

The Color Purple



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALICE WALKER

Born to a farmer father and a mother who worked as a maid, Alice Walker was sent to school at a young age, which was still fairly rare for African American children in Georgia at the time, as their farm-work for white landowners was believed not to require any formal schooling. Walker graduated first in her high school class, and studied at Spelman and Sarah Lawrence Colleges. She became active in the civil rights movement, and later helped revive interest in the work of Zora Neale Hurston, an African American writer from earlier in the twentieth century. Walker wrote *The Color Purple* in the early 1980s, and it brought her a great deal of immediate attention and fame. The book won the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, and was made into a movie by Stephen Spielberg (starring, among others, Whoopi Goldberg and Oprah Winfrey). Walker continues to write novels, short stories, and poetry, a good deal of it inspired by her early-life experiences growing up in rural Georgia.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Alice Walker was active in the American Civil Rights Movement, a momentous effort, beginning around 1960, by blacks and others that sought to remake the nature of black and white interaction across the United States, and most specifically in the South. Although the Civil War had been over for nearly a century, many African Americans were made to experience humiliating and devastating discriminatory laws (Jim Crow laws), which made it impossible for black people to use the same water fountains, lunch counters, and bathrooms as white patrons. These laws also made it difficult for African Americans to obtain educations at white-dominated state universities, and to vote for (and indeed win) elected office.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Alice Walker wrote *The Color Purple* during a period of important literary production among the African-American community. The author perhaps most often included in a conversation of Walker's work is Toni Morrison, whose novels, like Walker's, deal intricately with issues of racism, gender, and self-identity among black populations in the United States. *The Color Purple*'s consideration of women, sexuality, and power dynamics between whites and blacks is also reflected in the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, active during the second half of the twentieth century, and in the novel *Roots*, by Alex Haley, which was later made into an acclaimed television miniseries in

the 1970s.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Color Purple*
- **When Written:** 1981-82
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1982
- **Literary Period:** postmodernism in America
- **Genre:** Epistolary novel; the 20th-century African-American novel; 20th-century feminist writing
- **Setting:** Georgia and coastal Africa, roughly 1920-1950
- **Climax:** Nettie and Celie are reunited, just before the novel's end, back in Georgia
- **Antagonist:** Mr. and Pa
- **Point of View:** first-person (epistolary, or a novel-in-letters)

EXTRA CREDIT

White-black relations in the film version of *The Color Purple*. The film *The Color Purple* was directed by Stephen Spielberg, a white, male filmmaker. The film itself deals almost exclusively with the lives, troubles, and eventual triumph of African Americans, and some complained, during the film's production and release, that Spielberg did not have a right to direct a film running so counter to his personal experience. But Spielberg's efforts and response, implied in the film, point to the universality of Celie's experience, and to the applicability of the novel to people from all walks of life, and of all gender and racial backgrounds.



PLOT SUMMARY

Celie, a young girl who lives with her abusive father, her sick mother, and her younger sister Nettie, begins writing letters to **God**. In her first letters, she details how her father has been sexually abusing her. Celie becomes pregnant twice, and each time her father gives away the children.

A man named Mr. ____ begins courting Nettie. Celie encourages Nettie's marriage to Mr. ____ because Celie fears her father (Pa) will soon turn his sexual attentions toward Nettie. But Pa does not permit Nettie to marry Mr. ____, instead insisting that Mr. ____ marry Celie, since she is older and a hard-worker. Mr. ____ believes Celie to be ugly, but eventually is convinced to marry her, because he has several children by his previous wife (who was murdered), and Mr. ____ needs someone to take care of them.

Celie marries Mr. ____ and moves in with him. Nettie later escapes Pa and lives with Celie and Mr. ____ for a brief period. But Mr. ____ still has designs on Nettie, and Nettie flees to town, staying with the Reverend Samuel and his wife Corrine, whom Celie once met, briefly. By coincidence, Samuel and Corrine have adopted Olivia and Adam, Celie's two children. Celie believed she recognized Olivia, when she saw her with Corrine in a shop. Nettie promises Celie she will write to her from her new home, but these letters never arrive.

Celie takes care of Mr. ____'s children, whom she considers "rotten" save for Harpo, the oldest, who marries a strong, hard-working woman named Sofia. Harpo becomes upset that he cannot get Sofia to obey him; both Mr. ____ and Celie (at first) recommend that Harpo beat Sofia. But when Celie sees how Harpo's attempts at beating have hurt both Harpo and Sofia, Celie apologizes to Sofia, and the two become friends.

Shug Avery, a lover from Mr. ____'s past, comes to town, sick, and stays with Mr. _____. They strike up their affair once more, with Celie's knowledge. Celie has been fixated on Shug since seeing a picture of her, on a playbill, when Celie was a girl. Celie and Shug become friends and confidantes, and, later, lovers. Shug begins to sing at a bar Harpo has built behind his shack, after Sofia leaves him (she is tired of being beaten and ordered around by Harpo). Celie tells Shug about her father's sexual abuse, and about Mr. ____'s beatings. Shug promises to protect Celie.

Shug and Celie discover that Mr. ____ has been hiding, for years, the letters Nettie has been sending to Celie. Celie reads the letters and discovers that Nettie, upon moving in with Samuel and Corrine, and their two children Olivia and Adam, began studying to be a missionary in Africa. Nettie then traveled with the family to Harlem, in New York City, on to England, and to various cities in Africa, observing the culture and traditions of the people there, before settling in a village of the Olinka people. Nettie works for Samuel and Corrine, aids in the education of Olivia and Adam, and comes to know a girl named Tashi, whose mother, Catherine, does not approve of Tashi being educated in the Western manner. Celie begins writing letters to Nettie rather than to God.

Corrine, it is revealed, believes that Samuel has had an affair with Nettie back in Georgia, and that Adam and Olivia are actually Nettie's children. This is why, Corrine thinks, Olivia and Adam so resemble Nettie. Nettie swears to Corrine that the two children are her sister Celie's, and Samuel corroborates her story, adding that Celie and Nettie's "Pa" is really their stepfather, and that their biological father was lynched, after his dry-goods store became too successful in the eyes of his white neighbors in Georgia.

Back in Georgia, Celie, spurred on by Shug, confronts Mr. ____ for withholding Nettie's letters for so many years. Celie, Shug, Shug's husband Grady (whom she has married in the interim), and Squeak, Harpo's second wife, move to Memphis, where

Shug continues her singing career (Shug already has a house there). Celie begins making pants, a business she will continue for the remainder of the novel, and Squeak and Grady fall in love and move away. Sofia, who was arrested years back for attacking the mayor and his wife after they acted disrespectfully to her, has been serving as the mayor's family maid for twelve years. She is finally released to Celie's home toward the end of the novel. Her children, raised by Harpo and Squeak, no longer recognize her.

Meanwhile, the Olinka village is destroyed by British rubber companies, who plow over the Olinkas crops and hunting land, and charge the Olinka rent and a water tax. Dispirited by their inability to save the village, Samuel, Nettie, and the children return to England after Corrine dies of illness.

In England, Samuel and Nettie realize that they are in love, and marry; they tell Olivia and Adam that their biological mother is Celie, and vow to reunite the families in Georgia. After one last trip to Africa, in which Tashi and Adam are married, Tashi, Adam, Olivia, Nettie, and Samuel arrive at Celie's house in Georgia—the house she inherited from her biological father after her stepfather's death—and find Celie's family in good order. Shug, who had run away for a time with a young man name Germaine for a last fling, has come back to live with Celie and be reconciled with Mr. ____; Mr. ____ himself has found religion and apologized to Celie for mistreating her (he has even carved Celie a **purple** frog, as a form of apology) and Squeak, Sofia, Harpo, and the remainder of the family realize that, although a great deal has happened over the past thirty years, they, as a family, feel younger and more energetic than ever before.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Celie – The novel's protagonist, at the beginning of the novel Celie is quiet, passive, and able to express herself only through letters to God. As a teenager she is repeatedly raped by her father (later revealed to be her stepfather), Pa, and gives birth to two children, Olivia and Adam, whom her stepfather gives away and who are raised by a missionary couple. Celie is then married off to Mr. ____, who wants her only for her work ethic and regularly beats her. Celie tries to protect her sister, Nettie, and helps her to run away first from Pa and then from Mr. ____ when both try to rape her, too, at different times. Celie's attempts to get free of the men in her life, to discover her sexuality and to learn to love (both primarily through the female singer Shug Avery), to gain both her social and emotional independence, to find spiritual satisfaction and connection to God, and to find Nettie form the drama of the book, which is constructed as a series of letters between Celie and **God**, and between Celie and Nettie.

Nettie – Celie's more attractive younger sister. Forced to leave first her own home when Pa turns his sexual attention to her and then Mr. ____'s house after he makes sexual advances toward her, Nettie ends up helping out in the household of Reverend Samuel and his wife Corrine. The three of them, and the couple's adopted children Adam and Olivia (who are Celie's biological children), travel to Africa to serve as missionaries to the Olinka people. There, Nettie becomes educated and gains a new spiritual understanding of the world that mirrors Celie's own, and later marries Samuel after Corrine dies of disease. Nettie is later reunited with her sister, and she, as step-mother to Adam and Olivia, introduces the children to their biological mother at the novel's end.

Mr. ____ (Albert) – An abusive husband who emotionally and physically abuses Celie in order to control her. He carries on a relationship with the singer Shug throughout much of their marriage. He has multiple children by multiple women, but his overriding love is for Shug. After both Shug and Celie leave him, Mr. ____ realizes how much he depended on them and how cruelly he acted toward Celie in particular. He "finds religion" and apologizes to Celie, and they close out the novel as friends; Mr. ____ gives Celie a **purple** frog to symbolize their new friendship.

Shug Avery – A singer who is considered a "nasty woman" by those in the community, because she has relationships with numerous men, Shug becomes friends (and, later, lovers) with Celie, teaching Celie about sexuality, love, and spirituality in the process. She also carries on a long-standing relationship with Mr. ____, who is married to Celie for much of that time. After leaving Celie, with whom she was living in Memphis, for "one last fling" with a young man named Germaine, Shug returns to Celie and lives in her home in Georgia.

Sofia – A strong-minded and physically strong woman, and first wife of Harpo. She does not brook any discrimination from white people or physical or other efforts to control her by men, Sofia is sent to prison for fighting the (white) mayor and his wife. She later serves as maid in the mayor's house for almost twelve years, helping to raise his children. Sofia then returns to Celie's home, where her own children with Harpo no longer recognize her.

Harpo – Mr. ____'s oldest son, who is raised by Celie. Harpo is an essentially good man, but he drives Sofia, his first wife, away by trying to get her to "mind" (or obey) him. Harpo later marries a woman named Squeak, or Mary Agnes, and opens a jukejoint (bar) on his property in Georgia.

Squeak – Harpo's second wife, Squeak begins the novel as a physically weak and unimposing woman, who comes into her own over the course of the novel. She later leaves Harpo to run off with Grady, Shug's husband, in order to have a singing career. Squeak then returns to Celie's home just before the novel's end.

Eleanor Jane, Stanley Earl, and Reynolds – Eleanor Jane, the

mayor's daughter, becomes close to Sofia, the woman who raised her. Sofia is civil to Eleanor's husband Stanley Earl, but Sofia refuses to gush and dote upon Reynolds, their son, explaining to Eleanor that she (Sofia) has already been made to care for a white family that is not hers, at the expense of caring for her own family.

Samuel – A reverend, married to Corrine. Kind and good, Samuel adopts two children, Olivia and Adam, who are given to him by Pa (and who turn out to be Celie's children). He and his wife also take in Nettie after she flees from Mr. ____'s house, not realizing that she is the children's aunt. He travels with his wife, two children, and Nettie, to Africa, where he serves as a missionary to the Olinka. After his wife's death, Samuel marries Nettie, and the entire family travels back to Georgia to reunite with Celie.

Corrine – Samuel's wife, Corrine doubts, until just before her death, that Samuel is telling the truth about the children—Corrine believes that Samuel and Nettie had an affair, and that Olivia and Adam are therefore Samuel and Nettie's biological children. Corrine finally believes Nettie, however, before she succumbs to her illness and dies among the Olinka.

Adam – Nettie's stepson and Celie's son, Adam grows up in Africa, raised by Nettie, Samuel, and Corrine. After the Olinka woman he loves, Tashi, undergoes the ritual facial scarring of her tribe, and then is ashamed of having done so, he undergoes the same scarring. He marries Tashi before moving back to the United States with his family.

