

A STUDY GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

THE COLOR PURPLE





Marketing Department of the Denver Center for the Performing Arts.

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The Color Purple

Based Upon the Novel Written by Alice Walker and The Warner Bros./Amblin Entertainment Motion Picture

Book by Marsha Norman

Music and Lyrics by Brenda Russell, Allee Willis & Stephen Bray

Directed by **Timothy Douglas**

Choreography by Dane Figueroa Edidi



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PLAY SYNOPSIS

Based on Alice Walker's 1982 novel of the same name, *The Color Purple* spans 35 years in the life of Celie, a teenage African-American girl living in Georgia who is given by her abusive stepfather to an even more abusive husband. Though Celie spends most of her days as a servant in her own household, she, cut off by her husband from those she loves, tries to remain hopeful that she will ultimately be reunited with her sister Nettie and her children by way of her stepfather, Adam and Olivia. Over the years, Celie, increasingly jaded by her lot, finds ways to cope with life—a potential lover in the fabulous Shug Avery, a friend in her stepson's wife Sofia, a love of making stretchable pants that turns into a booming business. Through her string of unfortunate events, though, Celie learns that the most important thing is that she is a survivor, and that no matter what happens to her, she is still here.

CHARACTERS

Celie	a woman from Georgia whose story begins when she is 14
Nettie	
Pa.	
Mister	local farm owner who becomes Celie's husband
Harpo	
Sofia	
Shug Avery	Mister's long-time love, a singer who lives in Memphis
Church Ladies	Jarene, Doris, Darlene
Ensemble	1en and Women to play the Preacher, the Field Hands, the Church Soloist, Adam, Olivia, Squeak and Grady, Ol' Mister and others in the community

CELIE'S HOME A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN LIFE IN RURAL GEORGIA

The Color Purple takes place in a rural Georgia community near the town of Eatonton, where Alice Walker, the author of the novel, was born.

In 1865, at the end of the Civil War, Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which prohibited slavery, freeing the slaves throughout the South. This was known as "Emancipation."

In Georgia, there were more than 400,000 enslaved people. It took until the end of 1865 for Northern troops to spread the news of Emancipation to every corner of the state. Some Georgia freedmen (the term for the newly emancipated enslaved people) immediately went to the major cities, Atlanta and Savannah, looking for a new way of life. Others traveled throughout the South, seeking to reunite with family members from whom they had been separated. Others opened schools or established churches. And some took their freedom in small steps, finding out what it was like to be able to take a few hours off from work during the day, or to enjoy a stroll wearing one's best clothes in the town streets.

As former enslaved people adjusted to freedom, Georgia society was in chaos. Northern officials assumed that white and Black people would transition easily from the master-slave relationship to an employeremployee relationship. This was not the case; plantation owners wanted Black people to stay in their same powerless position, accepting the same conditions that they lived under during slavery. The freedmen, however, refused to work the same long hours for little or no pay. Tensions were high as each side tried to become used to a new relationship with the other.

As part of Reconstruction, the political and societal reorganization of the South after the war, freedmen were promised land. In Georgia, former enslaved people were granted 40-acre parcels, mostly near the coast. Only about 80,000 acres of land was distributed in this way, and some of it was taken away after crops were harvested. Only those new landowners who had court decrees supporting their claim were able to keep their land.

For those who did not have property of their own, the white landowners created a system which was a new form of slavery: sharecropping. Black farmers (and some poor white farmers) would be granted the right to lease a portion of white-owned farmland, working the land in exchange for a share of the profit when the crop was sold. They were supplied by the landowner with all the seeds, food, and equipment they needed; the cost would be taken out of their profit at harvest time. When the Black farmer brought in his crop (usually cotton), the landowner would determine that he was a few dollars short of repaying what he

owed. The next season, the farmer would begin by owing that money, and would come up short again, until the amount owed to the landowner was so great that it could never be repaid.

Seeing that owning property was the only road to prosperity, Black farmers did everything possible to gain ownership of their land. By 1910, Black farmers owned almost one fourth of the farms that were worked by Black people (the rest being sharecroppers). In *The Color Purple*, Mister is among this fortunate class of farmers who owned his land.

