

Bloom's Literature

How to Write about *Color Purple*

Reading to Write

Dear God,

I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy. He twelve. His mama died in his arms and he don't want to hear nothing bout no new one. He pick up a rock and laid my head open. The blood run all down tween my breasts. His daddy say Don't *do* that! But that's all he say. He got four children, instead of three, two boys and two girls. The girls hair ain't been comb since their mammy died. I tell him I'll just have to shave it off. Start fresh. He say bad luck to cut a woman hair. So after I bandage my head best I can and cook dinner—they have a spring, not a well, and a wood stove look like a truck—I start trying to untangle hair. They only six and eight and they cry. They scream. They cuse me of murder. By ten o'clock I'm done. They cry theirselves to sleep. But I don't cry. I lay there thinking bout Nettie while he on top of me, wonder if she safe. And then I think bout Shug Avery. I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him.

An unwanted marriage, violence, parenting someone else's four young children, and sexual exploitation: Celie endures all this because Mr. _____ cannot find anyone else to take care of his household. This poor, uneducated, country girl feels that only God might listen to the details of her daily suffering, so she writes letters to him in her idiosyncratic English. Since Celie imagines God as a distant old white man, she is not expecting much divine mercy or compassion for her plight because she has routinely been exploited and overlooked by men. Additionally, the endemic discrimination of blacks by whites in Georgia means that her white God is unlikely to bother himself with a black girl's problems. Celie asks God for signs to prove that he is listening, but she receives nothing. Taking all these factors into consideration, the opening words of the excerpt—"Dear God"—can be used as a starting point for a variety of approaches to writing on *The Color Purple*.

The form of the novel is distinct. An epistolary novel is one that is written in the form of a series of letters exchanged among characters. This use of letters permits the author to present the viewpoint of multiple characters, and the multiple first-person voices give an immediacy to the characters' experiences, which is diminished when a third-person omniscient narrator mediates a narrative. An essay could analyze how the epistolary form of this novel helps Walker convey themes and ideas or develop characterization. For example, an essay could relate the epistolary form of the novel to the themes of finding one's voice and speaking out. The first line of the novel is a warning to Celie from her stepfather, who has raped her and impregnated her, to "*never tell nobody but God*." How are Celie's letters a response to this command to be silent? Later in the novel, Celie addresses her letters to her sister, Nettie. How does this shift in addressee mirror the psychological and intellectual growth that Celie is undergoing? How does Celie's language differ in the later letters from the earlier ones? How has she changed, and what has prompted her transformation?

The excerpt touches on several ideas and themes whose analysis could form the basis of a paper. Since Celie's letters are addressed to God, the novel engages the idea of religious belief. Even though Celie is convinced that her remote, authoritative God is deaf to her prayers, she also admits that she finds it hard to dispense with God totally. Shug steers her toward seeing God in a pantheistic way whereby God is immanent in all creation and all creation is interconnected. How the characters' religious beliefs influence the way they live their lives could become an essay topic. The excerpt describes Harpo's violence to Celie on her wedding day. His own mother had been murdered, and he had held her in his arms as she died. Violence, particularly toward women and children, is commonplace in the novel's world. You could think about the different types of violence presented in the novel. What is Walker's didactic intent in including graphic details of rape, murder, and domestic abuse? How does the novel propose that the problem of violence could be managed?

The excerpt explains that, at this point in her life, Celie responds to Mr. _____'s sexual use of her by drifting away in her imagination. Her thoughts of Nettie are replaced by sexualized fantasies of Shug. Betrayed and exploited by men all her life, Celie turns to women for support and love. One of Walker's goals in the novel is to promote the importance of women's solidarity, and this notion readily presents itself as a potential essay topic. With the support of a strong network of friends and family, the women

are able to find self-fulfillment and acquire a sense of worth. Celie and Shug take this bond a step further by becoming lovers. A paper could analyze Celie and other female characters as womanists. Walker defined the word *womanist* in her essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* as someone who "appreciates and prefers women's culture" and who "loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually." How does Walker use the novel as a vehicle for her womanist ideals?