Celie and Nettie's mother – After the death of her husband who is lynched by a gang of white men, Celie and Nettie's mother falls into a deep depression. She eventually marries Pa, and never tells the girls that Pa is not their actual father. As she lies depressed in bed, Pa rapes Celie. She dies early in the story.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Pa (Alphonso) – Celie's sexually-abusive father, Pa is later revealed to be Celie's stepfather, meaning that Celie can inherit her biological father's house and dry-goods business after Pa's death, and that the children she bore as a result of Pa's sexual abuse were not the product of incest.

Buster Broadnax – Sofia's husband after Harpo, Buster is a prizefighter who has Sofia's best interests at heart. He helps to raise their children when Sofia is in prison and when she is working as maid to the mayor's family.

Grady – Husband to Shug, Grady is never trusted by Celie or by Mr. _____. It is later revealed that he runs off to Panama with Squeak, in order to work on a marijuana farm.

The Mayor and Miss Millie – The white mayor of the small town near Celie's and Mr.'s property. The Mayor, along with his wife Millie, are genteel and racist, and are the master and

mistress of the home in which Sofia works for nearly a dozen years.

Olivia – Adam's sister, Olivia is recognized by Celie early in the novel as being her biological daughter when she spots her with Corrine in a store, but Olivia is raised by Samuel, Corrine, and Nettie, and is not reunited with Celie until the very end of the book.

Tashi – An Olinka girl educated in the Western manner, Tashi elects to undergo the ritual female circumcision and face scarring of the Olinka, then feels ashamed of having done so. She ends the novel by marrying Adam and moving to the United States with him, Nettie, and Samuel.

Henrietta and Suzie Q. – Squeak and Harpo's children, Henrietta and Suzie Q. are raised largely by Sofia. Suzie Q. is a gifted singer, and Henrietta suffers from sickle-cell anemia, and is nursed by Sofia and the rest of the family.

Bub and Mr.'s other children – Bub and Mr.'s other children are considered "rotten" by Celie. They are "bad seeds," and they disappear midway through the novel; Bub is always in trouble with the law, and the others merely run away.

Catherine – Tashi's mother, Catherine does not approve of the Western-style education that Tashi receives from Samuel and Corrine, and eventually goes to live with Tashi among the mbeles, or Africans resisting British rule, in the jungle.

Miss Beasley – Nettie and Celie's teacher, Miss Beasley pleads with Pa early in the novel to let Celie attend school; but, finding out that Celie is pregnant, Miss Beasley breaks off her protests.

Kate and Carrie – Mr. ____'s sisters, Kate and Carrie help Celie to shop for clothing, since Mr. ____ provides her with almost none at all.

Jack and Odessa – Odessa is Sofia's sister, who helps to raise Sofia's family when Sofia is working as a maid to the mayor. Jack, Odessa's husband, provides the Army pants that serve as a template for the pants Celie makes as part of her company.

Daisy – Pa's final wife, Daisy is very young at the time of their marriage—not more than fifteen.

Germaine – Shug has a final fling with Germaine, a young man who settles in Arizona, on a Native American reservation, where he hopes to teach those who live there.

Doris – An Englishwoman who traveled to Africa to serve as a missionary, Doris meets Samuel and Nettie on a boat back to England, and shows to them her African grandchildren, much to the scandal of others on the boat.

a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



GOD AND SPIRITUALITY

The first words written by Celie, the novel's protagonist, are "Dear **God**," and the novel ends with a letter, the salutation of which reads, "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God." This encapsulates *The Color Purple's* relationship to religion and spirituality: a transition from a belief in a single God, an old white man in a long beard, to a God that exists all around, and is a part of human happiness. Celie begins writing letters to God in order to survive the her father's sexual abuse; she later comes to view God as an outgrowth of nature's beauty, after Shug convinces her that God is more than what white people say, and what church teachings confirm.

Although Shug is not typically religious, she believes strongly that God wants people to be happy, and that God, too, wants to be loved, just as people do. Nettie serves as a missionary to the Olinka people, intending to spread Christianity, but realizes, like her sister, that God is more pervasive, more bound up in nature than some Christian teaching suggests. Even Mr. ____ comes to realize that he behaved evilly as a young man, and his growing belief in the "wonder" of God's creation makes him a better person, and a friend to Celie. Nettie's return to Celie, at the novel's end, confirms that the beauty of family togetherness is one manifestation of God's power on earth.



RACE AND RACISM

The novel takes place in two distinct settings—rural Georgia and a remote African village—both suffused with problems of race and racism. Celie believes herself to be ugly in part because of her very dark skin. Sofia, after fighting back against the genteel racism of the mayor and his wife, ends up serving as maid to that family, and as surrogate mother to Eleanor, who does not initially recognize the sacrifices Sofia has been forced to make. In general, very few career paths are open to the African Americans in the novel: for the men, farming is the main occupation, although Harpo manages to open a bar. For women, it seems only possible to serve as a mother, or to perform for a living, to sing as Squeak and Shug Avery do. In Africa, the situation Nettie, Samuel, Corrine, Adam, Tashi, and Olivia experience is not that much different. Nettie recalls that the ancestors of the Olinka, with whom she lives, sold her ancestors into slavery in America. The Olinka view African Americans with indifference. Meanwhile the English rubber workers, who build roads through the village and displace the Olinka from their ancient land, have very little concern for that people's history in Africa. The British feel that, because they are



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have

developing the land, they "own" it, and the African people who have lived there for centuries are merely "backward" natives. It is only at the very end of the novel, after Samuel, Nettie, and their family have returned from Africa, to Celie's home in Georgia, that Celie and Nettie's entire family is able to come together and dine—a small gift, and something that would be considered completely normal for the white families of that time period, whose lives had not been ripped apart by the legacy of slavery and poverty.



MEN, WOMEN, AND GENDER ROLES

The novel is also an extended meditation on the nature of men, women, and their expected gender roles. In the beginning, Celie is expected to serve her abusive father, and, later, her husband Mr. _____, and Nettie, not wanting to do either, runs away. But Nettie sacrifices the job generally reserved for women—motherhood—in order to educate herself and work for Samuel and Corrine during their missionary labors in Africa. Celie, meanwhile, has two children, whom Nettie then raises in Africa, coincidentally—Celie only leaves behind the drudgery of housework when Shug comes to live with her and Mr. _____ and begins to teach Celie about her body and about other ways of living, outside the control of men. Celie and Squeak, Harpo's second wife, end up living with Shug in Memphis, and Celie is able to start her pants-making company.

The men in the novel, however, experience a different trajectory. It is expected that black men of this time, especially in the South, work in the fields, and that women obey them absolutely. But after Shug and then Celie leave him behind, Mr. _____ realizes just how much he took for granted and how much he, and his son Harpo, have relied on the work of women throughout their lives. Similarly, in Africa, Nettie manages both to achieve the gender role initially expected of her (by marrying the widower Samuel), and keeps working and forging her own path in life, eventually spending over twenty years as a missionary in Africa.

The end of the novel, then, celebrates both the continuity of family, populated both by strong female characters and repentant male ones, and the fact that "families," and the roles within them, are fluid, often overlapping, and part of a long arc toward equality and greater understanding, even if that arc is often dotted with tragedy, abuse, and neglect.



VIOLENCE AND SUFFERING

Violence and suffering in *The Color Purple* are typically depicted as part of a greater cycle of tragedy taking place both on the family level and on a broader social scale. Celie is raped by her stepfather and beaten for many years by her husband, only to have Shug Avery intervene on her behalf. Sofia is nearly beaten to death by white

police officers after pushing a white family; she nearly dies in prison. Nettie is almost raped by her stepfather and by Mr. _____, and must run away in order to protect herself. Harpo tries, unsuccessfully, to beat and control Sofia, his first wife, and he beats Squeak until she leaves him for Grady (though Squeak returns to Celie's home at the end of the novel). These cycles of violence are repeated across the South: Celie's biological father and uncles were lynched by whites jealous of their business success, and there is always the threat that, if black people agitate too much for their rights, they will be struck down by the white people who control the local and state government.

In Africa, too, this violence occurs within the local culture and in the relation between whites and blacks. Men in the Olinka village have absolute control over their wives, and a scarring ritual takes place for all women going through permanently, leaving their faces permanently marked. The white British rubber dealers who take over the Olinka land end up killing a great many in the village, without concern for the humanity or customs of the Olinka, who have lived there for many years. But despite all this violence and suffering, there is a core of hope in the novel: the hope that Celie and Nettie might be reunited. It is this hope that, eventually, stops the cycle of violence, at least within Celie's family, and enables the reunion of many of the family members in Georgia at the novel's end.



SELF-DISCOVERY

The novel is, ultimately, a journey of self-discovery for Celie, and for other characters. Celie begins the novel as a passive, quiet young girl, perplexed by her own pregnancy, by her rape at the hands of Pa, and her ill-treatment by Mr. _____. Slowly, after meeting Shug and seeing her sister run away, Celie develops practical skills: she is a hard worker in the fields, she learns how to manage a house and raise children, and she meets other inspiring women, including Sofia, who has always had to fight the men in her life. Further, she discovers her own sexuality and capacity to love through her developing romance with Shug. Eventually, Celie discovers that her sister Nettie has been writing to her all along, and this, coupled with Shug's support, allows Celie to confront Mr. _____, to move to Memphis with Shug, to begin her own pants company, and, eventually, to make enough money to be independent. Celie's luck begins to change: she inherits her biological father's estate, allowing her greater financial freedom, and she manages to repair her relationship with Mr. _____ (he gives her a **purple** frog as a symbol of his recognition of his earlier bad behavior), and create a kind of family with Mr. _____ Shug, Harpo, Sofia, Squeak, Nettie, and her own children.

Nettie's arc is also one of self-discovery. Nettie received more years of schooling than did Celie, and Nettie has seen the world, working as a missionary in Africa, and eventually marrying a kind and intelligent man. But Nettie also realizes that she can balance her independence, and her desire to work,

with a loving married life that also includes two stepchildren—Celie's children, Olivia and Adam. Indeed, it is the arrival of this extended family on Celie's land at the end of the novel that signals the last stage in both Celie's and Nettie's journey of self-discovery. The sisters have found themselves, and now, as the novel closes, they have found each other.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



PURPLE

The novel, of course, is called *The Color Purple*, and though the color itself does not appear in many places throughout the text, it is clear that **purple** is associated with Celie, and with Celie's transformation from a young girl to a mature woman. As Alice Walker writes in a preface to the novel, purple "is always a surprise but is found everywhere in nature." From the beginning, Celie shows that purple is her favorite color—she asks Kate, Mr.'s sister, to buy her clothing and shoes in purple, but they end up being too expensive. When Celie returns to Georgia, after having lived with Shug in a romantic relationship, and having started her own pant-making business, Mr. carves for Celie a purple frog, symbolizing a comment Celie made to Mr. long after her relationship with Shug, saying that men have always reminded her of frogs. Just as Celie always possessed the inner strength necessary to allow her strike out on her own and to break free of Mr.'s and Pa's influence, the color purple *is* found in nature, in flowers especially, yet it seems an impossible joy, something that ought not to be there—and an indicator of God's influence on earth.



GOD

God and Spirituality is a theme of the novel, but God, as discussed primarily by Celie and Shug, functions as a symbol for a far greater, and more diffuse, model of religious experience. At first, Celie believes that God and Jesus are white men. But Shug helps Celie to realize that this, itself, is a symbolic conception of God, one that has been created to suit dominant white interests. Shug says that God can be anything—a feeling of joy or connection with another person, or with nature—and Celie eventually comes to realize that God (whom she addressed in letters for a large part of the novel) is not so much a person or thing as a means toward happiness and fulfillment. It is revealed, coincidentally, that Nettie has developed a similar conception of the divine during her time with the Olinka.



QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Pocket Books edition of *The Color Purple* published in 1985.

Letter 1 Quotes

☹☹ Dear God, I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.

Related Characters: Celie (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

The Color Purple begins with a shocking revelation - that the main character, who is only fourteen years old, is expecting a child. No one knows who the father could be, but all signs indicate that it is someone much older - that Celie has been violated. *The Color Purple* is thus, from the beginning, Celie's story. It is a narrative of the violence that has been committed against her. And, finally, it is a tale of her own strength in the face of that violence - of the life she makes despite everything that has happened to her.


The letter, importantly, is addressed to God, whom Celie believes is always listening to her. Celie, from the beginning of the narrative, believes that there is hope to found in her situation, as dire and impossible as it seems. She senses that there is someone listening to her. And although God does not reveal himself during the course of the novel, the reader, of course, is listening, and is following the story that Celie lays out letter by letter.