Georgia was not an extremely wealthy state; seeing Black people gaining in economic power made many white people determined to hang on to what power they still had by any means possible. The Supreme Court, in the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision, held that it was not inherently unconstitutional for Black citizens to be excluded from accommodations designated "white only." In the wake of this landmark case, which upheld a Louisiana law forbidding Black people from riding in the same train cars as white people, the doctrine of "separate but equal" came into practice: the races could be separated as long as the facilities were equal in quality. In fact, what was provided for African-Americans was almost without exception inferior. Black people could not eat in white restaurants, swim in the same pools as white people, or use the same restrooms. Not only could Black people not ride in the same train cars, they could not even be in the same waiting areas in the train stations.

White people also sought to disenfranchise Black people – to deprive them of their voting rights. A poll tax was instituted; many Black people were too poor to pay to vote. When Black people were able to pay a poll tax, a literacy test was added.

Primaries were "white only." By 1920, a very strong anti-Black feeling existed all across the South. Membership in the Ku Klux Klan (a white supremacist organization) began to grow throughout the region.

In such a deeply divided society, some Black citizens found it easier to establish all-black communities, usually organizing around the church. In cities like Auburn and Atlanta, Black communities grew, as more and more rural farm workers migrated to the city in search of other jobs.

When the Great Depression struck in the 1930s, rural Georgia was hit hard. The cities did not fare as badly because of the developing industries like paper milling. President Roosevelt instituted programs for the unemployed such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, or CCC. Georgia Governor Eugene Talmadge would not hire Black people for the CCC program, until Roosevelt forced him to by threatening to withhold all aid money from Georgia.

By the 1940s, the end of the time period covered by *The Color Purple*, the Georgia economy began to recover, along with the rest of the country, as production geared up for the beginning of World War II. In *The Color Purple*, Mister and his family would have been considered fairly prosperous in the African-American community. Mister has enough property to afford to have men working for him. His son Harpo, as the owner of the local juke joint, would also have made a relatively good living. Women's options were fewer: most worked in domestic service as cooks or maids (as Sofia is ultimately forced to do). Almost half of the white families in the South employed a Black woman in their household. Only a very few African-Americans worked as ministers, doctors, or teachers, as Nettie plans to do.

NETTIE'S JOURNEY AFRICAN-AMERICAN MISSIONARIES IN WEST AFRICA

In the late 1800s, many European countries wanted to make use of Africa's plentiful natural resources. To avoid confusion and confrontation, Otto von Bismarck, the chancellor of Germany, invited the major European powers together to negotiate control of Africa.

This gathering, the Berlin Conference of 1885, was attended by representatives of Germany, Great Britain, Austria-Hungary, France, Russia, the United States, Portugal, Denmark, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium, and Turkey. Over the next twenty years, the countries of Africa were conquered and divided up as colonies among the European powers. The largest African empires were controlled by Britain and France; Germany, Belgium, and Portugal had colonies as well.

In *The Color Purple*, the Olinka, the fictional tribe that Nettie visits as a missionary, were located in West Africa. Because the West African climate was uncomfortable for most Europeans, they used tribes who were native to the area as a source of labor. Rubber trees, which produce a sap that is processed into rubber, were a major crop throughout West Africa. In *The Color Purple*, the Olinka's lands were destroyed to make way for rubber tree plantations.

There is a misconception that African tribes lived in isolation from one another; in fact, West Africa in particular had long been a bustling trade center. At the edge of the Sahara Desert, caravans took West African wares to the countries of North Africa. There was contact and interaction among many tribes throughout the continent.

The slave trade reduced the African population: twelve million Africans were taken into slavery over four hundred years, from roughly 1400 to 1880 (six million in the 1800s as the need for slaves in

the South grew). This may have slowed Africa's economic growth, since the workers who might have contributed to the further development of Africa were instead laboring in captivity in the Americas and elsewhere. Ironically, once the slave trade was outlawed, some African peoples then used slaves for labor to produce goods to trade with Europe and America.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN MISSIONARIES

From its very beginning, Christianity has had a strong tradition of missionary work, seeking to spread the religion by converting people of other cultures. Besides establishing new churches, missionaries also provided health care, ran schools and orphanages, and helped promote economic development by sharing their knowledge of craftsmanship and farming.