Although Celie's English is nonstandard, she is forthcoming in revealing her feelings and unguarded in retelling the events of her life. As a result of this style, the novel might appear to be an easy read at first glance, despite Celie's broken syntax and unconventional spelling. However, as the excerpt exemplifies, a lot can transpire in just a few lines of the narrative. Furthermore, there are aspects of her life that Celie does not mention, such as the world beyond her horizon or how much time elapses between each writing of a letter. When preparing to write on this novel, a careful read is needed to avoid missing critical details and to fill in the gaps in her story.

Topics and Strategies

The ideas suggested in the remainder of this chapter will propose a variety of essay topics on *The Color Purple*. These suggestions should be used as a starting point to aid you in generating your own innovative approaches to each topic.

Themes

The Color Purple depicts a cruel, violent world where women and children are routinely beaten and exploited. Walker illustrates violence's many faces through multiple accounts of rape, wife-beating, and murder. Yet within this violent milieu, characters still yearn for, and find, love. Love, too, has many different faces in this novel. Some men love their wives, some parents love their children, and some friends and family come to love each other. Love is a healing force within the psychologically damaged community that Walker presents. By coming together in love, Celie's extended family becomes stronger, providing a healthier environment in which to raise children. Through love, understanding, and forgiveness, Walker suggests that the cycles of violence, in which some families are trapped, can be broken. Breaking free from cycles of violence allows both women and men the chance to find self-fulfillment. Although *The Color Purple*'s black community cannot elude the racist aggression that they suffer at the hands of the white population, family support and love can help lessen its impact on each individual. At the end of the novel, Albert observes that the more he opens himself to loving other people, the more other people love him back. As a result of his revised perspective on human relationships, Albert and Celie are able to speak to each other with honesty. They are not the only characters to find their true voice. Celie is transformed when she finds the courage to speak out because she is finally able to defend herself against oppression and exploitation. Mary Agnes asserts herself, too, and makes her needs known after years of timidity. Only Shug and Sofia consistently refuse to be silent and downtrodden by the sexist, racist society in which they live. Love, cruelty, violence, oppression, exploitation, domestic abuse, child abuse, family, marriage, male-female relationships: These are just some of the many themes that *The Color Purple* takes a controversial look at and which could become the focus of an essay.

Sample Topics:

1. **Violence and cruelty:** Why are characters violent and cruel in the novel? What are the physical and mental effects on characters of acts of violence and cruelty? How does the novel judge the violent and the cruel?

This essay could focus on either the violent or the victims of violence or both. You might want to consider how Walker shows violence to be perpetuated within families or the link she makes between family violence and violence in society more generally (particularly in terms of violent acts carried out in the context of racism). A thesis could also be developed that takes into account the novel's suggested remedies for violence.

2. **Love:** What social and personal factors interfere in the expression of love between characters? How does Walker demonstrate the power of love in the novel?

A possible approach to the theme of love is to analyze the different types of love that the novel presents and show the power love has to transform lives. The novel includes examples of love between husband and wives, between sisters, and between women, and this love is a driving force in making characters behave the way they do. Walker also moves toward an idea of universal love at the end of the novel. How is Celie able to feel universal love, and what is the effect of that on her and on others?

3. **Family:** In what ways does *The Color Purple* portray a negative image of the family unit? Conversely, Walker shows that

the family can become a source of support and comfort. How?

Such an essay would start by looking at the specific family relationships in the novel. Some relationships provide characters with a reason to endure life's pain. For example, Celie's and Nettie's love for each other sustains both characters at difficult times in their lives. Walker depicts other relationships, particularly between husbands and wives and between parents and children, as sources of absolute misery and suffering. An essay could evaluate Walker's purpose in portraying the family unit in a negative light. Alternatively, a paper could focus on a specific type of family connection, such as husband and wife or sisters. These papers would analyze Walker's representation of marriage and sibling relationships respectively.

4. **Finding one's voice:** Which characters in *The Color Purple* have been compelled to be silent or felt compelled to speak out? What personality traits and attitudes determine whether a character will be silent or speak his or her truth?

This topic could be approached by analyzing certain characters' movement from silence to speech. What social and personal forces govern whether a character will be silent or self-assertive? What role does gender play in whether a character finds the will to speak his or her true thoughts? An angle that could be pursued is how the themes of silence and speaking out (for both black women and black men) are affected by the historical and social context.

