

The color purple analysis



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ Twentieth century American literature is often overtly political, but also says much about humanity in general.” By a detailed comparison of *The Color Purple* with at least one other text you have studied, show how far you agree that it is possible to see twentieth century writing in these terms.

The Color Purple, set in southern America at the start of the twentieth century, follows the life of Celie over several decades, until just before the second-world war, and emphasises the hardships and joys of black people – in particular black women at the hands of men.

Later in the novel, we explore the life of Nettie, Celie’s sister, as a missionary in Africa. Oppression is just as great here, not only of Africans by Europeans, but also of African women by African men.

The novel is written through letters. This unusual style contributes to the structure, as it provides two points of view, and two styles, in the first-person narrators – Celie and Nettie. The letters help with the overall story line.

Firstly, Celie writes to God as she feels this is the only person she can talk to, however, later, each of the sisters writes to the other, as an act of faith, keeping up her spirits in times of despair. The fact that Mr_ hides Nettie’s letters, stands in their way of “ communicating” with one another, and could suggest that he is trying to prevent their sisterhood.

The letters also act as an indicator of time. Sometimes dates are written on the letters, other times they are not, and it is therefore up to the reader to calculate the days, weeks, or even years that have passed. This elliptical style enables Walker to spread the novel over 40 years.

Written in 1982, it becomes clear that several modern movements affected Walker's work.

Firstly there is the obvious impact of the Civil Rights Movement which took place during the 1950's and 60's, and which compelled integration throughout the United States. Throughout her novel, Walker is stressing the in-justice present in America, particularly for the non-mainstream majority groups, such as black people, as well as liberation, which can only come when a person learns to accept what they are, and fight against any restraints they may be faced with.

This can be shown through Shug Avery's strong nature, and how she doesn't care what people think of her. For example, Shug is able to stand up and perform (letter 33, when Shug sings at Harpo's juke joint) despite the fact that it was not really seen as acceptable at that time – she represents the black people who fought against segregation on public buses, and in restaurants, to achieve full equality for black citizens.

Secondly, there is the influence of the feminist movement of the 1960's. Walker highlights how women were previously exploited and suppressed (for example in Celie's first letter, when her "father" raped her) in a patriarchal society, but goes on to show how the female characters, in particular the protagonist Celie, gain independence and freedom, as well as a step nearer to gender equality eg. In letter 77, when Celie sets up her own business, "Folkspants, Unlimited". Men were traditionally the businesspeople, and "breadwinners". The fact that Walker chooses "pants" to be created emphasises further equality and female emancipation.

Although raising political issues, *The Color Purple* also looks at other topical areas that are more in line with every day life, and humanity in general.

Firstly, the issue of education and literacy is addressed. At the beginning of the novel we are made aware that Celie is not very well educated. This can be shown in her first letter where there is an obvious crossing out:

“ I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl...”

Nettie is shown to educate Celie (letter 9), and this is echoed by Olivia teaching Tashi in secret, as the Olinka's do not believe in women being educated (p. 132-3). Albert is also very determined to prevent Celie getting Nettie's letters. This highlights how men try to suppress women further, in preventing them from being educated.

The letters allow us to see a critical view of the world – Celie's illustrate neglect and abuse, while Nettie's look at the inhumanity of white colonists and African men.

Celie's letter writing skills develop throughout the novel, and this can be seen as a step towards self-improvement and awareness.

The writing is also seen as a weapon – it was the only way for many women to express and share their feelings.

Religion holds a strong importance in the novel. Each one of the first 51 letters begins with “ Dear God”, as does the last letter. “ Amen” ends Celie's letters to Nettie, as well as the novel. At first God holds a strong importance in Celie's life, as she feels that this is the only person she can talk to,

however, by page 151 she has lost her faith, believing that God “ must have been asleep” to keep her from the knowledge of her true parentage, as well as separating her from Nettie. In her anger, she says that “ God...is a man” and that “ if he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place...” (p. 164).

Shug however, tries to explain that “ God is inside you and everybody else” (p. 166), and that he is not an old man with a white beard, but all created things, like trees. She says, “ Man corrupt everything” and, you must “ git man off your eyeball’ before you can see anything...” (p. 168). She goes on to say that when you free your mind from false images of God, you are also free from the taboos of religion, like the wrongs of sex. Celie is eventually converted by this new faith, and it is for this reason that the final letter begins “ Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything...” (p. 242)

Religion within The Color Purple can therefore be seen to suggest that patriarchal society should be overthrown in order to create a better, purer world.

Patriarchy, and men’s violence and power is probably one of the most important issues raised within the novel.

Walker goes into immense detail to describe accounts of how Celie has been abused, for example, page 97:

“...he never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged...”