In the nineteenth century, African-Americans who were active in the Christian church began to travel to Africa in increasing numbers as missionaries. All the major Protestant denominations of Christianity had established centers in Africa and Asia; white missionaries tended to prefer Asia, while African-American missionaries were directed toward Africa, sometimes under the belief that they could withstand the rigors of the African climate more easily, and have a better chance of surviving disease. This turned out not to be true, and as many African-American missionaries succumbed to disease in Africa as did white missionaries.

Many African-American missionaries chose to go to Africa out of a sense of curiosity, wanting to visit the lands of their ancestors. Some believed that the "civilizing influence" of Christianity would help native Africans to better govern themselves and their countries.

Once European colonies had been established in Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, and the numbers of white Europeans in Africa began to increase, African-American missionaries were regarded with increasing suspicion. The Europeans reasoned that, having been emancipated in the United States, the missionaries might encourage Africans to revolt against colonial governments. Still, African-American congregations continued to sponsor missionaries in Africa, sending them to establish churches, schools, and medical facilities throughout the continent. The numbers of African-American missionaries peaked in 1910, when their work was reaching greater and greater numbers of Africans. This was about the time that Nettie would have gone to Africa with Reverend Samuels.

By 1920, however, colonial governments throughout Africa were actively hampering the activities of missionaries, regarding them as "undesirable aliens." Portugal required that missionaries in its colonies be fluent speakers of Portuguese, and only permitted missionaries who were registered and assigned by the government. Other governments refused to issue visas; the United States would often refuse to grant passports to missionaries, or else would make it difficult for missionaries to return to America.

Missionaries who ventured to Africa usually did so in groups, or at least in pairs — often married couples would travel together. In 1919, the Reverend Henry Curtis McDowell, (former pastor of a church in Chattanooga, Tennessee) and his wife Bessie Fonvielle McDowell, journeyed to Angola with their child to found a mission. After some time spent studying the language, the McDowells, along with two other missionary couples, established the Galangue mission. All were college graduates, which was a rare accomplishment for African-Americans at the time. The McDowells and their colleagues worked with the local tribe, the Ovimbundu, providing education, medical services, and religious instruction.

Reverend McDowell often wrote to congregations back in America, hoping to dispel myths about Africa among his fellow African-Americans. Many thought that African people were the same across the entire continent, and that Africa was a mysterious, exotic place. McDowell tried to address these stereotypes in his letters home, writing travel essays that described Angola and the Ovimbundu in detail:

We are accustomed to think of Africa as the Sahara Desert and jungles of coconut trees and monkeys. I saw about a half dozen coconut trees at the coast and not one since. I haven't seen nor heard of the African monkey yet. Lobita reminds one of Florida and our station is very much like Talladega with its iron mountains and red soil. As to the natives they are like American Negroes in that they have shades of color. They only need a few more clothes to make them look the same.

Today, Christian missions of all denominations continue to work in Africa, providing relief services in addition to their religious work. In addition, numerous secular organizations (such as the Peace Corps, founded by President John F. Kennedy) have undertaken the work of bringing education, health care and economic aid to the people of Africa.

THE EPISTOLARY NOVEL

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel. The term epistolary, drawn from the word "epistle" ("letter"), means that the novel is made up of letters and diary entries. We read letters written to Celie by her sister Nettie in Africa, and letters written by Celie directly to God.

One of the advantages of writing a novel using this form is that the reader experiences the voices of the characters directly, reading their thoughts in their own words. This style can also give a sense of mystery to the story, since events may not be related fully (since we are seeing only one character's point of view and only learning what that character knows), and may not be presented in chronological order.

The epistolary style has a long history, reaching all the way back to the Bible; the letters written by the Apostle Paul are a major part of the New Testament. The first epistolary novel is generally agreed to be *Pamela*, by Samuel Richardson, published in 1740.

By the 1700s, the level of literacy in the general public was increasing. Letter writing was popular, and many manuals were published instructing writers in the proper form and etiquette of letter writing. (These kinds of manuals are still published today, giving correct forms of address, and even suggestions for the content of a wide variety of business and personal letters.)

The letter form was also used in writing for a broader audience, such as travel essays, which were popular with a public curious about the wider world.