Letter 3 Quotes

☹☹ I keep hoping he fine somebody to marry. I see him looking at my little sister. She scared. But I say I'll take care of you. With God help.

Related Characters: Celie (speaker), Nettie, Pa (Alphonso)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis



Celie recognizes that her father is capable of dangerous acts of sexual violence against herself and her sister Nettie. Celie's first thought, then, is to protect her sister from this. One way to protect Nettie would be for their father to marry. Although that would be dangerous for the wife-to-be, as their father is a violent man, at least it would spare his children his anger and lust, for a time.

Celie refers to God again in this passage, arguing that, without him, there is no protection against her father and his designs on the family. Celie's faith is reinforced by the difficulty of her circumstances. There is no one in the immediate family to help her, to protect her and her sister from her father's wrath. There is only the prospect of divine salvation, of God's help. Without that, there can be no removal from the impoverished, dangerous circumstances in which the girls find themselves - that is, until the girls grow up and begin seeking out other helpers in the town around them.

Letter 7 Quotes

☝☝ Fact is, I got to get rid of her. She too old to be living here at home. And she a bad influence on my other girls She ain't smart either, and I'll just be fair, you have to watch her or she'll give away everything you own. But she can work like a man.

Related Characters: Pa (Alphonso) (speaker), Celie, Mr. ____ (Albert)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the more morally abhorrent things that Pa does to his daughters. He argues, first, that he does not know who is the father of Celie's children, even though he himself is the father - he's guilty of incest and of raping his own teenage daughter. Then, when Mr. ____ seeks out Nettie's hand in marriage, Pa will not permit this, saying that Celie is a problem and has to leave the house first.

Pa "talks up" Celie's accomplishments only by saying that she "works like a man" and that she is too unintelligent to fight back against anyone who wishes to dominate her. It is, all told, a horrific display of lack of regard for one's own child. And it is not even the worst, of course, that Pa has done to Celie in her lifetime. But it is one more indication of Pa's selfishness, and of Celie's position, early in the novel, as an object to whom feelings and thoughts are not attributed

in public. At least the reader, in private, has access to Celie's thoughts via her letters to God.

Letter 9 Quotes

☝☝ I lay there thinking bout Nettie while he [Mr. ____] 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.

Related Characters: Celie (speaker), Nettie, Mr. ____ (Albert), Shug Avery

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Celie's sexual relationship with Mr. ____ is here described. She allows Mr. ____ to make love to her, although Celie herself allows her mind to wander elsewhere. It is telling that Celie's first concern is for Nettie and her safety. Celie's thought is of Shug Avery, whom Celie doesn't yet know, but with whom Celie is fascinated.


Celie does not, at this stage of the novel, fully understand what her interest in Shug might be, but she already has decided to act like she imagines Shug to act - to pretend to enjoy sex because she assumes Shug enjoys it. Celie does not yet know that Shug has a "bad reputation" around the town - that Shug has been in relationships with several men other than Mr. ____.

Letter 12 Quotes

☝☝ I can't remember being the first one in my own dress. Now to have one made just for me. I try to tell Kate what it mean. I git hot in the face and stutter.

Related Characters: Celie (speaker), Kate and Carrie

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Katie and Carrie are Mr. ____'s sisters. They are especially kind to Celie, and they do not take pity on her - instead, they seem genuinely to like her, and to want to do nice things for

her. They agree to buy Celie some clothes. Celie reveals that she has never purchased her own clothes, indicating the extent to which she has been deprived of any material comfort in her life up till this point. It is also one of the first indications of female friendship for Celie in the novel. Celie is close with her sister, Nettie, and she dreams frequently of Shug, but Katie and Carrie are nice to her for no reason other than wanting to be - and this is a revelation for Celie.


Celie discovers that she loves the color purple, and that she wants shoes of that color, too, but they're too expensive (and she buys blue ones instead). Despite all that she has been through up till this point, Celie possesses a love for life's more whimsical side - and the color purple is an indication of this, and of her desire for independence from the domineering men surrounding her.

Letter 14 Quotes

☝☝ Lord, I want to go [to see Shug Avery] so bad. Not to dance. Not to drink. Not to play card. Not even to hear Shug Avery sing. I just be thankful to lay eyes on her.

Related Characters: Celie (speaker), Shug Avery

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Celie's devotion to Shug is here made even clearer. Celie states that she would do anything just to observe Shug as she sings and walks the stage. Celie is enraptured by the power of Shug's personality, even from afar, and she believes that Shug's performance will be a highlight for her - a representation of just what is possible for a woman to achieve, even within the narrow strictures of the society into which Celie has been born.

Celie also takes pains to note here that she is not interested in going to the night club to engage in what might be called "immoral" behavior. Celie retains, for herself, an idea that gambling and drinking lead only to self-destruction. Celie does not ask for much - only to be allowed to enjoy herself in an environment where someone (most notably a man) isn't bullying her or forcing her to work. In the night club, watching Shug, Celie might have a taste of her own independence.

Letter 18 Quotes

☝☝ Sofia look half her size. But she still a big strong girl. Arms got muscle. Legs, too. . . . She got a little pot on her now and give you the feeling she all there. Solid. Like if she sit down on something, it be mash.

Related Characters: Celie (speaker), Sofia

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis


Celie is struck by Sofia's strength and independence. In the beginning of her marriage to Mr. ____, Celie had trouble keeping his children in line - they did not appear to want to listen to her, and occasionally, even despite her best efforts, they would fight back, or resist her even modest attempts at discipline.

Sofia, like Shug, represents for Celie a way of behaving, a way of asserting oneself in the world, that is at odds with the modes of feminine behavior in which Celie has been brought up by Pa. Mr. ____, for his part, reinforces Pa's treatment of Celie - Pa himself believed that he took Celie "off his hands" - and so Harpo and Sofia's relationship, with a different arrangement of power between man and woman, seems all the stranger to Celie for that. Celie will continue to wonder how she might assert herself in interactions with men as the novel progresses.

Letter 20 Quotes

☝☝ They fight. He try to slap her. What he do that for? She reach down and grab a piece of stove wood and whack him cross the eyes . . . She throw him over her back. He fall *bam* up against the stove.

Related Characters: Celie (speaker), Sofia, Harpo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

This is a continuation of the description Celie provides, in the previous quote, regarding Harpo's relationship with Sofia. As above, here Celie is taken aback by Sofia's resistance to Harpo's commands. Indeed, Sofia is the one who takes physical charge - she is unafraid of threatening Harpo physically, or indeed of hitting him, when she does not get her way. This inverts the paradigm of male violence

committed against women in the novel. Although it is still violence, and Celie is still frightened by it, Harpo's and Sofia's interaction nevertheless makes plain to Celie that other women in the community are standing up to, and fighting with, figures of authority.

Celie, too, is a passionate and quiet observer of the lives around her. This is evident from the start of the novel - which is, after all, her journal. In this scene, Celie is walking by Sofia and Harpo's home - she has not been invited inside, and she does her observing from a remove. There are other instances in the novel when Celie observes her friends and relatives in precisely this detached, generally objective manner.

Letter 26 Quotes

☝☝ What that song? I ast. Sound low down dirty to me. Like what the preacher tell you its sin to hear. Not to mention sing.

She hum a little more. Something come to me, she say. Something I made up. Something you help scratch out my head.

Related Characters: Celie, Shug Avery (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

The relationship between Shug and Celie deepens in this scene, as Celie combs Shug's hair. Although Celie and Shug do not yet engage in romantic behavior, there is nevertheless an intimate quality to their interaction here.

Shug is a creative spirit, and eventually goes on to spur that creativity in Celie. Celie has long looked for a creative outlet as a part of her journey of self-discovery - she has attempted to find a way to express herself and her feelings. Of course, Celie has been doing this all along without exactly understanding how or why - she has been keeping a journal of the events of her life, the journal that forms the basis of the narrative that the reader reads as the novel itself. Celie will, later on, begin to understand that she is a writer and storyteller - but, for now, she is content with witnessing Shug engage in her own acts of creation.

Letter 30 Quotes

☝☝ I don't know, say Sofia. Maybe I won't go. Deep down I still love Harpo, but—he just makes me *real* tired. She yawn. Laugh. I need a vacation, she say.

Related Characters: Celie (speaker), Sofia, Harpo

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Sofia and Harpo's marriage forms a counterpoint both to Celie's marriage to Mr. ____ and to Celie's burgeoning relationship with Shug. Sofia controls Harpo physically, often berating him and beating him - and this causes Harpo to want to retaliate, to eat so much that he grows in size. Sofia, understanding that Harpo merely wants to control her, does what she can to imagine a world where she does not rely on any man - just as Celie imagines this world for herself.



The idea of a "vacation" from anything in the novel is, for the characters involved, an inherently humorous wish - as most characters do not have the resources to take a break at all from their working lives. Celie's imaginative life is rich, and she longs, deep down, to live with Shug, and to throw off the burden of caring for Mr. ____, just as Sofia longs to be rid of Harpo. But at this point in the text, these can only be wishes and fantasies - not transferable into reality.

Letter 32 Quotes

☝☝ What Sofia gon say bout what you doing to her house? I ast. Spose she and the children come back. Where they gon sleep.

They ain't coming back, say Harpo, nailing together planks for a counter.

Related Characters: Celie, Harpo (speaker), Sofia

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Harpo and Sofia undergo their own period of self-realization, as Celie watches and inquires as to what they're doing. Sofia takes the children away, feeling that they are better off apart from Harpo, whose rage has, at this point, become difficult to handle. Harpo decides that he'd like to run a bar, or "juke joint," in order to host singers - and, more importantly for him, to "assert himself" as a man in the community.

Celie realizes that Harpo has long been worried he is not man enough, or that only Sofia might love him or desire him

sexually. Harpo's construction of the juke joint is, therefore, in part an announcement of his own masculinity, and his attempt to present himself as desirable to the women of the community. Celie intuits this, even as she marvels at the fact that a married couple can dissolve in this way, with mother and children going in one direction, and father going in another.

Letter 40 Quotes

☝☝ I don't know, say the prizefighter. This sound mighty much like some ole uncle Tomming to me.

Shug snort, Well, she say, Uncle Tom wasn't call Uncle for nothing.

Related Characters: Buster Broadnax, Shug Avery (speaker), Buster Broadnax, Shug Avery

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Shug is extraordinarily clever, and wishes to release Sofia from her imprisonment by whatever means are available to her. She understands that one role white men and women are comfortable with, for African Americans, is that of maid or servant - and although Shug recognizes that this would in fact be difficult for Sofia to manage, it would be far, far better than Sofia remaining in prison. And so Shug does what she can to court the favor and approval of white society, causing the prizefighter to argue that Shug is enticing Squeak, and indirectly Sofia, to perform for and act obsequious toward white society. This is "uncle Tomming."

Shug goes on to quip, however, that Squeak is in fact related to a white family in town, and the prison warden is in fact her uncle, so "uncle" would certainly be an apt term in this case. Shug maintains her composure and her ability to joke even in the most serious of circumstances - and nevertheless is capable of helping Sofia to improve her lot despite the punishment she is sentenced to in prison.



Letter 43 Quotes

☝☝ Sofia say to me today, I just can't understand it. What that? I ast.

Why we ain't already kill them off.

...
Too many to kill off, I say. Us outnumbered from the start.

Related Characters: Sofia, Celie (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

Sofia's tone here is very interesting. Sofia does not mean seriously to suggest that African Americans ought to kill the white families that oppress them. But she does wonder if that is the only solution that would structurally "solve" the problem of racism in the South. In other words, Sofia seems to understand that only a very, very profound change in the nature of black and white interaction in the South would upend many centuries of prejudice and active discrimination against African Americans.

Celie, however, recognizes something else - that, at this point, American society has been structured around white experience, making it extraordinarily hard to imagine a world in which those advantages are not taken into account. African Americans begin from a position of disenfranchisement; Celie's own experiences of slowly realizing her potential and her own set of skills are an indication in miniature of the effort required to resist anti-black violence in the South, and in America as a whole. Celie is committed to improving her own life, but she recognizes just how much stands in the path of her own progress, and the progress of African Americans more generally.

Letter 46 Quotes

☝☝ She singing all over the country these days. Everybody know her name. She know everybody, too. Know Sophie Tucker, know Duke Ellington, know folks I ain't never heard of. And money. She make so much money she don't know what to do with it.