Even within Harpo and Sofia's happy relationship, violence occurs as Harpo has been brought up with the idea that if a woman doesn't do what a man expects him to, then he should hit her. This can be shown when Harpo is talking to Albert and Celie on page 34. Albert says, "...Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating..."

Walker presents men as the weaker, although not gentler sex. Characters like Albert, Alphonso, Harpo and Grady exemplify male weakness and male impulses to bully. Although Harpo and Grady are generally not as violent as the others, they are still thoughtless and hold traditional values that women are inferior, and only there for the good of men:

" Like when he [Grady] be making goo-goo eyes at Squeak...he say, Aw, Mama, you know I don't mean no harm..." (p. 98)

Walker highlights the assumption shared by all men, that women are inferior, through Albert's strong conviction on page 176: " You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam...you nothing at all."

The suppression of women, in a patriarchal society, is however softened by the bond, or " sisterhood" that the female characters share.

Celie keeps her faith in the world, by believing that one day she will meet Nettie again. The fact that the sisters keep writing despite the distance and uncertainty of whether the other is alive, highlights their determination and defiance, as well as the strong bond between them.

Sofia's strength (" All my life I had to fight..." pg. 38) and Shug's love and independence also help to develop and strengthen Celie's character, and because of this, Celie eventually has the courage to stand up to Albert:

" The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot.... I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook...but I'm here." (p. 176)

Similar issues are raised in Tennessee William's A Streetcar Named Desire.

Written in 1947, the play is set in New Orleans (American South) in the immediate post-war period. It focuses on the country trying to repair itself economically, as well as showing how people, especially working class males returning from service, try to get their lives back to normal. The central characters are brutish Stanley Kowalski, Stella, his wife, and Blanche DuBois – Stella's sister who came to stay with them.

Williams work was clearly affected by the war. In the play, he looks at America, and the people within society, with a mix of anguish, criticism and pity.

Personifying the harsh reality, and hardships of modern day America through Stan and his poker friends, compared to Blanche, who represents the traditional, more idealistic American South, we are able to see that the " American Dream" is nothing more than a myth, and that people have two options in life – to face reality, or try to hide from it (Blanche).

Once again, patriarchy, and male power is a major aspect.

Stanley is shown to be crude and chauvinistic, summing up women in a glance. In the stage directions, we learn that “...the centre of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it...with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens...”

He is clearly the dominant character in the household, and believes that a woman’s role is to look after the man. This can be shown through the way in which he talks to Stella:

“ How about my supper, huh?...” (Scene 2, page 15)

He is also very aggressive, and violent, as he is unable to control his temper. This can be shown in the stage directions of scene 3: “ She backs out of sight. He advances and disappears. There is the sound of a blow...”

Everything about Stanley emphasises the typical working class man of that time. He is roughly dressed, uncouth, and uncivilized, enjoying nothing better than a poker game with “ the lads” where they can drink, and talk in a sexual manner. He shows little respect towards women, and in particular, his wife.

This is in complete contrast to Blanche. Blanche takes the up most care with her appearance, speaks in a very refined manner, and is clearly from a better background to Stanley. Her language is very poetic, and overdramatic:

“...have got to be seductive – put on soft colours, the colours of butterfly wings, and glow – make a little – temporary magic...” (Scene 5, p. 45)

She refers to the nicer things in life, or perhaps an ideal world, cowering away from harsh reality – it is for this reason that she always has a shade on the light, as she needs “ protecting” from the evil of society:

“ Daylight never exposed so total a ruin!...”(Scene 1, p. 9)

Stanley clearly does not like Blanche and her superior manners, and makes life as awkward as he can for her. The strong bond between Blanche and her sister however, eases the tension, and it is often Stella that stands up in defence of Blanche, just like the strong sense of sisterhood in *The Color Purple*:

“ And try to understand her and be nice to her, Stan...” (Scene 2, p. 16)

Despite this, Stella ultimately sides with Stanley when it comes to believing whether or not he raped Blanche:

“ I couldn’t believe her story and go on living with Stanley...” (Scene 6, p. 83)

This therefore acts as a contrast to *The Color Purple*, as we are aware that nothing could come between Nettie and Celie -especially a man.

In conclusion, I believe that twentieth century American literature can address political issues. This can be shown within both Walker’s and Williams’s work. Walker is clearly influenced by the Civil Rights, and Feminist Movements, while Williams chooses to take more of a critical view of America after the second world war – in particular, the illusion of the American Dream and the effects of the economy.

In spite of this, the writers also choose to look at more topical issues such as domestic violence, patriarchy, relationships, and the search for personal freedom.

I therefore believe, that in order to create a successful piece, a writer must consider movements and issues that have effected the way society is at the present time, but also look at more personal aspects, which shape a persons existence, and their outlook on life. This not only adds to the enjoyment of the work, but allows the reader to interact, and relate to particular situations.