Samuel Richardson got the idea to use letters as the basis for his novel *Pamela* while he was writing a letter manual. This style became popular because letters were an easily recognizable form of communication: reading a character's letters made that character seem like a real person.

The form was used by authors throughout the eighteenth century, in novels such as *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* by Choderlos de Laclos. Laclos began to play with the "mystery" aspects of the form, giving the account of the story's events bit by bit, presented out of order. This made the reader naturally curious, reading further to put all the pieces of the story together. (In 1985, author Christopher Hampton adapted the novel for the stage. The play ran successfully in London's West End and on Broadway, and was filmed under the title as *Dangerous Liaisons*. Other film adaptations of Laclos' novel include *Valmont* and *Cruel Intentions*.)

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the epistolary style was becoming less popular. Jane Austen originally wrote *Pride and Prejudice* using the epistolary form, but then changed her mind. She rewrote the story using a different device—the third-person omniscient narrator; the reader is told the story by a narrator who is not a character in the action, and who has access to the inner thoughts of all the characters ("omniscient" means "knowing all").

The epistolary style is still used today; some modern examples include Helen Fielding's novel *Bridget* Jones' Diary and P.S. I Love You by Cecelia Ahern. Other epistolary novels use e-mails in place of letters: P.S. He's Mine, by Rosie Rushton and Nina Schindler, and the companion works *Blue Company* by Rob Wittig and Kind of Blue by Scott Rettberg.

Adapting a novel into a play or musical presents certain challenges; the playwright usually cannot use narration or description. He or she has to primarily use dialogue—what the characters say to one another. In a musical, songs can also reveal the characters' inner thoughts. Because the epistolary novel is made up entirely of the characters' own words and thoughts, it is related more closely to theater than other types of fiction.

The fact that the novel *The Color Purple* is made up of letters is important also because the letters themselves are a crucial part of the story. When Celie finds the letters Mister has hidden, she not only discovers that Nettie is alive and still cares about her, but she also begins to break free of Mister's domination.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE BLUES AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN INFLUENCED MUSIC worksongs

Africans who were enslaved and taken to America brought the tradition of the work song with them. As they worked in the fields, laborers would sing rhythmic songs that coordinated their movements (swinging hammers or farm implements, etc.). In the musical *The Color Purple*, the song "Brown Betty" is an example of a work song.

Work songs were also known as work calls, field hollers, or arhoolies. They could also serve as communication, as workers shouted down the fields to one another. A sung/shouted line would get an answer in response.

This "call and response" structure is characteristic of many work songs. A lead singer "calls out" a line, and the rest of the group responds. This pattern can be heard in marching cadences used in the military—a sergeant calling out a line, and his soldiers responding in rhythm. "Call and response" can be heard in gospel music as well, and the rock & roll/rhythm & blues music that draws on gospel for inspiration (such as the music of Ray Charles).

Work songs and field hollers gave rise to spirituals and the blues.

SPIRITUALS

Author, philosopher, and social crusader W.E.B. DuBois wrote, in his 1903 book The Souls of Black Folk:

They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days—Sorrow Songs—for they were weary at heart. And so before each thought that I have written in this book I have set a phrase, a haunting echo of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black man spoke to men. Ever since I was a child these songs have stirred me strangely. They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and mine.

...Out of them rose for morning, noon, and night, bursts of wonderful melody, full of the voices of my brothers and sisters, full of the voices of the past... The songs are indeed the siftings of centuries; the music is far more ancient than the words...

A "Sorrow Song" was the way DuBois described a spiritual. These were songs sung to express the grief and anguish felt by the African-American enslaved people. They often drew on phrases and images from the Bible, especially the stories of the Israelites who were kept in slavery in Egypt. In these songs, the enslaved people released their pain, and tried to have hope for the future when they would be freed. One of the best known of all spirituals, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," also contained a subtle message, encouraging Southern enslaved people to find their way to the Underground Railroad, the "chariot" which could carry them "home" to freedom in the North.

THE BLUES

The blues grew out of work songs and field hollers, carrying on the tradition of the West African griots or storytellers, who would sing and recite the stories of their tribe set to music.

Work songs were sung in a group, but the blues were usually sung by one person. Instead of "call and response" between a leader and a group, the blues singer would repeat a line—answering himself or herself.

