

A woman with dark skin and hair is shown in profile, looking upwards and to the left. She is wearing a light-colored, patterned top. The background is a vast field of tall grasses under a deep purple and blue sky, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

The Color Purple

STUDY GUIDE

Alice Walker, Author

Born in Eatonton, Georgia, on February 9, 1944, Alice Walker partly spent her life working as a teacher, lecturer and social worker but is primarily known as a writer today. Daughter of a maid and sister to seven siblings, Walker spent her childhood with little money. She suffered a serious eye injury at the age of eight by being shot by a BB pellet while playing with her brothers. A white scar around her right eye made her really self-conscious and led her to isolate herself from much of the world. However, she engaged herself in reading and writing poetry that soon became her source of enjoyment.

Walker studied in a segregated institution and became the valedictorian of her batch. She then went to Spelman College in Atlanta having received a scholarship. Later, she transferred to New York where she studied at the Sarah Lawrence College. One of her years was spent in Africa as part of an exchange program. 1965 marked an important year in her life as she graduated from college and also published her first short story.

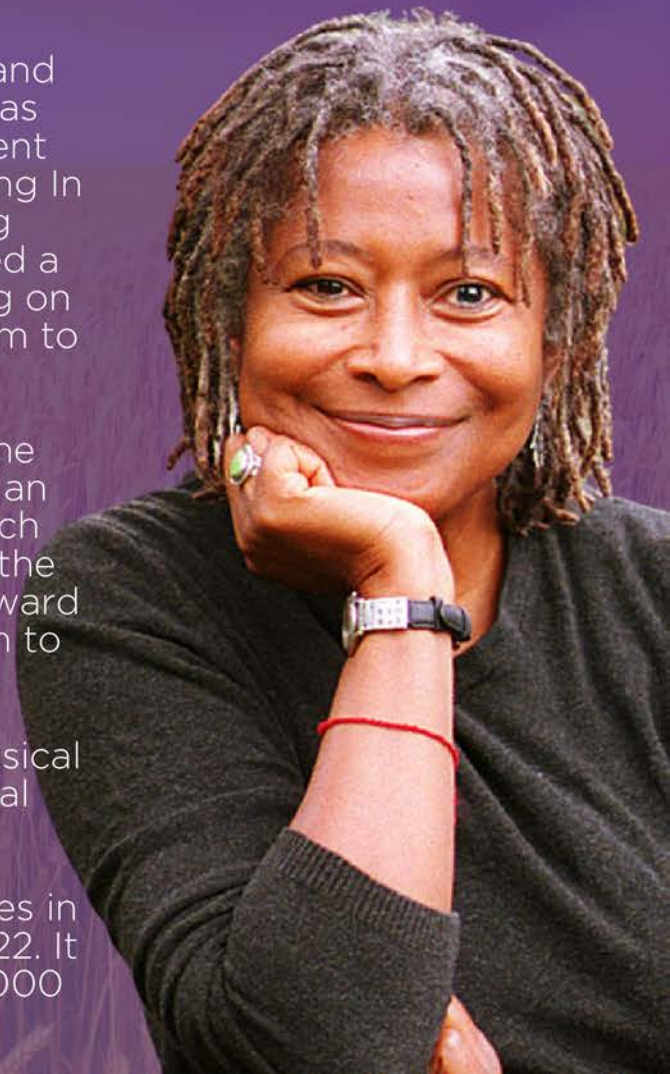
Post-graduation, Walker worked as a teacher, lecturer and social worker. She fought for equal rights being given to African Americans and used the Civil Rights Movement as a medium to achieve this goal. In 1968, her first collection of poetry, *Once*, got published.

Today she is primarily known for writing novels and her first work, *Third Life of Grange Copeland*, was published in 1970. She experimented with different types of writing ranging from short stories including *In Love and Trouble* to children's books including *Langston Hughes: American Poet*. She also played a pivotal role in the Black Feminist Movement going on at the time. In 1983, she coined the term womanism to mean Black feminism.

She rose to fame in 1982 with her third novel, *The Color Purple*, which highlighted the struggles of an African American woman. The novel gained much praise from the critics and Walker was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for Fiction in 1983. She was the first Black woman to be awarded this prize.

The Color Purple has been adapted into a non-musical movie, a Broadway musical, and a movie musical based on that Broadway production.