Related Characters: Celie (speaker), Shug Avery

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

Shug's success on the touring circuit in the South is one of the emergent features of the novel. Shug's development as a character involves her getting more and more recognition for the quality of her singing. Celie has long been proud of Shug's accomplishments - indeed, she has held her in awe. Shug, for her part, encourages Celie to pursue her own passions.


In a most immediate sense, these passions are physical. In this section of the novel, Celie confides in Shug that she has never had an orgasm, and therefore considers herself to be a "virgin" with Mr. _____. Celie's realization that Shug has gotten what she wants from life by going out into the world and asserting herself, coupled with Celie's continued journaling, causes her to approach her own enjoyment in a more proactive way. This quality will grow in Celie as the novel continues.

Letter 53 Quotes

☝☝ But God, I miss you, Celie. I think about the time you laid yourself down for me. I love you with all my heart.

Related Characters: Nettie (speaker), Celie

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

Nettie's letters back to Celie - the existence of which Celie does not know about at the time the letters are written - document the "other side" of the narrative. Nettie has escaped the harsh conditions of the rural South, where Celie continues to live. She raises Adam and Olivia, Celie's biological children, as her own adopted children. And Nettie finds, in the care of the Reverend Samuel and his wife Corrine, a kind of sustained, nurturing family environment that was not available to her in her family home.


Celie's journal, then, is braided into the narrative with Nettie's unanswered letters back to Celie. The fact that Celie does not read them, nor know about them and respond to them, does not deter Nettie from continuing to write. In this way, both Nettie and Celie develop the "story" of *The Color Purple*, even though they have no evidence that anyone will be able to read it. This determination to bear witness to the events of their lives is one of the most profound and affecting morals of the novel.

Letter 58 Quotes

☝☝ Did I mention my first sight of the African coast? Something struck in me, in my soul, Celie, like a large bell, and I just vibrated. Corrine and Samuel felt the same. And we kneeled down right on deck and gave thanks to God for letting us see the land for which our mothers and fathers cried—and lived and died—to see again.

Related Characters: Nettie (speaker), Corrine, Samuel

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

Nettie's life is much "larger," geographically, than Celie's is - she travels with Samuel and Corrine into Africa as part of an evangelizing mission, to spread Christianity among African peoples and to share the good news with populations with whom they understand themselves to live in a greater community. Nettie marvels at the seats of African culture and their relationship to black life in the American South. And she wishes that Celie were present to share in this wonderment with her.

Nettie's response to a visit to Africa represents one of many versions of African American cultural revival in the South of this time. For some, like Celie (who has no other choice, in effect), African American life is about living in the United States, about a set of circumstances particular to being born and raised in the South. For others, like Nettie, the African American experience is linked to the African experience, and it is important for her to find the networks that connect one aspect of this broader culture to another.

Letter 62 Quotes

☝☝ Corrine said to me this morning, Nettie, to stop any kind of confusion in the minds of these people, I think we should call one another brother and sister, all the time.

Related Characters: Nettie (speaker), Corrine

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation has to do with the nature of the Olinka community, where Samuel, Corrine, Nettie, and the children settle. Corrine worries that the Olinka do not understand Samuel's relationship to Nettie - the Olinka believe, in fact, that Samuel has two wives, and that Nettie is the younger, and therefore more desirable, wife. Although Corrine wishes to behave with Christian courtesy both to the community they are visiting and to Nettie, she is visibly upset by the idea, even the merest hint of one, that perhaps Samuel and Corrine have had some form of sexual



relationship at some point in the past.

Nettie's interaction with Corrine at this point in the novel makes clear that, despite the loving brother- and sisterhood of Samuel and Corrine's family, everyone in the novel is susceptible to jealousy of a kind. Corrine values the integrity of her marriage and believes that, if the Olinka view Samuel to have taken multiple wives, this integrity might be in jeopardy.

Letter 64 Quotes

☝☝ Today one of the boys in my afternoon class burst out, as he entered, The road approaches! The road approaches! He had been hunting in the forest with his father and seen it. Every day now the villagers gather at the edge of the village near the cassava fields, and watch the building of the road.

Related Characters: Nettie (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

Nettie teaches school among the Olinka, and part of her job, as Samuel has laid it out, is to "Christianize" the members of that community - to disabuse them of some of their local traditions regarding religion, but without utterly changing the culture they are, in fact, visiting. Nettie, then, is struck by the English intrusion into the Olinka community and by the presence of the road builders. For the road is a double-edged sword.

On the one hand, the road can make the Olinka far more connected to other communities - it can link them, for example, to places for trade, and could improve the economic health of the tribe. But these ideas are vastly outweighed, for the Olinka and for Samuel, Corrine, and Nettie, by the possibility of destruction that the road represents. For the road will cut through the community in severe ways, and the road builders do not seem to mind it what direction it goes, or what they must destroy in order to construct it. Furthermore, most of the "interconnectedness" the road will bring is likely to just mean more white colonizers, and therefore more oppression and exploitation of the Olinka.

Letter 71 Quotes

☝☝ Don't cry. Don't cry, I said. My sister was glad to see Olivia with you. Glad to see her alive. She thought both her children were dead.

Related Characters: Nettie (speaker), Olivia, Corrine

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

For years, Corrine has noted the resemblance between Olivia and Nettie, thinking that perhaps the children are biologically related to Nettie (of course they are, although Nettie is their biological aunt, and Celie their mother). But this goes to Corrine's longstanding feelings of jealousy and anxiety regarding Adam and Olivia's parentage. Corrine fears that Samuel has loved Nettie, and that the family's "coming together" and trip to Africa was, in some sense, a pretext for Samuel and Nettie to continue to be together.

But Corrine, in confiding this to Nettie finally, does free herself of some of the burden of her fear before she dies of an illness. Corrine has been warped by her jealousy - her goodness has changed to bitterness over the time the family has been in Africa. In this way, even though Nettie has found a more supportive and less violent family structure with Samuel and Corrine in Africa, her life is afflicted with many of the same jealousies and divisions as Celie's life in the American South.

Letter 72 Quotes

☝☝ Now the engineers have come to inspect the territory. Two white men came yesterday and spent a couple of hours strolling about the village, mainly looking at the wells. Such is the innate politeness of the Olinka that they rushed about preparing food for them . . . And the white men sat eating as if the food was beneath notice.

Related Characters: Nettie (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

In this section Nettie teases out what it means to connect, aid, or reconstruct a culture, versus what it might mean to "modernize" and therefore destroy it. The English engineers argue that the road will improve the connection between the Olinka and Western economic structures - just as a road in the American South might help the business relationships between two towns. But Nettie wonders whether this new arrangement among the Olinka would be actually good for the community - or whether it would only benefit the

English who are coming in and who eye the land greedily. Nettie thinks, too, on the nature of change in this section. The Olinka, of course, cannot stay exactly the same - the community has evolved and changed over time. But it has changed of its own accord, and on its own timeline - it hasn't needed Western involvement for that to happen. In this way, Western involvement seems more like intrusion and less like development.


Letter 73 Quotes

☝☝ She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other pope. But one day . . it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh.

Shug! I say.

Related Characters: Shug Avery, Celie (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

Celie is struck by the nature of Shug's religious experiences. Celie, for her part, has stopped writing to God, and now writes to Nettie, just as Nettie has written to Celie for years. And Celie is not sure that Nettie will ever receive her letters, just as Nettie has continued her writing despite total unawareness that Celie has been reading, after a long period of not knowing the letters existed.

For Shug, God is a sensual and spiritual entity that exists in all living things, and that ties living beings together, unifying them even if they do not appear to be unified. Shug takes a great deal of comfort in this unifying energy, and even connects it to her sexuality. Celie, though she is at first surprised to hear that Shug speaks of God in this way, comes to realize that Shug's connection to earthly life and sexuality is a powerful and sustaining one.

Letter 80 Quotes

☝☝ You may have guessed that I loved him all along; but I did not know it. oh, I loved him as a brother . . . but Celie, I love him bodily, as a man! I love his walk, his size, his shape, his smell, the kinkiness of his hair.

Related Characters: Nettie (speaker), Samuel

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis

Nettie confides in Celie here, telling her that, after years, she finds herself married to Samuel, and that she has fallen in love with him. Corrine, of course, feared for a long time that this might happen, and Nettie betrays a small amount of guilt for confirming, even if only after Corrine's death, the fear that she long harbored.


But Nettie is happy and has found a way to cement her familial relationship with Adam and Olivia, and to care for the man she loves. As Nettie describes it, this is a love that is affirming both for her and for Samuel - they feel comfortable doing things together, and take a great deal of satisfaction merely from being in one another's presence. Meanwhile, Celie has similarly recognized over the course of the novel that her lifelong love has been Shug, and that this relationship with her has allowed her further to grow and recognize her own abilities.

Letter 82 Quotes

☝☝ Then she took some cedar sticks out of her bag and lit them and gave one of them to me. Us started at the very top of the house . . . and us smoked it all the way down to the basement, chasing out all the evil and making a place for good.

Related Characters: Celie (speaker), Shug Avery

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

This is a turning point in the novel. Tapping into some of Shug's ideas of spirituality, Celie moves with her through the home, airing it out, and removing from it the "spirits" that have long haunted it. As part of her journey of self-discovery, Celie, along with Shug, begins to tell herself that her life has been lived in subservience to men - and that life can be so much more than this. Shug has helped Celie to realize that even the oddest or most personal ritual, if genuinely believed, can help one to overcome inner demons - to reassert authority of a world that, for so long, has given Celie nothing.


Indeed, as Celie's journey comes closer and closer to its conclusion, the reader realizes just how much Celie and Nettie's lives have been intertwined, despite the enormous distances between them. Each has lived a life in search of true love and commitment - and each has found it, after years of hardship.

Letter 87 Quotes

☝☝ But guess what else . . . When the missionaries got to the part bout Adam and Eve being naked, the Olinka peoples nearly bust out laughing . . . They tried to explain . . . that it was they who put Adam and Eve out of the village because they was naked. Their word for naked is white. But since they are covered by color they are not naked.

Related Characters: Nettie (speaker)

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the most important racial passages in the novel. Celie notes (paraphrasing a letter from Nettie) that the Olinka word for naked is "white," meaning "having no color." For the Olinka, being naked is being without color - and because the Olinkans happen to have dark skin, for them "whiteness" has nothing to do with skin color at all. This is a way for Celie to understand both that the Olinkans are proud of their heritage, traditions, and skin, and that they do not consider their "blackness" to be any kind of categorical or immutable category. Olinkans can be white or black, naked or clothed.

The white Englishmen who come into the village, however, have a much different conception of race - for them, the Olinkans are nearly naked and are black - the Olinkans, for them, simply cannot be white. This means that the


European conception of race, compared to the Olinkan, is vastly cruder and less informed. The Olinkans have within their culture a well-developed concept of subtle difference, whereas the English see, literally, only in black and white terms.

Letter 90 Quotes

☝☝ And I see they [the children] think that me and Nettie and Shug and Albert and Samuel and Harpo and Sofia and Jack and Odessa real old . . . But I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt.

Related Characters: Celie (speaker), Adam, Olivia, Tashi, Nettie, Shug Avery, Mr. ____ (Albert), Samuel, Harpo, Sofia, Jack and Odessa

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

This is the marvelous closing passage to the novel. After all that has happened to Celie and to Nettie - after all the miles Nettie has traveled, after all that Celie has been through in remaining in the South - time feels, in this passage, not to have passed at all. It is as though time itself was brought to a halt, or a new kind of time is here introduced. Celie and Nettie, reunited, can now make physical the bond that has united them in letters for years. And this bond is made even stronger by the presence of family, both biological and affiliative, that Celie and Nettie have assembled over the many intervening years. Despite their hardships, Celie and Nettie recognize that their stories are stories of family togetherness, of bonds made and sustained despite the incredible difficulty of their circumstances. *The Color Purple* thus ends triumphantly, as a celebration of the power of love in the face of violence and hatred.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LETTER 1

The unnamed main character, who is later revealed to be named Celie, writes a first letter to **God**, saying that she is fourteen, and that she wonders what is happening to her body. She is expecting a child.

Celie reveals that her mother is ill and unwilling, at the moment, to sleep with Celie's father, (referred to here as "Pa," but later revealed to be named Alphonso) because of her illness. Celie's father rapes Celie because of Celie's mother's refusal, and tells Celie she must "shut up" about her abuse (meaning she cannot tell anyone), and must get used to this kind of treatment.

After these sexual assaults begin, Celie's father is nicer to her mother, but Celie knows that her mother will not live much longer.