Character

In Walker's essay "Writing *The Color Purple*" in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, the author describes her characters as living spirits who demanded a pleasing location and silence in order for them to tell her their stories. Reading this essay will give you a good sense of how Walker viewed her vibrant and divergent cast of characters; she describes herself as their medium rather than their creator.

Many of *The Color Purple*'s characters are sufficiently dynamic and three dimensional that they provide ample material for an essay analyzing their development. Celie starts the novel as a reticent and abused child who blossoms through Shug's love into a self-assertive, successful businesswoman. Shug's presence is felt in the novel before she officially makes an appearance when Celie finds a photograph of her, which she treasures. When Mr. _____ brings Shug to their house, Shug ultimately responds to Celie's kindness and devotion. Despite her wild past and her affair with a boy less than half her age, Shug eventually settles down in the country with Celie. Mr. _____ transforms himself into Albert. Initially, he is a man so brutal and uncaring that only his constant love for Shug might salvage him slightly from readers' utter contempt. Through life experience, Mr. _____ becomes self-aware. Instead of being portrayed as a generic angry, aggressive, lazy bully, the novel shows how he becomes a man who earns love from other characters apart from Shug. Sofia enters the novel brash and confident. She refuses to be browbeaten by her husband's need to control her. Crushed by a racist encounter that leads to her imprisonment and then years of enforced domestic labor, Sofia stands strong and resilient once again in the final pages of the novel. These four characters could be written about using different approaches, and they could also be compared with one another and with other secondary characters. See the "Compare and Contrast" section for suggestions on comparative topics.

Sample Topics:

1. **Celie's growth:** How does Celie develop over the course of the novel? What and who helps her to assert herself?

To create a thesis on the topic of Celie's growth in awareness and self-assertion, the essay writer must determine the exact nature of Celie's change and what prompts it. Evidence for this can be found by comparing and contrasting how Celie responds to other characters at the start of the novel when she is young with how she deals with the same characters later in her life. Although she has obviously aged and had many experiences that have helped educate her, how does the changing social and historical context facilitate Celie's development?

2. **From Mr. _____ to Albert:** What events in this character's life cause him to transform himself from a nameless bully into a sensitive man capable of love and empathy?

Similar to an essay on Celie, this paper is likely to look at the events and other characters who help Albert develop in terms of his behavior and attitudes. There are marked differences between Mr. _____ and the Albert who appears at the end of the novel, sewing with Celie on the porch. Why is Celie able to reconnect with her former brutish husband as a friend? What has Albert learned about himself as a man?

3. **Everybody's sugar—Shug:** Which of Shug's characteristics cause Celie and Albert to find her very attractive? How does

she serve as a stimulus for change in Celie's and Albert's lives?

Shug educates Celie in many ways, both sexually and intellectually. Albert spends his entire life loving Shug but does not have the strength of character necessary to keep her with him. An essay on Shug could look at her function in the novel as a catalyst for love and transformation. How does Walker achieve sympathy for Shug despite her wild and sometimes mean behavior? How does the social and historical context of the early parts of the novel contribute to our judgment of Shug? Another approach to an essay on Shug could evaluate her as a symbol of resistance to traditional gender roles.

4. **Strong Sofia:** How and why does Sofia stand up for what she believes is right? How does Sofia contribute to other characters' growth in awareness?

Sofia's outspokenness and her preparedness to fight back against injustice and oppression are admirable qualities, but they bring her a lot of concomitant grief and suffering. An essay on Sofia could analyze her dominant character traits and show how they lead to positive and negative consequences in her life. How does she differ from other female characters in the novel in her attitudes and the choices she makes? How do the other characters respond to her? What is the significance of her relationship with Eleanor Jane to some of the novel's themes? The meaning of the name Sofia is wisdom. How is Sofia a source of wisdom for other characters?

