

# Men and women in the the color purple



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In the 1900's, men and women were not as equal as they are today. For centuries African Americans have been fighting for fairness, equal rights and equal opportunities in a country and racist system that wants to keep them as lower-class citizens. Even with Heads of State such as Abraham Lincoln, John F Kennedy and Barack Obama, and Civil Rights leaders and freedom fighters like Martin Luther King, although greatly increased since the abolition of slavery, the opportunities for African Americans were still significantly lower than white America.

Families were generally patriarchal and in the movie *The Color Purple* by Steven Spielberg, he dissects the idea of how diverse two people's pasts can become later in life with the smallest change of detail when a person is young. The story focuses mainly on the lives of African American women in the southern United States in the 1930's and addresses numerous issues suffered by them but most importantly, their exceedingly low position in American Social Culture. Two sisters, Celie and Nettie, live contrasting lives, one in the form of torture, and one in the form of a successful life fulfilling adventures. One of the protagonists is an independent, no-nonsense and assertive African American woman called Sofia who takes pride in the fact that she is a free woman and doesn't have to work for white folk. While in town, the Mayor's wife Miss Millie approaches Sofia and her children. She begins to paw at and finger the children, without speaking to, or asking permission from their mother. This is a poignant image and reminiscent of the way slaves would have been examined at the slave markets.

This description shows that the white members of the town don't even consider the feelings of the African American mother or children they are just

something that can be examined or checked like possessions that they can check over at a store before buying. As an African American woman raised in the south in the 1930's, Sofia utterly dismisses the systematic oppression and discrimination that immersed the position of the black woman at this time. In this system, African Americans had to remain completely subservient to the white Americans both economically and socially. Sofia feels there would be no greater dishonor than to have to answer to or feel inferior to a White American. Sofia pays greatly for keeping true to herself and her morals and in the process loses most of her strength and dignity. This shows a great irony that the value she places on fighting back against the white man is the thing that prevents her from living her life independently. The character of Sofia, for this reason, both manoeuvres and hinders empowerment. Spielberg uses Celie to show how finding your voice and stating yourself can enable you to oppose mistreatment<sup>1</sup>. In the original novel by Alice Walker, Celie writes letters to God about her life experience, but in the movie it is all shown through powerful scenes and voiceovers. Racism, sexism, and feminism are three main things that are shown throughout the film. The cyclical nature of sexism can be seen many times, but it can mainly be seen in Celie and Harpo's lives. Celie is a character that can be seen to have the core issue of low self-esteem. Most of the film she believes that her sister Nettie is dead. This causes her to feel inadequate and in most of all instances, Celie shows that she doesn't enjoy living, as she lives in fear most of her life. Her low self-esteem is first seen early, as she writes Alfonso beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church. I may have got something in my eye but I didn't wink. I don't even look at mens.

I look at women though, cause I'm not scared of them<sup>2</sup>. Celie is beaten by her stepdad, Alfonso, who she believes at the time is her real father. Alfonso beats her because he presumes that she was showing romantic gestures to a male. This is showing that Alfonso clearly doesn't allow Celie to show any romantic feelings or doesn't allow her the freedom to choose her husband. Clearly in this society, women have a lot less power than men and are regularly beaten in private. Celie is submissive to Alfonso, and later Albert (Mr.). She writes, Albert beat me like he beat the children. Except he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie get the belt. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man<sup>3</sup>. Just to survive and endure these beatings, Celie imagines that she's a tree and doesn't fight back. She is submissive and fills the stereotype of the housewife who cares for the children and doesn't talk back to the husband. However, as time goes on, Shug, Sofia, and Nettie empower Celie, giving her a reason to fight. Her breaking point was when she found the letters that Albert was hiding from her her whole life. They create a support group for Celie, giving her safe space. Celie is rebirthed, as she is able to then retaliate against Albert and stand up to him. She says to him, You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need. You took my sister Nettie away from me, I say. And she was the only person love me in this world. All of this pent up anger towards Albert was finally released and she shocked everybody. Speaking back in this society was not normal and everyone was extremely surprised that she did it of all people. The superego is in the internalized social values of a person" what is right and what is wrong. Harpo's superego underwent a dramatic change after he met Celie and Sofia.

His initial societal beliefs can be seen when he is asked to get a bucket of water, to which he responds, Women work. I am a man. It is very easy to see the sexism of work in the society.

Women do all the heavy lifting while the men sit around and drink. These values can also be seen when he marries his first wife, Sofia. Sofia is different from Celie in the sense that she doesn't subdue herself to men in her life. Harpo tries to beat Sofia multiple times, however, he never succeeds. The societal idea that you must beat your wife is so ingrained into Harpo's mind, that he continuously tries to control Sofia through fear, as he witnessed his father do to Celie. Harpo trying to beat his wife is showing that this is normalizing society and continues without thought through our generations. Feminism is shown when Sofia fights back and gives him a black eye. He lies to everyone about how he got it, which shows his insecurity in regards to his manliness because of the fact that his wife can beat him up. In their relationship, Sofia becomes more dominant. Harpo and Sofia also believe that no matter what, their children will grow up to be racists. Sofia is convinced that because of society's influence, her children will become cynical of everyone around them. Celie is oppressed throughout her life because that's the way society has been for a long time. The idea that men are better than women was passed down for generations. However, Celie was able to break the cycle. The movie's representation and portrayal of the historical context from struggle to liberation invites the movie's viewers to understand the issues from a gender and intercultural perspective. .