

September, 2023: The Color Purple Discussion Question

1. In Celie's first letter to God, she asks for a sign to let her know what is happening to her. Discuss the way confusion and deception become powerful tools for those characters who want to take advantage of Celie. Unravel the layers of lies that are told to her throughout the novel, perhaps making lists that compare the fiction she is expected to believe with the truth about her world. These can be concrete (Celie's impression that Pa is too poor to provide properly for her, and the later realization that he had more resources than he ever lets on) or abstract (the assertion that Celie is unintelligent, though she demonstrates constant intelligence in planning for her safety and that of her sister). Ask the students to recall their own experience with a revelation: when in their lives has the truth set them free?
2. What is the effect of not knowing Albert's last name? In early novels, it was not uncommon for authors to use a blank in place of a character's name, to create the illusion that the character was someone the reader might know—someone whose identity had to be kept secret. What does it mean that Celie must call her husband Mr. ____? When does she at last begin calling him by his first name?
3. Why does Albert tell Harpo to begin beating his wife, Sofia? Why is it so important to Harpo that his wife have no will of her own? Is his relationship with Squeak (Mary Agnes) fulfilling? What do these scenes tell us about the nature of abusive cycles? Is cruelty something that is taught—something that is unnatural? In your opinion, what does it take for someone (male or female) to deserve true respect?
4. Just as Celie grew up being told she was inferior, Shug Avery was always told she was evil. What are your impressions of Shug, from the photo Celie sees early on, to the end of the novel, when Celie and Albert have united in their devotion to Shug? What does Shug teach Celie about being loved, and about finding one's true self? What price does Sofia pay for being her true self?
5. What does it take for Celie to finally reach her boiling point and reject oppression?
6. What is Celie's opinion of Grady and his haze of addiction?
7. Why is it difficult for Shug to commit to the people who love her? In what ways does Shug bring both pleasure and heartache to them?
8. Nettie's life with Corrine and Samuel gives her the first semblance of a healthy family life she has ever known, but Corrine's jealousy taints this. Only the memory of that crucial early scene, when Celie lays eyes on her daughter at the store, absolves Nettie just before Corrine dies. *The Color Purple* brims with these intricate turns of plot. List the seemingly minor scenes that turn out to be pivotal in the lives of the characters.

(Questions issued by publisher.)