History and Context

How does Walker portray Africa? The stamp on Nettie's letter has a picture of Queen Victoria, "peanuts, coconuts, rubber trees and say[s] Africa"? Why does the stamp not read "Nigeria" or "Senegal"? The West has always inclined toward a homogenization of Africa, rather than acknowledging the specificity of each country and each country's diverse populations. Why does Nettie say that she has lessons in the "Olinka dialect"? African languages are repeatedly referred to as dialects in the Western media, but a dialect is a variation of a standard version of a language. What is "Olinka" a dialect of? Popular western images of Africa assume that all Africans live in thatched huts in rural areas; bustling African cities with their skyscrapers, malls, and cars are conveniently overlooked. Although Walker refers to Africa's colonial history through the allusion to Queen Victoria, Nettie does not question Corrine and Samuel's right as missionaries to go to Africa and impose their Christian views on the populace. Does it make a difference that Corrine and Samuel are African American and not white? Nettie is surprised that the Senegalese are not concerned with "the uplift of black people everywhere." The market traders are only interested in making a sale, and if there is no sale, there is no common purpose between African and African American. African-American attitudes toward Africa vary and shift over time; nonetheless, the goal of refuting white people's widespread belief that people of African descent are inferior to people of European descent has been constant. As Nettie travels to Africa, passing through New York and England, how do the different people she encounters add to the picture of Africa as either an inferior continent or as a place horribly misrepresented by the West? Does Walker compound the West's distorted representation of Africa (perhaps despite positive intentions), or is her mission to correct the West's misperception successful? As with *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, there is textual evidence that can be advanced both to criticize and defend Walker's representation of Africa.

In much of her work, Walker assigns the American South both positive and negative values. As a southern writer, Walker is able to draw on her lived experience of being raised in a sharecropper family in rural Georgia. She has firsthand knowledge of the daily toil involved in working the land and of the constant, violent brushes with white southern racism. Her thoughts on her southern heritage are explained in the essay "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience," which can be found in the anthology *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Another helpful essay on the South from the same anthology is "Coretta King: Revisited." These two essays should give you an understanding of the ambivalence that vexes Walker when writing about the South.

Alice Walker advocated womanism in *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden* as a tool to communicate the interests of black women and women of color. Targets of racism and sexism, black women had concerns that white feminism and the Civil Rights movement neglected. As Mr. _____ revels in telling Celie, "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all." Celie is perceived as being at the bottom of the social hierarchy because of her color, her gender, and her class. In the definitions of womanism included in the opening pages of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker writes that "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender." Thus, black women's feminism is associated with the color purple. (See the "Language, Symbol, and Imagery" section for more information on the color purple's symbolism.) How does Celie come to claim the color purple, or a womanist position, for herself?

Sample Topics:

1. **Visions of Africa:** How does Walker offer a positive presentation of Africa and Africans? What aspects of the novel's depiction of Africa could provide evidence to accuse Walker of misrepresenting Africa?

An essay on this topic would be evaluative, aiming to determine whether Walker's fictional construction of Olinka is tainted by Western assumptions on Africa or whether it redresses the West's repeated distorted representations of the continent and its people. How does she depict the relationships between the African characters and African Americans? What is the novel's position on colonialism and white involvement in Africa? To what purpose does Walker include the story about the white missionary (who Nettie eventually meets)? Essay writers on this topic might adopt a variety of different stances on this topic after examining the textual evidence of Walker's representation of Africa.

2. **The South:** In what ways does Walker show rural life in the South to be extremely difficult for both black women and black men? What are the positive aspects of southern life for Walker's black characters? How does the novel offer hope for change in the South?

Walker's southern landscape is racist, violent, and oppressive. By the end of the novel, the characters are fighting back and have formed a community that can help its members with their struggles. An essay analyzing Walker's representation of the South could reflect on its conflicting features. How can a place be perceived as a home that offers a supportive community, yet many of the characters feel compelled to move away? What aspects of black southern life does Walker validate in the novel? Why do Celie and Shug move back home? How do the secondary characters, particularly Eleanor Jane and her baby son, shed light on Walker's judgment of the white southern mentality?

3. **The Color Purple as a womanist novel:** How does Walker show the effects of sexism on the black female characters when they interact with both black and white males? How does Celie come to espouse womanist ideas, and how are they reproduced in her behavior and actions?