Alice Walker is now 80 years old and currently lives in Mendocino, CA. Her last published work was in 2022. It is a collection of her diary entries from 1965 to 2000 entitled *Gathering Blossoms Under Fire*.



African-American Life in Georgia in the early 1900s.

The Color Purple is set in rural Georgia near Eatonton, where Alice Walker was born. The novel takes place from 1911-43. In 1865, the end of the American Civil War led to Congress passing the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution. Known as the Emancipation, this act prohibited slavery.

Slavery, the forced servitude of one person by another, was brutal and inhumane. Besides having to perform incredibly difficult labour, slaves were subject to horrific physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Slaves were viewed as property instead of people, and there was no regard for any family ties from capture to being sold to different plantations. Husbands and wives were separated, and children taken from their parents. Amy and Andrew Billingsley note "Slave women were exploited by white owners...for pleasure and profit. A role for the Black man as husband and father was systematically denied...In a word, the black family had no physical, psychological, social, or economic protection." While the eras of slavery occurred before the time of *The Color Purple* we can see the repercussions in regards to racial power dynamics, family relations, and treatment of women ripple through the community in the play.

There had been 400 000 slaves in Georgia, and for decades afterward, the state was in upheaval. Many plantation owners wanted former slaves to stay powerless and tensions were high. Georgia was not a particularly wealthy state and any Black economic success made whites determined to cling to any power possible.

The reorganization of the South after the war was called Reconstruction. Some former Georgia slaves were granted parcels of land, but only landowners with decrees from the court could keep their land after harvest. Not everyone could prove their claim and sharecropping became the new form of labour. In this system, wealthy whites - former slave owners - owned farmland, and Black farmers (and some poor whites) were permitted to lease some land by paying a portion of their profit from their crops. All supplies were given to them by the owner who also took that cost out of the farmers' profits. Some landowners would determine every year that the farmers were a few dollars short of what they owed, and debt would accumulate until it was so great there was no hope of it ever being repaid - keeping sharecroppers tied to the land and forcing them to work it in a variation on slavery.

The Color Purple is not a story about slavery, but the emergence from indentured servitude to freedom and self-sufficiency, both for Black people broadly and the Black woman in particular informs the setting, characters, story of the show.

Adapted from the writings of Ksenia Broda-Milian

Gender Roles in the time of *The Color Purple*

In the south, most of the southern population lived in rural areas and extended families had to work together to keep the household going. There were defined gender roles in patriarchal family structures, in which men were the “head of the house” doing most of the physical farm work and dealing with finances. In this play, Mister and his family were relatively prosperous in their community; he could hire men to work for him, and Harpo would have done fine as owner of the juke joint. Options were less varied for women who were expected to care for children, make meals, and do physical chores such as cleaning house, chopping wood, and carrying water.

Because of high mortality rates large families were valued. Bearing children, often each year, could leave a woman weak and vulnerable to illness. Families were separated during slavery and some were able to reunite after Emancipation, but 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” (StageNotes). This only served to add conflict to families in already difficult situations. When *The Color Purple* starts the Civil War has been over for barely two generations, so men and women still had clearly defined family roles. A wife was expected to be subservient to her husband.

As violence was being used in power dynamics between rich and poor and white and Black, it was also commonly used to enforce gender roles as it was seen as a man’s right to physically discipline his wife or children. Some women did work outside the home at this point. Most were cooks or maids (as Sofia had to become) and about half of white southern families employed at least one Black servant. Sofia is a surprise to all as she rails against prevailing gender stereotypes, and Celie breaks free of them by eventually leaving Mister. She also sets up an independent living for herself as an entrepreneur. Shug defies these domestic expectations too, but we do see her being judged by the rest of the community for that. It was less common at this point for an African-American woman to work as a teacher, as Nettie planned. Even in Nettie’s missionary work, she finds that the Olinka also have strong ideas about men and women.

Adapted from *The Color Purple* study guide of the Royal Manitoba Theatre Center


The Music of *The Color Purple*

The Color Purple includes many different styles of music, each relevant to the setting and storytelling of the show.