Celie writes the first of the novel's 90 letters. A novel written entirely in letters is called an epistolary novel, and it often provides key insights into a character's psyche—insights of which the character herself might not be aware.



In the beginning, Celie is perplexed by her condition. She knows only that her father hurts her, and that she has gotten "big"—that she is going to have a child. Pa knows that it is of the utmost importance that Celie speak to no one about her abuse, in order to keep his secret. Thus Celie addresses her letters to God, and maintains them as a kind of journal.



Celie's mother has only a small part in the novel—it is later revealed that she has been mentally ill for some time. It is not clear whether she is aware of Pa's mistreatment of Celie.



LETTER 2

In a second letter, Celie describes how her mother dies "cussing and screaming." Celie is pregnant, and Celie's mother, as she is dying, wonders who the father is, and asks Celie. Celie replies that **God** is the father of the child. Celie's father mourns his wife's passing at her bedside.

Celie writes that Pa took her first-born child away from her (this child is later revealed to be a girl, and is named Olivia). Celie believes that her father took the baby girl out to the woods and killed her. She also believes that Pa will do the same to the male child (later named Adam) to whom Celie gives birth not long after Olivia's birth. Pa is the father of both these children.

Celie's mother is aware of Celie's pregnancy, but she thinks it more likely that Celie has gotten pregnant by some local boy. Celie's father, like Mr. ___ later in the novel, mourns his wife even as he has mistreated her.



Celie's separation from her children, Olivia and Adam, forms the first of the novel's major separations. The second cuts off Nettie, Celie's younger sister, from Celie. The arc of the novel is the eventual reconciliation of these separated people—although it takes a great many years to reassemble the family all in one place.



LETTER 3

Celie writes that Pa has taken her other child, the boy, from her. But Celie does not believe he has taken this child out to the woods to kill it. Instead, Celie thinks Pa has sold the child to a man and woman in the nearby town of Monticello. Celie worries that her father will soon have sexual designs on her younger sister, Nettie. Celie vows to protect her sister from harm, "with **God's** help."

It seems that Pa does not have designs specifically on Celie—Celie comments that she herself is not especially pretty, and her skin is dark. Rather, Pa seems to want simply to abuse his own daughters. Celie recognizes this impulse in Pa, and does her absolute best to make sure that Nettie escapes his sexual abuse.



LETTER 4

Celie's father marries a girl (not named; referred to as Celie's stepmother) who is nearly the same age as Celie and from the nearby town of Gray, and brings her back to the house to live with Celie and Nettie. Nettie begins dating an older man, a widower referred to only as Mr. ____, but Celie advises Nettie to keep studying and not to marry Mr. ____, who will make her care for his three motherless children.

More evidence is here supplied that Pa has a penchant for young woman. Much later in the novel, when Celie visits Pa to learn the truth about her family, she finds him married to another young girl—Daisy, who seems to think that her husband is an upstanding gentleman, who merely wants to help the young women in his life.



LETTER 5

Celie's father beats her because he thinks she is winking at a boy in church, although Celie denies this. Celie states that she prefers looking at women, since they do not scare her.

Pa's remarriage does not prevent him from feeling sexual jealousy toward his daughter, whom he wishes to control.



Celie worries that her father will begin sexually abusing Nettie, so she changes her mind and tells Nettie to wed Mr. ____ Celie reveals to **God** that she no longer gets her period, meaning she can no longer become pregnant.

Celie realizes that, although Mr. ____ himself is a man of bad reputation, he is of better reputation than Pa, and could at least spirit Nettie away to another location, sparing her from Pa's abuse.



LETTER 6

Mr. ____ asks for Nettie's hand in marriage, but Celie's father refuses, saying that Mr. ____ is surrounded by scandal, since he's a widower because not long before his wife was murdered by her lover. Also, Mr. ____ is dogged by rumors that he continues a romantic relationship with a woman named Shug Avery.

The first mention of Shug Avery, a romantic interest to Mr. ____ and to Celie in the novel, and one of the book's freest spirits. Members of the community have difficulty accepting Shug's libertine ways—at this point in the novel, the sexual revolution is approximately 30 to 40 years in the future.



Celie asks her stepmother who Shug Avery is. Her stepmother gets a picture of Shug, which Celie finds entrancing. Celie sleeps with the picture and dreams about Shug.

Celie's attraction to Shug begins very early. At first, Celie finds even the idea of Shug—and the picture she keeps—entrancing. Celie does not understand the nature of her attraction to Shug—that it is, fundamentally, a loving and romantic attraction.



LETTER 7

Celie's stepmother gets sick and must stay in bed. Celie tells her father to sleep with her, not Nettie, while their stepmother is ill. Celie dresses up for the occasion to entice her father; her father beats her for dressing "trampy," but still sleeps with her. Celie believes that Nettie has figured out that their father sexually abuses her, but everyone is too scared to say anything.

Mr. ____ comes again to ask for Nettie's hand in marriage. Celie's father says no, again, but tells him he can marry Celie, the older daughter, despite the fact that she's had two children. Celie's father pretends he does not know who the father of those children is.

Mr. ____ says that Celie is unattractive, but her father says she is a good worker, that she can no longer bear children, and that she will be a good wife to Mr. ____, though she isn't very smart and she's a "liar."

One of the novel's saddest scenes. Recognizing that she is not traditionally attractive, Celie does her best to present herself in a fashion that her father will enjoy in order to protect her sister, and gets beaten for it. Nettie never forgets that Celie has "laid herself down" for Nettie on this and other occasions.



Pa's reasons for marrying Celie off aren't entirely clear, but it appears that, now she is older, Pa is less interested in her sexually—and he wants Nettie to remain at home, so he can begin to sexually abuse her instead.



Pa does not try very hard to "sell" the idea of marriage to Celie—but he recognizes that Mr. ____ needs help raising his children, and will do whatever it takes to provide for them a mother-figure.



LETTER 8

It takes Mr. ____ most of the spring to decide whether or not to marry Celie. In the meantime, Celie and Nettie study together, although only Nettie is still in school. They read in particular about Christopher Columbus, and the Native Americans whom Columbus brought back to Europe as slaves.

Celie's father took Celie out of school the first time she got pregnant, saying that Nettie was the smarter of the two sisters anyway. When Miss Beasley, their teacher, comes over to beg with Celie's father to let Celie back in school, Miss Beasley sees Celie, dressed in a tight dress and pregnant, and leaves, disgusted in her former student.

Mr. ____ returns toward the beginning of summer and looks anxious and tired. He says he needs a woman to take care of his children, and asks to see Celie again. Celie's father repeats that Celie would be a good stepmother. Mr. ____ asks whether Celie comes with a cow, and her father replies that the cow is hers: a dowry, or wedding present.

This passage introduces, through the presence of Christopher Columbus, the idea of American slavery which is one of the novel's undercurrents. Nettie and Celie are only two or three generations removed from black slavery in the American south.



Miss Beasley wishes to help Celie, but it appears that this help is limited by Miss Beasley's sense of propriety. Celie's teacher assumes that Celie has made a "choice" to get pregnant—and Miss Beasley therefore judges Celie based on this "choice," deciding that it is not worthwhile to argue she should be placed back in school.



Pa's logic has been proved correct. Mr. ____ cannot take care of his four children alone (it is revealed later he has four, not three). Celie's ability to quietly do her duty, at any cost, is, perversely, exactly what Pa exploits, and what he praises when encouraging a marriage between Mr. ____ and Celie.



LETTER 9

On the day of her wedding, Celie is attacked by one of Mr. ____'s children, the oldest boy, aged twelve. This boy, who is later revealed to be named Harpo, hates Celie and is still distraught over the death of his mother, Annie Julia, Mr. ____'s first wife. Harpo hits Celie with a rock. Celie finds out that Mr. ____ has four children, not the three she had initially heard about—two boys (Harpo and a younger boy named Bub), and two unnamed girls.

Celie tries, after the wedding ceremony, to detangle Mr. ____'s daughters' hair, and realizes the two girls haven't had baths since their mother's death. The girls go to sleep angry with Celie, because their heads hurt after the detangling. Celie lets Mr. ____ have sex with her, and thinks of her sister Nettie's safety, and then of Shug Avery, during the act.

LETTER 10

Celie, out in town one day (the "town" is not named explicitly, but it is probably Monticello), thinks she sees her child Olivia with another woman—the child's stepmother (later revealed to be the Reverend's wife, Corrine). Celie has not seen Olivia since shortly after the child was born. Celie believes she knows it is Olivia because of the color of the girl's eyes.

Celie follows Olivia and her stepmother into a store. Celie asks who the child's father is, and the woman replies that it's the Reverend Mr. ____ (later revealed to be Samuel). This last name is unfamiliar to Celie.

The Reverend is not yet present to pick up his wife and daughter, so Celie invites them into her husband's wagon, waiting outside the store. They sit together for a moment. The Reverend's wife asks about Celie's husband, and, finding out who it is, says Mr. ____ is a handsome man. Celie thinks to herself that she cannot tell when men are handsome.

Ironically, it is Harpo, whose initial aggression toward Celie is so shocking, who will be the only of Mr. ____'s children to develop a loving relationship with Celie. The two younger girls, whose hair Celie braids, get pregnant later in the novel, and run away from Mr. ____'s home. They are not heard from again.



This scene foreshadows another scene of hair detangling, when Celie combs out Shug's hair. In that latter case, however, Shug greatly appreciates Celie's efforts, and writes a song during the detangling she later dedicates to Celie.



Celie's attachment to her daughter is extremely strong, so strong that Celie believes she recognizes Olivia merely by the color and shape of her eyes, even though Celie has not seen her daughter since she was very, very young—perhaps only several days old.



One of the novel's great coincidences: the Reverend who takes in Adam and Olivia also will take in Nettie and allow her to go to Africa. Of course, Celie aids this coincidence by telling Nettie to go to the Reverend's household when Nettie is running away from Mr. _____. It is unclear whether Celie does this knowing that the Reverend and Corrine have adopted Adam and Olivia.



One of the interesting undercurrents in the novel is Mr. ____'s attractiveness. Everyone in town seems to acknowledge he is a good-looking man; this is one of the reasons Shug finds him so physically irresistible.



Celie asks the mother the girl's name, and the mother says "Pauline," but that they call her Olivia, because they feel that the child looks like an Olivia. (It is later revealed that they adopted the child knowing her name was Olivia). Celie is shocked by this information, and happy that the child is in fact hers, but the Reverend quickly arrives and takes Olivia and his wife away in his wagon.

Another coincidence. It is not clear whether or not Pa gave Olivia to Samuel and Corrine saying that the child's name was Olivia. If not, then it is perhaps difficult to believe that the Reverend and his wife would settle on the exact name Celie chose. But in either case, Olivia and Adam seem fated to have a more stable and secure upbringing than Celie could provide.



LETTER 11

Nettie runs away from her childhood home because she is afraid of Pa's sexual advances, although Nettie feels guilty abandoning her stepmother to Pa's abusive ways. Nettie joins Celie and Mr. ___ in their home nearby.

Nettie escapes Pa's advances only to find herself in another environment—Mr. ___'s house—in which she will be sexually propositioned, mistreated, and from which ultimately she will be forced to leave.



Celie reports that Mr. ___ still "has eyes" for Nettie. Nettie continues studying for school while in their home, and Celie attempts to control Mr. ___'s unruly children, who typically do not listen to her or obey her.

Celie is a good mother—she does what she can for Mr. ___'s children because it is her wifely duty—but the children simply hate her, perhaps because they feel she has replaced their mother, who was murdered by a lover.



Mr. ___ continues to make advances to Nettie, and strongly implies that he wishes to have sex with her. Nettie refuses Mr. ___, thus angering him. Mr. ___ tells Celie, as a result of Nettie's refusal, that Nettie must leave their house. Celie gives Nettie the name of the Reverend and his wife—the only people, Celie says, she has ever seen with money. Celie tells Nettie to find them in Monticello and to ask to stay with them.

It seems hard to believe, but it is in fact true, as far as the narrative goes, that Celie has never seen money, nor has she had occasion to spend it. The day she once passed in town, observing Corrine and Olivia, is perhaps the only time in her life she has been permitted to see other people going about their business. Mr. ___ keeps Celie, essentially, as a maid in his house, and as a nanny to his children.



Nettie is happy to leave Mr. ___ and his "rotten" children, but feels guilty to leave Celie. She promises Celie she will write to her when she reaches the house of the Reverend and Corrine. But, Celie says, in this letter to **God**, that Nettie never does write.