An essay drawing on Walker's womanist philosophy will need to have a grasp of black feminist theory. First, you should read the definitions of *womanism* that can be found at the start of the essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Second, you will find reading a book on black feminist theory helpful. You will likely find an appropriate text, such as *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* by Patricia Hill Collins or Barbara Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, in your library. With an understanding of the meaning and goals of womanism, you could identify and analyze womanist concerns that Walker touches on in *The Color Purple*. For example, an exploration of how Celie and other female characters recast their relationships with the male characters and claim their power as black women is viable.

Philosophy and Ideas

Since Walker makes black women's interests a primary focus in much of her work, thinking about gender is a logical place to start when trying to devise an essay topic for *The Color Purple*. Most societies around the world have expectations about the way men and women should behave. Failure to conform to these expectations can lead to a person being judged as aberrant or deficient. Popular explications of gender define women as weak, dependent, and sexually passive, whereas men are strong, independent, and sexually driven. In this schema, a strong, assertive woman is an anomaly, as is a man ridden with doubt or a desire to engage in domestic activities. Many of the characters in *The Color Purple* challenge traditional views of gender; however, there can be repercussions for their lack of conformity. For example, Shug's decisions to fulfill her sexual needs cause her society to label her a "loose woman." There is an imagined correlation between a woman's sexual behavior and her overall value as a woman. A man who cannot control his wife, such as Harpo, is deemed to be lacking masculinity. Women who reject standard models of femininity and men who do not conform to society's standards for masculinity find themselves marginalized from their society. Although *The Color Purple* shows that there can be negative consequences for those who defy traditional gender roles, the novel argues that behaving contrary to one's true nature is also detrimental to individual happiness and fulfillment. Society, however, will insist on conformity and, in the case of women, solidarity is crucial in order for society's pressures to be withstood. By the end of the novel, all the main female characters have stopped undermining one another, realizing that antagonism and jealousy only allow men and society to have power over their lives. The way that female characters, such as Celie, interact with men and society is often linked to their perceptions of God and religion. At the start of the novel, Celie sees God as a distant, disinterested white man. Her later adjusted understanding of God aids in the overhaul of her interpersonal relationships and her manner of conducting herself in society. Another facet of Celie's growth is the education she receives from Shug and Nettie. They broaden her knowledge in areas such as sexuality, geography, history, and religion. Women in this time period were often uneducated. As Nettie explains in one of her letters to Celie, the Olinka do not want girls educated by the missionaries because no

man wants a wife who knows as much he does. Undoubtedly, a formal or informal education can be a catalyst in helping women break free of the traditional gender roles that curtail their freedom and choices.

Sample Topics:

1. **Gender roles:** How does *The Color Purple* challenge traditional definitions of femininity and masculinity? According to the novel, what are the consequences of both challenging, and not challenging, stifling gender roles?

This topic could either focus on just the male characters, or just the female characters, or make a comparison of male and female characters. An essay could examine not only how some of the characters defy society's expectations for them as women or men, but also the consequences on those characters who choose not to conform. How does conformity to traditional gender roles limit Mr. _____, Harpo, Celie, or Squeak? How does disruption of socially imposed gender roles affect Sofia and Shug?

2. **Female solidarity:** Why and how does the novel show female friendship and support as essential to women's well-being? What situations and emotions undermine women's solidarity at the start of the novel?

By supporting one another, the female characters find the strength to stand up to the men who try to control, exploit, and oppress them. An essay on this topic could analyze specific characters' growth in awareness about the benefits of women's cohesion. For example, how does Squeak put aside her jealousy of Sofia and start to support her? Alternatively, a paper could look at the moments where the women are united. During these moments, how do the men respond to the women's unity, and what are the women able to achieve through their unanimity? How important is the sisterly bond in the novel?

3. **Religion and God:** The way a character views God is reflected in the way they act in the world and in the way they view their own agency. How is Celie's interaction with Mr. _____ indicative of the way she perceives God at any given time? How does Shug's perception of God carry over into the way she conducts herself?