The blues was based on a simple pattern, usually twelve bars long (although it could be extended easily to thirteen or fourteen bars). A "bar" is a measure of music—usually four beats. The twelve-bar blues uses the three most common chords in a scale, known as the I, IV, and V chords. The blues singer is able to improvise over this basic chord pattern.

The other major characteristic of the blues are blue notes. These are notes that are "bent" or flattened from their pitch, giving the sound of a wail or a cry to the melody.

The blues gave birth to other kinds of music, including jazz, swing, and rock & roll. The same I-IV-V-I progression used in blues is used in many early rock & roll songs.

JAZZ AND SWING

Jazz music began evolving from the blues from 1900 onward, reaching its peak in the 1920s, a decade known as the "Jazz Age." Musicians began exploring more sophisticated harmony than the simple blues chords, although jazz melodies often used the blue notes—the flatted third and seventh notes of the scale. Jazz musicians still improvised most of their parts, just like blues players.

There was a lot of overlap between jazz and the blues—the first recorded jazz song was the "Livery Stable Blues," played by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band in 1917. Many jazz players wrote and recorded songs that were titled "Blues": "West End Blues," "Potato Head Blues," "Basin Street Blues," and "Gutbucket Blues" were some of the songs recorded by trumpeter Louis Armstrong, who was one of the musicians helping to develop the new jazz style.

In the 1930s, jazz dance bands began to get larger. With more musicians in the group, bandleaders began writing out specific musical arrangements for the players; the only improvisation was in the instrumental solos given to certain members of the band.

This tighter musical style became known as swing, which was popular through the 1930s and 1940s. Swing referred to the way the musicians played with a slight "swing" or bounce to the notes, sliding behind the beat.

SHUG AVERY'S SISTERS FEMALE BLUES SINGERS

In *The Color Purple*, Shug Avery is a blues singer, who entertains in "juke joints." Female blues singers had a freedom of expression that other women of their time did not; popular blues singers like Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith, just like Shug, were able to be bold and speak the truth as they saw it in a way that other women were not.

MA RAINEY

The first professional blues singer, "Ma" Rainey was known as "The Mother of the Blues."

She was born Gertrude Pridgett on April 26, 1886, in Columbus, Georgia. Inspired by her parents, who had performed in minstrel shows, she was singing onstage by the age of fourteen. She left home to tour with a group called "The Rabbit Foot Minstrels." In 1902, while in St. Louis, she heard a blues song sung by a local girl, and she began performing songs and others like it in her act.

Two years later, she married the singer William Rainey. He was known as "Pa" Rainey, so Gertrude dubbed herself "Ma" Rainey. The pair continued to tour with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels and other groups, billing themselves as "Rainey and Rainey, Assassinators of the Blues."

Ma Rainey had an outspoken, brassy style on stage. Several of her teeth were gold, and she always appeared in extravagant sequined outfits with her trademark necklace of gold coins.

She was a mentor to future blues singer Bessie Smith, who was hired as a dancer in the same performing troupe as the Raineys. (Smith left the troupe to start her own career as a singer around 1915.)

Ma Rainey began recording her songs in 1923, and in the next five years recorded over 100 songs. Styles began to change, however, and by 1933 her popularity had waned. In 1939, Ma Rainey died of a heart attack.

"BLACK CAT, HOOT OWL BLUES" (RECORDED BY MA RAINEY IN 1928)

Black cat on my door-step, black cat on my window-sill If one black cat don't cross me, another black cat will Last night a hoot owl come and sit right over my door A feelin' seems to tell me I'll never see my man no mo' I feel my left side a-jumpin', my heart a-bumpin', I'm mindin' my P's and Q's I feel my brain a-thumpin', I've got no time to lose Mama's superstitious, tryin' to overcome these blues

BESSIE SMITH

Bessie Smith was born in 1894 in Chattanooga, Tennessee. After a brief stint working as a dancer and getting to know blues legend Ma Rainey, twenty-year-old Bessie Smith began working as a blues singer herself. By 1920 she was well known throughout the South, as well as up and down the East coast.

She was an imposing presence on stage: six feet tall and 200 pounds, with a voice that could fill a room. Like other blues singers, she used her "chest" voice (the lower vocal register) to "shout" the tunes, knowing instinctively how to adjust any melody to keep it in the strongest part of her range.