One of the novel's great unbroken promises. Of course, Celie does not discover Nettie's letters, hidden by Mr. ___, for some time. But Nettie does in fact manage to correspond with Celie over the span of many years.



LETTER 12

Mr. ___'s sisters, named Kate and Carrie, visit Celie at home with Mr. ___ and tell her about Mr. ___'s first wife, Annie Julia. Annie Julia was not a good homemaker, nor did she watch the children and keep them clean and disciplined. The sisters report that Mr. ___ was always "chasing around" Shug Avery while Annie Julia was home with the children.

Annie Julia, like Shug, was not capable of caring for children, nor was she a particularly gifted homemaker. But she did not look like Shug—she was not as pretty—and Mr. ___ spent much of their marriage apart from his own family, thus causing Annie Julia to take a lover.



The sisters complain about Shug Avery, saying that, as a singer, she is conceited, untrustworthy, and a woman who loves the company of many different men. They praise Celie's housekeeping skills, although they appear to acknowledge, implicitly, that Celie is not as attractive as Shug.

Very few people in the novel find Shug to be spellbinding and a good friend—and most of them are men. Celie is that rare woman who is not frightened of Shug's sexual frankness, nor of her free-spiritedness.



Kate tells Mr. ____ that Celie needs new clothes; Celie has been wearing the same clothes in Mr. ____'s house that she wore in Pa's. Kate takes Celie to buy shoes and a dress. Celie initially wants **purple** shoes, but they're too expensive and so she settles for blue. Celie has never before worn a dress that was not bought second-hand.

The first mention of the color purple in the novel. Purple seems to represent, for Celie, something she wants and cannot have—a splash of brightness and excitement and luxury in a life otherwise dominated by abuse and obligation.



Kate gets in an argument with Mr. ____ about Harpo, Mr. ____'s eldest son, who says that he won't work, that women are supposed to do all the work at home, even difficult labor like carrying in water. Kate tells Celie to fight Mr. ____, but Celie thinks that she knows better how to deal with him. She says, in her letter to **God**, that she will continue to appease Mr. ____, and to give in to his demands, in order to keep the household running smoothly, and to help raise his children.

Harpo starts off, as a young man, like his father—unwilling to work, and arguing that work is for women, not for men. One of the novel's primary ideas is the way behavior gets cycled through generations. Here, Mr. ____ seems to model a kind of male behavior that is socially backward, but sadly common. It is the idea that men rule the roost and order women around, and that women are the ones who work, raise the children, and make sure the household is in order.



LETTER 13

Harpo asks his father why he beats Celie; Mr. ____ answers that he beats her because she's his wife. When Celie is beaten by Mr. ____, she pretends she's unfeeling wood, "like a tree."

Celie wishes to be as unfeeling as a tree, but, in reality, it is Celie's empathy and powers of sensitivity that enable her to be a loving mother and a friend to people like Shug and Sofia.



Harpo, who is seventeen, tells Celie he is in love with a girl who is fifteen. Celie says they are too young to be in love, but Harpo disagrees. Harpo is afraid to talk to the girl or to the girl's father, since he is worried the girl does not like him as much as he likes her, and he is even more worried that her father will disapprove of their relationship.

Again, Harpo appears to be repeating his father's behavior. He wants to get Sofia pregnant and marry her so that he can have a family of his own—and so that he can rule in that family the way Mr. ____ rules in his.



LETTER 14

Shug is coming to town to sing. Mr. ____ prepares himself to meet her (he has not seen her for an undefined but significant period of time). He shaves and asks Celie to wash and iron his clothes, in order to make a good impression on her. Shug's arrival has dramatically improved Mr. ____'s mood, and he is nicer to Celie as a result.

One way that Shug helps Celie, without even knowing it, is by simply arriving in town. Shug's very presence is enough to make Mr. ____ happy, and when Mr. ____ is happy, he tends to take out his aggression on Celie less frequently.



Celie sees a copy of the bill advertising Shug's show. Celie wants to go: not to dance or drink, but just for a chance to see Shug in the flesh.

This is the second time in the novel that Celie has become entranced by a picture of Shug in her singing costume. The idea of Shug is almost as powerful as Shug in the flesh.



LETTER 15

Mr. ___ spends the entire long weekend with Shug. When he comes home, without Shug, he is distraught. Celie wants to hear about her—what she wore, how she performed, what their time together was like—but she is afraid to ask Mr. ____. The next day, Celie works in the field and Mr. ___ joins her briefly, before going back inside to sit by himself and think of Shug.

Here, Mr. ___'s behavior with Shug, while married to Celie, exactly mimics his behavior with Shug when he was married to Annie Julia. Mr. ___ appears incapable of remaining a steady presence to his own family. He must follow Shug around wherever she goes.



LETTER 16

Mr. ___ stops working in the fields altogether. He sits on the porch and tells Celie and Harpo that they must work in the fields and continue the plowing he has stopped doing. Harpo tries to fight his father's demands, but though he is physically strong he is, according to Celie, "weak in will." Harpo does not stand up to Mr. ____. Celie believes that Mr. ___ has stopped working because he is still in love with Shug, and upset that their brief time together is over.

Although Mr. ___ was hardly a hard worker before Shug's visit, he is now even less inclined to help Celie in the fields. In this way, he can punish Celie for, in effect, not being Shug. Celie understands this implicitly, and later tells Shug this is the reason why Mr. ___ beats her—because Celie is not Shug.



LETTER 17

Harpo's girlfriend's father says that Harpo is not good enough to marry his daughter—Harpo is too young, he has very little money, and he comes from a bad family. Mr. ___ tells Harpo, later, why this is true: because Harpo's mother (Annie Julia) was killed by her lover (not Mr. ___; another, unnamed man, with whom Annie Julia was having an affair). This murder caused a scandal for Mr. ___'s family, and many in town no longer wish to associate with them for this reason.

Once again, we see repeated the idea that a certain family is "not good enough" to be joined with another family through marriage. Shug's family was considered suspect by Mr. ___'s family, and Mr. ___'s family considered suspect by Celie's family. But it also seems that these romantic relationships persist, despite the disapproval of family members.



Harpo has dreams that his Annie Julia is being chased by her boyfriend, the man who killed her, and then is shot in the stomach. Harpo wakes up from the dreams yelling, and Celie comes to him in the night to comfort him.

Annie Julia's violent death has obviously greatly affected Harpo, who is the most sensitive of Mr. ___'s children. But only Celie is empathetic enough to see this trauma in Harpo.



People say that Celie is skilled with Mr. ___'s children, but the three children other than Harpo are mean to her, and they do no work. Bub, a younger son, is always getting into trouble with the local authorities.

We hear very little from Bub, only to learn, much later in the novel, that he spends significant time in prison, and never amounts to anything in life, as he is always getting into scrapes with the law.



Harpo says he is in love with Sofia Butler, his girlfriend (the same girl whose father does not wish for them to marry). He declares, again, that he wants to marry her, and reveals that he has gotten Sofia pregnant. Celie tells Harpo that Sofia's father will be angry about this, but Harpo thinks the situation will improve once he and Sofia are married.

Sofia, seven months pregnant, comes to the house with Harpo to meet Mr. _____. Mr. _____ asks who the father is, trying to insult Sofia; she replies, calmly, that Harpo is the only possible father. Mr. _____ seems not to believe that this is true.

Mr. _____ says he will not let Sofia and Harpo marry, even though Sofia is pregnant. Sofia says she doesn't need to be married at the moment; she is living with her sister and her sister's husband. She tells Harpo that once he is a free man (working on his own, and not living with his father), she and Harpo and their child can live together.

Harpo seems to believe that Mr. _____ will somehow come to understand Harpo's position if he sees how happy he and Sofia are together. But Harpo underestimates Mr. _____'s cruelty. In fact, Mr. _____ might oppose the marriage simply to spite and torment Harpo.



Here is an example of Mr. _____'s spitefulness. Although he knows full well that Harpo is the father, he wishes to test Sofia, and, if possible, to insult her.



Sofia here demonstrates her strength as a woman and as the potential leader of a household. She does not rely on Harpo to provide for her. Instead, Sofia is a spur causing Harpo to work harder in the fields, and to contribute more to the family than ever before.



LETTER 18

Despite this, Harpo and Sofia soon marry. Harpo begins receiving a wage from his father (his father believes this will make him work harder), and he and Sofia renovate a small shack on the edge of Mr. _____'s property, where they intend to live.

Harpo's and Sofia's wedding is small but relatively happy. Celie makes curtains for their new home. Harpo has begun working harder in the fields, since Sofia has arrived. Mr. _____ tells Harpo that Sofia will eventually "switch traces" on Harpo, meaning that she will be unfaithful to him, or leave him.

The geography of the novel is never made exactly clear, but Mr. _____'s father owns enough land that it can be divided up into parcels—with Mr. _____ getting a large share, and Harpo receiving some as well.



Celie demonstrates, in this section, the beginning of her talents as a seamstress. She will put this talent to good use later in the novel, when she begins making pants.



LETTER 19

Harpo tells his father that he cannot get Sofia to "mind" him, or obey him. Mr. _____ asks if Harpo beats her; Harpo says that he has not tried. Mr. _____ says that the only way to get a woman to understand, and to obey, her husband is to beat her.

It is revealed that three years have passed since Harpo's wedding. Harpo seems happy with his Sofia, but still wants her to "mind" him. Harpo asks Celie what to do; Celie says that, to make Sofia listen, Harpo must beat her. It is not initially clear while Celie wants Harpo to beat Sofia.

Harpo has not managed to eradicate every aspect of Mr. _____'s personality, however. His desire to make Sofia obey him becomes, essentially, an obsession of his.



Time in the novel is often difficult to follow—and it is clarified by specific events referred to in the letters. The three years that have gone by, here, elapse only in a few pages of written text.



Harpo returns to Mr. ___'s home one day, looking cut-up and bruised. Harpo explains to Celie that he got in a tussle with an obdurate mule, but Celie knows that Harpo has tried to beat Sofia, and that Sofia beat him back.

One of the novel's small moments of levity. Harpo knows, of course, that Celie recognizes Sofia cut and bruised him. But he is unwilling to show that he has been "dishonored" and beaten by his own wife.



LETTER 20

One day, Celie is walking by Sofia and Harpo's shack, near the edge of Mr. ___'s property, when she sees the two of them fighting, and hears the enormous clatter they make when doing so. She wonders whether Sofia and Harpo will eventually kill each other in one of their fights. But the next day Celie observes them and their two babies—the family, this next day, is relatively peaceful, preparing to visit Sofia's sister Odessa.

When Celie is beaten by Mr. ____, she does not fight back, for fear that Mr. ___ will hurt her even more gravely. In contrast, Sofia is a strong woman, and she feels that she has the upper hand on Harpo. She fights back with all the energy she has—and eventually leaves Harpo, when she realizes he will not stop wanting to make her obey him.



LETTER 21

Celie has trouble sleeping and is not sure why, at first. Then she realizes she has wronged Sofia, by telling Harpo that he ought to beat her. One day Sofia comes to Celie and returns the curtains Celie made for Sofia and Harpo's house, saying that she (Sofia) looked to Celie for guidance and help, and that Celie has instead ordered her stepson to beat her, in order to make her "mind" him.

Although Celie is especially skilled at understanding the emotions of others, she occasionally has difficulty understanding her own thoughts and feelings. She feels she has betrayed Sofia, but it takes her several nights to figure out that this is the cause of her distress.



Celie admits that she was jealous of Sofia's ability to stand up to Harpo; Celie is unable to do this with Mr. ____. Sofia explains that her brothers and father were all abusive when she was younger. Now, as a married woman, Sofia wants her husband to treat her as a free and independent woman.

Celie nevertheless has the presence of mind—and the greatness of character—to acknowledge her mistake and to ask for Sofia's forgiveness. Celie's generosity of spirit, here, is sadly rare in the early part of the novel.



Sofia admits that she feels sorry for Celie, who has no power over Mr. ____, but instead must do exactly as Mr. ___ says. Sofia and Celie talk about and compare their families growing up, both of which were large, and Celie explains she has never intentionally hit or hurt anyone in her life. Celie does not go into detail regarding Pa's sexual abuse.

Ironically, Sofia only knows of Celie's mistreatment at the hands of Mr. ____. She does not know that Celie was also severely abused by her own father. This would only cause Sofia to pity Celie even more.