An essay on this topic might link certain characters' perception of the divine to their sense of identity and self-worth. Why does Celie initially address her letters to God? What life events cause her to reject God as the recipient of her letters? Another approach to this topic could look at the role of religion in wider society as shown in *The Color Purple*. How do religious beliefs, whether Christian or otherwise, affect the Olinkan people and their traditional way of life? What does Nettie suggest have been the effects of Christian (whether European or American) missionaries in Africa?

4. **Education and learning:** Toward the end of the novel, Sofia observes that, "Everybody learn something in life." What do the different characters learn, and from where or whom do they get their education?

A feasible approach to this topic could look at the Olinka and the rural community of Georgia and determine how access to education (or lack thereof) is used to reinforce social inequities and to control segments of the population. Another approach might consider what different characters end up learning despite a lack of formal education. What ways can characters acquire an education? What does Walker's novel suggest can happen on an individual and social level when people become educated (whether that education is formal or informal)?

Form and Genre

In the essay, "Writing *The Color Purple*," Walker asserts that she "knew *The Color Purple* would be a historical novel." She then goes on to note the differences between what a man might imagine as a historical novel versus her woman's definition. A male historical novel deals with wars over land or the lives of "Great Men," whereas her woman's history starts with "one woman asking another for her underwear." However, if a historical novel is defined as one in which the action is set during a specific period (earlier than that of the time of writing of the novel) and where the behavior and mentality of that period are reproduced accurately, then *The Color Purple* can be seen as a historical novel. Furthermore, a historical novel will often dwell on the conflicts that arise at an individual level because of the historical and social events that are happening "offstage" that are shaping characters' lives. *The Color Purple* describes the American South during the first half of the 20th century at a time when the South was still segregated and women were extremely limited in the choices they could make for their lives. However, Walker barely mentions the events that mainstream society would consider of supreme importance for this period, such as war or colonial conquest. Although some social and world phenomena and events are alluded to if they touch on Celie's or Nettie's lives, they are not at the forefront of the narrative.

The novel's lack of traditional history is explainable because the story is told through private letters. How would an uneducated, isolated black woman gain access to knowledge and information about the wider world? Celie's world only starts to expand once she meets Shug and once she starts reading Nettie's letters. An epistolary novel is one written in the form of a series of letters exchanged among characters. If letters from more than one character are used, the epistolary form can be undermined if an author does not differentiate the style and tone of the different characters' letters. In *The Color Purple*, Walker solved this problem by having Celie's letters written in a dialect appropriate for an uneducated, rural, black southern girl, whereas Nettie's access to a greater level of education is reflected in her use of a standard English that can employ a more sophisticated vocabulary and syntax.

Walker's creation of Celie's unique voice resonated with readers, and the novel's popularity led to Steven Spielberg directing a film version of it in 1985. The film version starred Whoopi Goldberg as Celie, Danny Glover as Albert, and Oprah Winfrey as Sofia. In order to appeal to mainstream audiences, aspects of the novel were glossed over. For example, Celie and Shug's sexual relationship is barely hinted at, since portrayals of lesbianism were not the norm in film in the 1980s. As Spielberg is a white, Jewish male who had not lived in the South, some critics felt that he was an unsuitable choice for director. He was condemned for having re-created a rather romantic representation of the South and for having shied away from showing its harsh realities. However, despite the mixed reviews, the movie made money and is still considered successful. *The Color Purple*'s ongoing popularity is shown by the musical version of the story that was brought to Broadway in 2005.

Sample Topics:

1. ***The Color Purple* as a historical novel:** In what ways is the setting of the novel a crucial foundation for Walker's thematic goals? Why is it significant that Walker deliberately sidelines mainstream historical events in her novel?

An essay on the use and function of setting in *The Color Purple* could start by identifying the different historical events that Walker mentions. Why does she incorporate these particular events? In addition, she uses the southern mentality of the early 20th century as a backdrop that sheds light on many events that happen in the lives of her rural black characters. How does Walker challenge traditional understandings of history in the novel and why does she do this?

2. ***The Color Purple* as an epistolary novel:** How does the letter form of the novel enhance Walker's themes? How does Walker use the changing recipients of the letters to show character development?