She began making blues recordings in 1923, which made her popular nationwide. She toured extensively throughout the South, traveling in her own railroad car, becoming the highest paid black entertainer in the country.

Like all performing artists, her career suffered when the Great Depression struck. She still toured as much as she could throughout the 1930s, singing in clubs. She made one appearance on Broadway, in the 1929 musical *Pansy*. The show flopped, but Smith received good reviews.

On her way to a performance in Clarksdale, Mississippi, Bessie Smith was in a car accident that nearly severed her arm and left her near death. She was taken to the Afro-Hospital in Clarksdale (hospitals in the South were divided between those serving African-Americans, and those that were "white only"). She died of her injuries that day, September 26, 1937.

"THINKING BLUES" (LYRICS BY BESSIE SMITH)

Did you ever sit thinking with a thousand things on your mind? Did you ever sit thinking with a thousand things on your mind? Thinking about someone who has treated you so nice and kind You'll get an old letter and you begin to read Got the blues so bad tell that man of mine I wanna be Don't you hear me baby, knocking on your door? Don't you hear me baby, knocking on your door? Have you got the nerve to drive me from your door? Have you got the nerve to say that you don't want me no more? Have you got the nerve to say that you don't want me no more? The good book said you got to reap what you sow Take me back baby, try me one more time Take me back baby, try me one more time That's the only way I can get these thinking blues off my mind

GENDER ROLES IN THE COLOR PURPLE

The Color Purple, both the novel and its film version, ignited many discussions among readers and viewers concerning what the story says about the relationships between men and women. Critics claimed that the characterization of Mister was an attack on African-American males, while others maintained that there were a variety of male-female relationships, which depicted a range of truthful human behavior.

The Color Purple raises many questions about traditional gender roles: that is, how does society expect men and women to act? What qualities are considered "masculine" and "feminine"? What limits does society place on the ways men and women can act?

Southern society in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was divided in many ways: wealthy and poor, white and Black, male and female. Each division had one side with power, and one that was relatively powerless. This created incredible tension at every level of society.

The South's population was primarily rural. Extended families had to stay together, since a lot of work was required to keep any household running. The family structure was patriarchal, meaning that men were considered to be the heads of the household. Men did the majority of the farm work, took care of family finances, the building of the family home, and defending the family property, if necessary. The women were expected to care for the children, prepare family meals, wash clothes, clean house, chop wood, and carry water. Women often bore children every year, leaving them weaker and more vulnerable to illness. Women often died in childbirth; a man would frequently marry twice or three times, because a woman was needed to care for his children.

Large families were valued because the mortality rate was high. Many children did not survive to adulthood, so couples had as many children as they were able to. If family members survived to old age, they were kept as part of the extended family, helping to care for young children and assisting with running the household.

African-American families in the South had additional pressures. During slavery, families were often not allowed to be together; slave owners separated husbands from wives, and parents from children. Enslaved people in a household would form their own family units; often these units were headed by the women of the group.

After slavery was abolished, freed slaves reunited their families. The strain of living under slavery took its toll on both men and women: men had to reassert their expected place as head of the family, while women were forced to give up their say in family matters. This was not true of all families, but it was a common situation among those trying to adjust to a new way of living.

By the time that *The Color Purple* begins, barely two generations have passed since the end of the Civil War. Family patterns have not changed greatly; men and women still have clearly defined roles in the family, and in society.

The central relationship triangle is among Celie, Mister and Shug. Shug, being a blues singer, is freed of the traditional expectations that a woman faces. Some may judge her, but no one expects her to cook the meals, wash clothes, or bring up children. For Celie, it is just the opposite: for most of her life, she is viewed only as someone who cooks, cleans, and cares for others. Mister is expected to fulfill the man's role – to be the "big dog" – in charge of everyone else in the household. At the time, men were considered free to discipline their wives and children in any way they saw fit, including physical punishment.

In contrast, the relationship between Harpo and Sofia is one in which they both try to define new roles. Harpo is criticized for being unmanly when he lets Sofia have her way; even Celie advises him to beat her to make her submit to him. Sofia is not content to be subservient, and when the situation no longer suits her, she leaves, rather than compromise.