Sofia and Celie end up laughing about Mr. ____, whom Sofia says Celie should crack on the skull and kill. Although this does not seem like a joke, Sofia and Celie laugh at the utter improbability of Celie actually murdering her husband. Celie replies that she will be freed from her earthly torments, and from Mr. ___'s control, when she is in heaven. The two sit on the step outside Mr. ___'s house and enjoy their newfound friendship.

Another instance of dark humor in the novel. Of course it is not superficially funny to argue that Mr. ___ should die a painful death. But because Mr. ___'s presence looms so large on the farm, it would be akin to arguing that Celie should try to kill God himself. Mr. ___'s power over Celie is difficult to overestimate.



LETTER 22

Shug Avery is sick, and everyone in town blames her illness on her "wild," independent ways. The townspeople believe it is either tuberculosis or a "nasty woman disease," caught from one of Shug's many lovers. Celie begins helping the preacher out around the church, cleaning the pews after services, and the preacher delivers a sermon chastising a nameless woman who has strayed from **God**. Shug is the implied subject of this fiery sermon.

After the sermon, Mr. ____ hitches his wagon and leaves for five days; he is enraged that even the preacher shuns Shug, and he resolves to help her. When he returns to his home, he has brought Shug with him. He calls to Harpo, Sofia, and Celie to prepare the house for their sick guest.

Celie is excited that Shug is coming to stay with them—so excited, she can barely speak to Shug as Shug is helped up the steps by Mr. _____. When Mr. ____ introduces his wife to his lover, Shug's only reply to Celie is to affirm that Celie is indeed very ugly, and to laugh.

It is never clear whether Shug's illness is, in fact, a venereal disease or the simple result of contracting tuberculosis. In either case, the town is all too willing to state that Shug has "earned" her disease, by living a lifestyle of freedom and independence. Only Celie and Mr. ____ seems to care for Shug despite these accusations and rumors.



Mr. ____ demonstrates his generosity in this section of the novel. Of course, he has Celie take care of Shug, and mostly spends his own time sitting and worrying. But he is shown to care genuinely about the fate of another human being—no small thing for Mr. ____.



Celie finally gets a chance to see Shug in the flesh. The cruelty of Shug's first comment to Celie will be reversed by many years of kind treatment; but it is hard to imagine how difficult this scene is for Celie, who has spent so much time idolizing Shug from a distance.



LETTER 23

In her sickness, Shug lies in bed in Mr. ____'s house and lashes out at him, calling him a "boy" and not a "man." Mr. ____ worries about Shug's illness, even though she appears to be getting better, and keeps his pipe, without tobacco, in his mouth all day. He sits in Shug's room and refuses the food Celie prepares for him.

When Celie talks to Mr. ____ about Shug, he says it's OK by him if Celie wants Shug to leave, even though he, of course, wants Shug to stay. But Celie says she, too, wants Shug to stay, and she watches as Mr. ____ struggles to hold back anxious tears, as he continues to worry about Shug. Shug refers to Mr. ____ as Albert, which is his given name.

Shug is one of the few characters in the novel unafraid of taking Mr. ____ to task, and of exposing his laziness and his dependence on other women. Celie will develop this same sort of strength later in the novel, mostly through Shug's influence.



Celie only finds out at this point in the novel that Mr. ____'s first name is Albert. Celie will only call him by his first name later in the novel, when Mr. ____ is no longer her boss and taskmaster, but rather has become a true friend and confidant.



LETTER 24

Even though Shug has been his lover, and they have had three children together, Mr. ___ is nervous about giving Shug a bath. Celie therefore offers to bathe Shug, and gazes in wonder at Shug's naked body, which Celie finds beautiful, despite Shug's sickness. Shug asks, jokingly, if Celie has never seen a naked woman before, and Celie replies that she hasn't.

Shug asks if Celie has children; Celie replies that she has two, but that she does not know where they are. Celie asks if Shug misses her children, who are staying with Shug's mother in an undisclosed location, and Shug answers that she does not miss anything in her life, not even her own children.

Another instance of Mr. ___'s "boyish" squeamishness. Celie realizes in this scene that she is genuinely attracted to women. In contemporary times, Celie's sexuality would be understood to be "bisexual," but at this particular moment, in the South, there was very little terminology in use to describe same-sex romantic relationships.



Of course Shug later shows that she does have regrets: she apologizes to Celie for running off with Germaine, and for making Celie feel that Shug did not love her. Shug also has an arc of self-discovery, realizing that, despite her desire for freedom, she also has an obligation to those she loves.



LETTER 25

Celie cooks a large breakfast for the family—eggs, biscuits, ham—and asks if Shug would like some. Shug says no, that she only wants coffee and cigarettes. Celie leaves Shug in her bedroom to fetch her some water. When Celie returns, Shug has nibbled some of Celie's ham and biscuit off her plate. Celie tells Mr. ___ this, and he is relieved that Shug has finally eaten something.

Food does seem, in the novel, to be an important occasion for family togetherness. Some of the most important decisions in the book, including Celie's ultimate break with Mr. ___ and desire to go to Memphis with Shug, occur around the dinner table, or at meal-time.



LETTER 26

Celie helps Shug by combing out her hair, which hasn't been combed for a very long time, and is considered quite messy, even by those like Mr. ___ who find Shug very attractive. As Celie works, Shug begins humming a tune that Celie enjoys, and thinks sounds "dirty." Shug answers that it's something she's just made up, something that Celie has "scratched out of her head."

Once again, Celie helps to comb out a woman's hair. This time, however, Shug is very desirous of exactly this, and she later considers Celie's kindness in this moment to be an important stepping-stone in their friendship and romantic relationship.



LETTER 27

Mr. ___'s father comes to the house and yells at Mr. ___ for taking in Shug and tending to her in her sickness. Mr. ___'s father considers Shug to be a "dirty" woman. Celie spits in Mr. ___'s father's water, because she is enraged by his crude statements about Shug. Celie contemplates other ways of hurting Mr. ___'s father (like putting ground glass or urine in his water), but does not do it.

Mr. ___'s father is a mean man, just like Mr. ___; he is perhaps even meaner than his son. Once again, the novel shows that certain patterns of suffering, anger, and violence crop up throughout generations, as though they were traditions passed down among families.



Mr. ___'s father says that Shug comes from a bad family, and that Shug's mother makes her living taking in laundry for white families. He considers this disgraceful. Mr. ___'s father tells Celie that not many wives would allow their husband's "whore" to live with them. Mr. ___ and Celie look at each other after this is said, and Celie feels closer and more sympathetic to Mr. ___ than ever before. They have begun to bond over their mutual affection for Shug.

Tobias, Mr. ___'s brother, comes over a few days later. He asks about Shug's health and talks about his wife, Margaret, who, he claims, doesn't work as hard as Celie. Celie knows that Tobias and Mr. ___'s father, though they are concerned only with money and like to think they are rich, are being forced to sell off their land, bit by bit, to turn a profit. Celie's and Harpo's fields are the family's most profitable, and were once owned by Mr. ___'s father.

Shug comes out and says hello to Tobias. She then tries to learn to sew from Celie, who has been stitching on the porch during the conversation with Tobias, but Shug's stitches are crooked—like her song, Celie thinks to herself. Celie continues to stitch between Mr. ___ and Shug, sitting on the porch talking to Tobias. Celie thinks to herself that, in this moment, she is happy, for one of the first times since marrying Mr. ___.

LETTER 28

Sofia and Celie have begun working on a large quilt that Celie wants either to give to Shug or to keep for herself. She wishes to give it to Shug only if it turns out really beautifully. Celie tells **God**, in the letter, that she now feels closer both to Sofia and to Shug.

Some unspecified time later, Sofia asks Celie why men eat as much as they do. Apparently Harpo has been eating a great deal recently—whole pans of biscuits, six eggs, many glasses of buttermilk. Sofia says, also, that Harpo enjoys housework more than she does; she prefers to work outside, in the fields. Sofia is perplexed as to why Harpo is eating so much.

Celie observes Harpo's eating the next time Harpo comes to her house. Harpo has cornbread and "clabber" (naturally soured milk), and Celie notices, in the following days, that Harpo is eating so much he is growing a potbelly, and he now resembles a pregnant woman.

Although Mr. ___'s father is a mean man without much sense of propriety, he nevertheless considers Shug to be uncouth and "trash." This exposes another hypocrisy traced in the novel: the very men, like Pa and Mr. ___, who are abusive of women are concerned most with the appearance of family togetherness, of "politeness" and reputation.



Although Tobias is only mentioned in this scene, he appears a bit different from his father and brother—or at least not so mean as both. But Tobias also believes that Margaret, his wife, should obey him, and should work around the house in order to make life easier for Tobias.



It is sad to note that Celie's first moment of togetherness with Mr. ___ involves Mr. ___'s love for another woman—Celie is upset, as Mr. ___ is, that Mr. ___'s father has said terrible things about Shug. But Shug is, as the novel progresses, a tie that binds Mr. ___ and Celie, and both parties eventually come to recognize and cherish this.



This is another example of Celie's improved craft skills—skills she will put to good use in her pants-making business.



Harpo's scenes of overeating are another of the novel's very few comedic moments. But, of course, Harpo's eating is motivated by a deep uneasiness, and by a fear that he is not strong enough, not "man" enough, not big enough to beat and control his wife.



An ironic instance of cross-gendered description. Harpo has eaten so much, in order to become "manly," that he has come to look like the most feminine of mother-figures: a pregnant woman.



LETTER 29

Celie finds Harpo one evening in her house, crying to himself. Harpo is upset that he cannot get Sofia to obey him—this seems to be the source of some of his recent anxieties. Celie tells Harpo that Sofia is a good, hardworking wife. But Harpo wants to be larger in order to boss Sofia around—this is the implied reason for his eating so much.

Celie once again shows her talent for understanding the emotions of others. She feels that Harpo wants Sofia to obey, but she attempts to show Harpo that Harpo already has a great deal that Celie does not—including the love of a good spouse. But Harpo is not inclined to feel this love.



Celie says that she married Mr. ____ to look after his children; the two do not love each other. Sofia and Harpo, on the other hand, really do love one another, and Celie tells Harpo that this ought to make him happy. But when Celie mentions how slender Mr. ____ is, Harpo, thinking of his own recent fatness, becomes sick to his stomach, and vomits outside. Celie puts him to sleep upstairs.

Celie attempts to convince Harpo by showing just how miserable her life with Mr. ____ can be, even though Mr. ____ "makes her mind." Harpo's vomiting, here, is an indication of his uneasiness regarding his "tough man" routine. But his father's influence is too strong to make him give up this thirst for power all together.



LETTER 30

Celie talks to Sofia, who is fixing the roof of her and Harpo's shack. Sofia tells Celie that she no longer has any sexual interest in Harpo, who seems obsessed with making her obey him, and with growing larger, by eating enormous amounts of food, in order to seem more physically imposing. Sofia considers taking the children and going to stay with her sister Odessa for a while.

This scene is indicative of Sofia's abilities around the house—not only can she take care of the children, but she can also physically keep the house in good condition. It is implied that Harpo is not particularly skilled at this kind of labor, although Harpo does help Swain build the bar later in the novel.



This conversation causes Celie to think about her own marriage. Celie thinks about her lovemaking with Mr. ____; he cares only about his own pleasure, and Celie dreams about Shug when they're having sex. Sofia complains, to Celie, that Harpo too thinks only of himself when the two of them are having sex. She tells Celie she wants a "vacation" from her marriage, since she no longer desires Harpo physically, and finds his bossiness and attempts at abuse frustrating.

Mr. ____'s lovemaking with Celie really does not involve Celie as a person. But because of Celie's past, she does not understand that a woman might also take pleasure from sex. And if she does understand this—as she seems to glean from Shug's interactions with Mr. ____—she believes this kind of pleasure is not possible for her.



LETTER 31

Sofia decides to take a few of her older children (these children are not named) to stay with her sister Odessa for a while. Celie asks Harpo whether he wants to stop Sofia, but he says there's nothing he can do. Sofia's strong, tall sisters help her move some of her things out of the shack while Celie and Harpo look on. Harpo will stay in the shack and look after the unnamed younger children.

Sofia's sisters are also large, physically imposing, and powerful inside the home. Odessa and Jack, whose relationship is only briefly mentioned in the novel, seem to understand each other more or less as equals, and it is this kind of freedom and equality to which Sofia aspires in her marriage to Harpo.



Harpo quickly changes the diaper of one of the children, who has wet herself. He then hands the child to Sofia (this is the last child Sofia will take with her), as she quickly says goodbye to him and to Celie. Sofia mounts up on a wagon with her sisters and the children, and drives away.