The epistolary form is not a commonly used novel form; however, it served Walker's goals for her novel very effectively. An essay could evaluate how the form of the novel is used by Walker to reinforce certain themes, amplify character traits, and reveal character development. The epistolary form could also be analyzed in conjunction with the novel's use of history. Since the letters are not dated, the passing of time becomes quite hard to pinpoint. Nonetheless, around 40 years elapse from the start to the finish of the novel. How does the epistolary form support Walker's beliefs about history? How can an uneducated girl's letters provide an alternative source of history?

3. **The film compared to the novel:** What are the critical differences between the film version and the novel? How do these differences undermine the novel's thematic intent? Why do you think the movie version made these changes?

Since the film version of *The Color Purple* has been successful, it must have something that appeals to audiences even if it discarded some of the original foci of the novel. An essay could compare and contrast the film version with the novel. Remember though that you must construct a thesis that provides a purpose for the comparison, rather than simply listing all the differences between the two versions.

Language, Symbols, and Imagery

According to the essay "Writing *The Color Purple*," Walker was working on a quilt at the same time she was writing the novel. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that characters such as Celie and Sofia spend time together sewing a quilt. Sewing, in *The Color Purple*, can be a communal or an individual activity; however, even when done individually, a character can sew while in the company of others. Individual or communal, sewing is deemed to be a woman's activity. Thus, when Albert starts sewing with Celie on his porch, it signifies a radical shift in his attitude toward women and himself. Celie discovers that she has talent for sewing and starts making pants for herself and Shug. The pants' practicality and aesthetic designs soon attract other customers. Before long, Celie has a thriving business sewing pants. Although sewing and quilting can have simply utilitarian functions, many women, such as Celie, express their creative proclivities through their sewing. This creativity has limited other outlets within such women's daily lives of child-rearing, housework, and working on the land.

Celie's ability to find a sense of self-worth, partly through sewing, is symbolized by her attainment of the color purple. At the start of the story, when Mr. _____'s sister takes Celie to buy a new dress, they fail to find the color purple among the possible fabrics. When Shug instructs Celie in her view of God, she asserts that God is annoyed when people fail to notice the color purple in a field. In the house where she settles down with Shug, Celie finally decorates her room in purple and red. Albert even gives Celie a carved purple frog. Celie's attainment of the color purple is tied to Walker's definition of black feminism (womanism), when she writes in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* that "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender." The importance of the color purple to Celie is comparable to the importance of roofleaf to the Olinka. The Olinka villagers have a ceremony documenting the loss and reattainment of roofleaf. The Olinka associate roofleaf with balance and harmony within their own community and with their environment. Loss of that balance can be hazardous. However, the harmonious way of life has been destabilized by greedy people in the past and in the time when Nettie is living with them. Sewing, pants, the color purple, and roofleaf are four significant symbols whose analysis could become the foundation of various essays.

Sample Topics:

1. **Sewing and quilting:** What are the functions of sewing and quilting in the rural Georgia community that Walker depicts? What does the making of a quilt symbolize? Why is it significant that Albert learns to enjoy sewing?

A quilt is constructed out of different types of fabric, which sewn together creatively can produce something useful and beautiful. Often the fabric pieces are chosen for the memories and associations they evoke. Why does Sofia propose to Celie that they make a quilt together? Given that the two women, and sometimes Shug, spend much time together working on this quilt, what does the sewing of this quilt symbolize? An essay could consider how the symbolic significance of quilting enhances some of the main themes and ideas of the novel. This topic could be extended to analyze the importance of all types of sewing and why sewing is so symbolically important to women, women's community, and interpersonal relationships.

2. **Pants:** How does pant-making contribute to Celie's development and self-assertion?

Although the sewing of pants could be incorporated into one of the essay topics suggested above, pants have a special importance to Celie that could make them the focus of an essay in their own right. Why is it thematically important that although pant-making starts out as Celie's hobby, it turns into a money-making venture? Why is it significant, given the time period, that Celie starts making pants for women?

3. **The color purple:** Why did Walker give her novel the title *The Color Purple*? Why is the color purple so important to Celie?

If you want to write on the color purple, you could start by thinking of the associations that mainstream society has traditionally given to the color purple. Purple is the color associated with royalty. Bruises might be described as purple. An essay exploring the multiple meanings of the color purple probably should not overlook Walker's claiming of the color purple as the color symbolizing black feminism.

