during the 1930s. When Maya moves to St. Louis with her mother, she is raped and remains mute for a number of years. Like Celie in *The Color Purple*, she eventually develops self-esteem.
- Jane Hamilton's 1988 novel *The Book of Ruth* is the story of a poor, white, small-town girl, who comes of age through great trauma. Like Celie, she too finds self-realization in spite of the despair of her life circumstances.
- In 1959, playwright Lorraine Hansberry became the first black woman writer to have a play produced on Broadway. *A Raisin in the Sun* is about the aspirations of a black family to attain a better life in racist America. Hansberry won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the play, and it was made into a film in 1961.
- Jamaica Kincaid was born in St. John's, Antigua. Her 1983 book *At the Bottom of the River*

explores the mother-daughter relationship in the setting of British colonial rule. In this novel, as well as her other works, Kincaid explores themes of racial domination, poverty, and coming of age.

- Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize winner Toni Morrison has produced a number of novels that deal with the complexities of black life in America. She depicts how African Americans are threatened from within by their own culture and history, and repressed from without by the white world. *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1969, *Sula* in 1973, *Tar Baby* in 1981, and *Jazz* in 1992.
- The renowned southern author Eudora Welty is known mostly as a short story writer, but she has written a number of novels that deal with the complex relationships in families. In *Delta Wedding*, published in 1946, Welty explores the intricacies of the close ties within the family. She is noted for her portrayal of powerful and engaging women.