Throughout the African diaspora, music is an incredibly important point of connection. The tradition of a work song was brought to America by enslaved Africans. Labourers would sing rhythmic songs that coordinated their movements (swinging tools, picking fruit, and so on). Work songs were also known as work calls, field hollers, or arhoolies. They were also a form of communication to workers farther down the field. A sung or shouted line would get an answer back; this “call and response” structure where a lead singer has a line and the rest of the group responds was brought into gospel music as well. During the post-Reconstruction Era, the majority of African-Americans were unable to read. The call and response method let everyone participate in religious worship without reading. It is also present in 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 expressed deep grief and pain felt by slaves. These often incorporated Biblical phrases and imagery - particularly those of the Israelites, enslaved in Egypt. These were songs of anguish and hope for a free future. Civil rights activist Dr. W.E.B DuBois described spirituals as “sorrow songs” for those who were “weary at heart.”

Feelings are also expressed in music in the Blues genre - these songs are non-narrative and less concerned with story. Also coming from the work song background, but sung by one person instead of a group, this genre carries on the traditions of West African storytellers. You’ll often hear techniques like melisma (one syllable sung across several pitches) or “bending” or flattening notes, and rhythmic syncopation. These can give a wailing or crying-like quality to the song. The blues was based on a simple pattern, usually using 12 four-count bars (measure of music). The 12-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. Georgia was one of the major centres of the birth of blues (Britannica gives Blind Willie McTell and Blind Boy Fuller as examples of the Georgia style). In the 1920s, the first blues recordings were made by Black women, including Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, and Bessie Smith; in *The Color Purple* these women are represented by Shug Avery.



Jazz, swing, and rock & roll evolved from the blues; the I-IV-V chord progression being used in many early rock songs. From 1900 on, jazz grew, and reached its peak in the 1920s (the “Jazz Age”). It incorporates European harmonic structures and African-American rhythms. Jazz arose as musicians explored more complicated harmonies than blues’ simple chords, while keeping the flattened “blue notes” on the 3rd and 7th notes of the scales. Jazz players were also often improvisational. There was overlap between the genres - trumpeter Louis Armstrong, one of the musicians developing this new style, recorded several songs with “Blues” in the title - but through the 1930s music began to get more specific. Jazz dance bands grew in size and parts were written in particular arrangements, with special sections for improvising in solos. A tighter musical style was known as swing, for the way that musicians played with a “bounce” slightly behind the beat. This musical style was popular through the 1930s and 40s.

Adapted from the *The Color Purple* study guide of the Citadel Theatre

Characters

Celie—a woman from Georgia, Celie is 14 at the beginning of the story

Nettie—Celie's younger sister

Pa—Celie and Nettie's father

Mister—local farmer and Celie's husband

Harpo—Mister's son from a previous marriage Sofia—Harpo's wife

Shug Avery—Mister's long-time lover, a singer from Memphis

Jarene, Doris, Darlene- Church ladies

Squeak - Waitress at the juke joint

Grady - Shug's husband

Ol' Mister - Mister's father

Celie's children - Adam and Olivia

Buster - Sofia's boyfriend



From Left to Right: Shinnerrie Jackson as Sofia, Carli Hardon as Celie, and Tamica Nicole as Shug Avery



From Left to Right: Lindsey Kaye Pace as Darlene, Yolanda Treece as Doris, and Meggan Utech as Jarene

"Celie is the kind of hero we all have a chance to be whatever happens to us in this life. She bears her own suffering with grace, and reaches out to others to provide for their needs and spare them harm. Our love for Celie grows as she makes her way through a perilous journey, as she prays without ceasing for some assurance that God sees her."

Marsha Norman, who adapted the novel *The Color Purple* for the musical production. This adaptation is known as the Book in musical theatre terms. The other creators of the musical were Brenda Russell, Allee Willis, and Steven Bray, all credited with music and lyrics.

Questions for Discussion

1. *The Color Purple* is a novel, movie, and a musical. If you have seen read or seen the movie version, how do they compare to the musical? Are there elements that work better on screen rather than on stage or vice versa?
2. Have you seen other movies, musicals, or plays that have been based on books? Did you like one version of the story more than the other? Why?
3. An actress playing the role of Celie must portray the character from age 14 up to age 50. How does Celie change physically and emotionally throughout the musical?
4. By the end of the musical, Celie is an entrepreneur and has started her own business. Discuss why this feat is impressive in this era and location in the musical.
5. What role does prayer play in Celie's life? Would you say this a religious musical? Does it promote a moral message? Can one have morality without religion? Explain