4. **Roofleaf:** What does the presence or absence of roofleaf signify to the Olinka? Why do the Olinka accord divine status to roofleaf?

A paper on the symbolism of roofleaf could address it in the context of the novel's linking of nature to divinity. Another approach could discuss the symbolism of roofleaf in the broader context of an analysis of the symbolism of trees. Why does Celie think of herself as a tree? What other meanings does Walker assign to trees later in the novel? For example, think about all the flowering trees Shug and Celie notice when they return together to Celie's former home. The topic of trees could be extended even further to think about how other flowers and plants are given significance in the novel.

Compare and Contrast Essays

An essay that compares and contrasts characters is a place you might begin if faced with the task of writing a comparative paper. *The Color Purple* has several characters who have obvious similarities. For example, how does Shug compare to Sofia? They are both strong and unconventional women who, however, challenge societal norms in completely different ways. The female characters in general could provide material for an essay, and they could be compared using a variety of aspects. For example, their respective attitudes toward men or sexuality, their respective attempts to find their voice within their families and within

society, and their respective behavior toward other women could all be ways that Shug, Sofia, Squeak, and Celie could be compared. Alternatively, specific types of relationships could be examined, such as mother-daughter relationships or the bond of sisters. The male characters could be approached in a similar way. How does Mr. _____ compare to Harpo? What message is Walker trying to convey through the character parallels she establishes between Albert and Harpo? With a comparative essay, it is essential to go beyond simply detailing the similarities and differences between two or more characters. You need to prove the significance of the comparisons you draw.

In *The Color Purple*, there are also elements of the plot that could be compared. After Celie finds Nettie's letters, the novel splits into two parallel plots. The main plot still follows Celie's life and transformation; the secondary plot provides details of Nettie's difficult times with the Olinka in Africa. When an author includes a subplot in this way, its purpose is usually to elucidate events in the main plot. An essay centered on Celie and Nettie could compare and contrast the twists and turns in their respective lives. A thesis comparing Celie's plot with Nettie's plot would want to determine what Walker's purpose was in making the two sisters' journeys have so many elements in common.

Sample Topics:

1. **Comparing the female characters:** How does Shug compare to Sofia? How does Squeak compare to Celie? How does Sofia compare to Squeak? How does Celie compare to Sofia? How does Sofia compare to Eleanor Jane? How do different mother-daughter relationships in the novel compare?

There are many possible permutations that an essay comparing female characters could choose from. Your choice of characters will depend on the purpose of your paper. For example, if you choose to compare attitudes toward sexuality, Shug and Celie would be possible choices. An essay comparing women's attitudes toward gender roles could focus on Shug and Celie or Squeak and Sofia. The different types of relationships between women could be compared. How do the different women raise their children? Why does Walker include so many different mother-daughter pairs in the novel? This topic could be extended to include appraisal of other black womanist texts, such as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou or *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. How does Celie's life compare and contrast with the female protagonists of these texts?

2. **Comparing the male characters:** How does Albert compare to Harpo? How do some of the secondary male characters compare to one another?

Walker has often been criticized for her portrayals of black men. Many of her black male characters are shown to be abusive sexual exploiters and bullies. *The Color Purple*'s male characters were condemned by critics who felt that Albert and Harpo contributed to the negative image of black men perpetuated in mainstream media. How could Walker's depiction of Harpo and Albert be defended from these charges? An essay could compare and contrast these two men's growth in awareness and their changing attitudes and behavior. Another way to approach the male characters would be to compare some of the secondary characters such as Grady, Samuel, or Jack with the purpose of illustrating Walker's condemnation or endorsement of certain types of masculinities.

3. **Celie's plot and Nettie's plot:** What are different areas of overlap between the two plots? What is the point of Nettie's subplot in the novel?

Both Celie and Nettie are forced away from home and find themselves in difficult situations to which they must adjust. Both sisters struggle to survive in a triangle of two women and one man, raising another woman's children. What other parallels are there between the two plots? An essay could examine the two plots' similarities and differences.

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