Even Nettie, who has chosen the path of adventure in choosing to become a teacher and missionary in Africa, finds that she cannot escape traditional gender roles: the Olinka tribe have just as strong ideas about the relationship between men and women as Americans do.

The Color Purple has many layers of meaning for the audience to explore. It challenges us to reconsider our ideas about the way men and women—people—should treat each other, and the roles that they are given in a family and in society.

MADAME C.J. WALKER: ENTREPRENEUR

In *The Color Purple*, Celie eventually goes into business for herself, creating one-size-fits-all pants. A business owner who owns and operates her own company is called an "entrepreneur" — especially if that company offers something innovative or unique.

Sarah Breedlove McWilliams Walker, better known as Madame C. J. Walker, became one of the most successful African-American entrepreneurs of the twentieth century, by revolutionizing the haircare industry for African-American women.

Sarah was born in rural Louisiana on December 23, 1867, to Owen and Minerva Breedlove, former enslaved people who worked as sharecroppers. Sarah was orphaned at age seven, and went to work in the cotton

fields with her sister. At age fourteen, she ran away from her sister's home and married Moses McWilliams. Two years later Moses was killed by a lynch mob. Sarah headed for St. Louis, taking her young daughter A'Leia with her.

In St. Louis, Sarah worked as a cook, laundress, and housecleaner while living with her brothers, who worked as barbers. She was afflicted with a scalp condition that caused her hair to fall out. She tried many products that promised to help, but none were effective. She then had a dream, in which a man appeared and told her which ingredients to use to make a hair restorer. The formula soon had her hair regrowing.

Sarah moved to Denver, where she met and married newspaperman Charles Joseph "C.J." Walker. Sarah became known as "Madame" C. J. Walker. She and her new husband began selling "Madam Walker's Wonderful Hair Grower." Walker contributed many marketing ideas to his wife's business; at his urging, she set out on a long door-to-door sales trip through the South. Her products were very popular. Madame Walker began planning the expansion of the "Walker System," which included several "Walker Schools" of cosmetology, and a network of "Walker Agents" who were licensed to sell her cosmetics. Her company grew to the point where she employed over 3,000 people. She was the first African American woman to become a self-made millionaire, a fortune she built in just fifteen years. She died of a heart attack at age fifty-two.

Madame Walker's entrepreneurial spirit lived on, however, when one of her employees, Marjorie Joyner, patented a device for putting a permanent-wave curl in hair in 1928. It became very popular among women both Black and white.

Madame C. J. Walker was always frank about the work that it took to achieve her success:

"I am a woman who came from the cotton fields of the South. From there I was promoted to the washtub. From there I was promoted to the cook kitchen. And from there I promoted myself into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations. I have built my own factory on my own ground."

When people asked her what the secret of her success might be, she replied:

"There is no royal flower-strewn path to success. And if there is, I have not found it for if I have accomplished anything in life it is because I have been willing to work hard."

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THE COLOR PURPLE STUDY QUESTIONS

Pre-Performance Questions

- 1. Have you read or seen *The Color Purple* before? What do you remember from the story or what have you been told about the film or musical?
- 2. In what ways does a musical adaptation of a novel, change the way a story is told or experienced on the stage?
- 3. Alice Walker describes *The Color Purple* as "dealing with ancestral voices." What does this mean to you? Who do you imagine your ancestral voices to be?

Post-Performance Questions

- 1. How did the performance align with your preconceived idea or memory of the play? Were there any surprises?
- 2. How do the technical elements of scenic, costume, sound, and lighting design enhance the story?
- 3. Explain how the title, *The Color Purple*, pertains to the story.
- 4. How would you describe Celie's relationships with Mister and Shug? What factors influence the difference between these two relationships?
- 5. How does the play explore gender roles and expectations? What factors influence how each character is expected to behave? How do they challenge or accept their roles?
- 6. How is Nettie's journey chronicled in the play? How was her journey portrayed theatrically?
- 7. How do letters play an important role in the play? What happens when Celie is given Nettie's letters?
- 8. Why do you think Alice Walker chose to create a fictional tribe, the Olinka, rather than write about an existing African tribe?
- 9. How does Sofia contribute to the story? What part of her story surprised you?
- 10. How are jazz, blues, and gospel music used in the play? How do the characters incorporate the music into their lives?



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