Sofia spends a good part of the novel away from home—first, here, when she leaves Harpo, and next when she is placed in prison, and forced to work as a live-in maid in the house of the mayor and his children.



LETTER 32

Sofia is gone for six months. In the meantime, Harpo does some "traveling" of his own, as he tells Celie, and Celie realizes that Harpo has come to find that he's an attractive man, and that he has probably been seeing many other women during this "vacation" period from Sofia.

Although it has not been mentioned earlier, it seems understandable that women find Harpo attractive, since so many people in the novel comment upon Mr. ___'s good looks and fine features.



A friend of Harpo's named Swain begins coming by, and the two start constructing a jukejoint, or small shanty bar, attached to their shack. The bar will be out of the way of the police, as it will be hidden enough by the fields and the woods behind them. Celie asks Harpo what Sofia will think of the jukejoint, but Harpo replies that Sofia is never coming back to live with him, thus her opinion about the bar does not matter.

If Harpo cannot get Sofia to "mind" him, he will find another way to assert his authority and his independence. The bar he opens brings in a good deal of money, and helps to relaunch Shug's career. It also serves as a starting-off point (as far as singing careers go), ironically, for Squeak, Harpo's second wife, whom he also seeks to control.



LETTER 33

Harpo's jukejoint opens several weeks later, with Swain playing some songs on weekends, but there are very few customers in the beginning. Shug, whose nickname is the Queen Honeybee, comes down from Celie's house to check out the bar, and Mr. ___, Harpo, and Swain agree to book Shug for a few shows there.

Shug has been slowly on the mend in the intervening chapters. Although it appeared that Shug was going to die, earlier in the novel, Celie believes that Shug is too strong, and too stubborn, to give up the ghost easily.



Shug prepares to sing one night, and Celie and Mr. ___ accompany her to the bar, despite Mr. ___'s protestations that Celie should not be allowed in an establishment like that, since it's "no place for wives." Shug says she needs Celie there, however, so Celie is ultimately permitted by Mr. ___ to go.

Shug's decisions regarding Celie tend to override Mr. ___'s. This will be repeated later on in the novel, when Shug demands that she be allowed to sleep with Celie every night, and Mr. ___ agrees.



Shug sings a few songs, much to Celie's delight. But Celie enjoys looking at Shug so much, she grows confused and starts to cry: she loves looking at Shug, but Shug only wants to look at Mr. ___. Then Shug sings a song she dedicates to Celie—the "dirty" song she began composing while Celie was combing her hair—and Celie feels a surge of happiness.

All Celie wants is to be recognized as a person—as a friend, as a supporter of Shug's. Shug, at this point in the novel, seems to acknowledge just how much Celie has done for her. Shug also feels a pang of guilt for being cruel to Celie immediately after meeting her.



LETTER 34

Shug begins growing stronger, and tells Celie it will soon be time for her to leave their Mr. ___'s home. Shug is singing regularly on the weekends, now, at Harpo's bar. Celie grows distraught at this news, and tells Shug, finally, that Mr. ___ beats her when Shug is not around.

Shug asks why Mr. ___ beats Celie, and Celie explains that he's upset because Celie is Celie, and not Shug. He is upset that he is married to an unattractive woman, rather than a beautiful, and locally-famous, singer. Shug holds Celie and promises not to leave her until Mr. ___ agrees to stop beating her.

Although it is hard to believe, Shug is not aware of the extent to which Mr. ___ mistreats Celie. Perhaps this is because Shug is so powerful and free-spirited, she simply did not allow Mr. ___ to beat her or mistreat her, and so cannot imagine someone else being treated that way.



Celie recognizes what others in the novel cannot: that Mr. ___ is, in fact, a frustrated and lonely man, who has not been permitted to marry the woman he loves (Shug). It is hard to believe that Celie can feel any sympathy for Mr. ___, but she does, and this sympathy grows stronger when the two become friends, at the novel's end.



LETTER 35

Shug begins staying in Mr. ___'s room, especially after she sings at Harpo's. Shug asks Celie whether Celie minds that she has sex with Mr. ___, and Celie says she doesn't mind it at all, since Celie's own sex with Mr. ___ is not very important to her. Shug announces that she has a "passion" for Mr. ___, but does not really love him. She says she loves having sex with Mr. ___, and asks Celie if she feels the same way, but Celie says she has no opinion about their married love life, which Mr. ___ directs only toward his own pleasure.

Shug asks Celie if she has touched her own clitoris, or if she knows that doing so will cause her to have an orgasm. Celie doesn't know what Shug is talking about. She and Shug go into a bedroom with a mirror, and Shug shows Celie how to masturbate. Celie touches herself and feels a small jolt of excitement.

Afterward, Celie repeats that she does not mind when Shug sleeps with Mr. ___. But Celie then admits, in the letter to **God**, that when she hears Shug and Mr. ___ having sex, she touches herself quietly, in her own room, and cries.

Another scene in which Shug attempts to explain to Celie exactly what sexual pleasure is like. Although Celie has been sexually active since a young age, she has never been permitted to discover her own sexuality, nor to indulge her own desires. Celie's sexuality, up until this point in the novel, has been reserved entirely as a service to the powerful men in her life.



Again, it seems hard to believe, but Celie has had so little opportunity to think of herself sexually, she has not had an orgasm in her entire life. Shug helps her to remedy this situation.



A sad scene in the novel. Celie has said that she does not mind when Shug makes love to Mr. ___, but she does—not because Shug becomes her and Mr. ___, but because he comes between her and Shug.



LETTER 36

One night at Harpo's bar, Sofia arrives with a new boyfriend, a boxer named Buster Broadnax. Mr. ___ asks Sofia where her children are, and Sofia replies that they're "at home," meaning with her sisters. Sofia implies that Mr. ___ does a bad job of taking care of his own children, other than Harpo. Mr. ___'s two unnamed girls live elsewhere, and have had many children, and Bub has been in and out of prison.

Celie realizes that Sofia has started a new life with Buster. Celie feels that her own "new" life began when she (Celie) met Shug. Harpo comes up to Sofia, who explains that she has come to the bar, with Buster, to see Shug sing. Sofia compliments the bar and Harpo's efforts in running it.

Harpo asks Buster if he can dance with Sofia, and Buster agrees. Harpo and Sofia dance across the floor at the center of the bar, until Harpo's new girlfriend, Squeak, who is small and quiet, comes over and asks to cut in. When Harpo doesn't let her, saying he wants to dance with his lawful wife (Sofia), Squeak gets angry and slaps Sofia.

Sofia, however, as Celie describes, does not deal in slaps, but rather punches Squeak in the face, knocking out two of Squeak's teeth and bloodying her. Harpo clings to Sofia for a moment, after she has punched Squeak, then goes to help his current woman (whom he refers to as his wife, although their wedding has not been described, and their marriage might not be formal). After this fight, Sofia and Buster leave the bar.

LETTER 37

Some unspecified amount of time later, Celie asks Squeak why Harpo is moping, and Squeak replies that Sofia has been thrown in jail, and Harpo is upset. Before she begins to tell the story, Celie tells Squeak to make Harpo call her by her real name, Mary Agnes, since that will force him to respect her.

The story goes as follows: Sofia, Buster, and Sofia's children were walking around downtown, when they ran into the (white) mayor and the mayor's wife. The mayor's wife complimented Sofia on her children's pretty faces and "white teeth" and asked whether Sofia would want to serve as maid to the mayor's household, since she apparently did such a good job raising her own children.

Mr. ___ seems to want to imply, somehow, that Sofia is being a bad mother to her children. But of course this is the height of hypocrisy, for Mr. ___ has done absolutely nothing to raise his own children, and all of them, with the exception of Harpo, have either run away or gotten themselves thrown in jail.



Buster, a quiet character in the novel, is a force for good. Although he is a boxer, renowned for his fighting, he mostly spends the novel's climactic scenes finding peaceful solutions for himself and for those around him.



It is unclear exactly what Harpo's motive is here. He probably does not want to rekindle a romantic relationship with Sofia, but it appears he wants to assert the power he still has over her, as her legal husband.



Sofia is far too powerful for Squeak. In many ways, Squeak is Celie's foil in the novel. Squeak also undergoes a journey of self-discovery—she learns she has a beautiful singing voice—and she escapes her controlling husband (in this case, Harpo) by the novel's end.



Celie understands that Squeak's real name is a source of power for Squeak. If Harpo calls her Mary Agnes, he is recognizing that she is a person, one whose feelings matter.



Sofia, once again, brooks no insults from anyone. Of course, she knows that her resistance here will only land her in trouble, but she feels it is more important to stand up for herself, whatever the consequences may be, than to kowtow to white authority.



Sofia said "hell no" to this offer; when the mayor asked her to repeat herself, and she did, he slapped her for her impudence, and Sofia fought back, knocking the mayor down. Buster restrained himself, though he wanted to defend Sofia, because he knew that if he were to intervene, he would be shot by the police. And, indeed, the police were quickly called to the scene to break up the fight to protect the mayor and his wife.

Again, Buster avoids confrontation, and ends up being instrumental in helping to raise Sofia's children while she is in prison, and later, when she serves as maid to the mayor's children. Sofia is one of the novel's unluckier characters—although she has attempted to gain her freedom from Harpo, she ends up losing her freedom entirely, and is placed in jail.



Mr. ____, who is on friendly terms with the white sheriff, convinces that Sheriff to let him visit Sofia. He goes to the jail to do so, and eventually convinces the Sheriff to let Celie visit as well. Celie, when she visits later, combs Sofia's hair and is horrified by how battered and bruised she is; Sofia has been beaten by the police almost beyond recognition.

Sadly, Mr. ____ has come to know the sheriff because Bub has spent so much time in and out of prison. Mr. ____'s concern for Sofia, here, is another indication that he does care about the wellbeing of other people—but not, at this point, about Celie's wellbeing.



LETTER 38

When Celie and Mr. ____ visit Sofia in jail some time later, they find that Sofia has been placed on laundry duty in the basement of the jail, breathing in fumes from the chemical cleaners and working nearly every waking hour, every day. During the visit, Mr. ____ proposes to Sofia that, perhaps, she can get time off her twelve-year sentence for good behavior. But Sofia says she would not be capable of groveling to the prison authorities in order to earn her early release.

The conditions in Sofia's prison are far from acceptable. It is also implied that, because the people controlling the prison are white, they are mistreating Sofia because of her skin color, and because she got into a fight in the first place by resisting white authority.



LETTER 39

At dinner later, Mr. ____, Celie, Shug, Odessa, Buster, and the rest of the family think of how to get Sofia out of prison sooner, since they worry she will die from her backbreaking labor before the sentence is over. It is discovered that Squeak is related to the prison warden, whose family has hidden the secret of its partially African-American heritage. Mr. ____ tells Squeak that she needs to go to the warden, who is technically her uncle, and plead on Sofia's behalf.

A glancing reference to the reality of couplings between white and black people in Southern society. These couplings were common, although the children of these romantic relationships were often not acknowledged as being part of "white" society. Indeed, anyone of partially black parentage was considered, simply, "black."



LETTER 40

Shug, Mr. ____, and Celie dress Squeak up to resemble a white woman, applying extra make-up to her face to lighten her skin. They tell her to tell the warden that Sofia doesn't really mind her punishment, and that the only thing Sofia would hate would be to serve as maid to a white woman. Mr. ____ and Shug believe this lie, an instance of reverse psychology, will cause the warden to do exactly that—to release Sofia as a maid to a white family. This release, Shug and Mr. ____ hope, will save Sofia's life.

This use of reverse psychology is rather ingenious, and it is effective. Celie and others in the family, especially Shug, understand the kinds of fears that motivate white society in the South. One of those fears is a total anxiety about the status of black people in the community, whom white authorities know they are holding down. This anxiety becomes a kind of cruelty, and if the wardens believe Sofia is not being punished enough, they will seek to increase that punishment.



Buster says this sounds like a bit of "Uncle Tomming," or behaving in a servile fashion to white authority, but Shug jokes to the family that, after all, the warden is actually Squeak's uncle to begin with.

A reference to the novel Uncle Tom's Cabin, by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Uncle Tom is a slave, who, despite experiencing brutal treatment at the hand of whites refuses fight back. When Uncle Tom's cabin was written Uncle Tom was meant to serve as a symbol of the power of Christian goodness, but by the time in which The Color Purple is set the character had come to be seen as a man who was complicit in his own enslavement by refusing to stand up against injustice.



LETTER 41

Squeak comes home, from her meeting with the warden, bruised, and with her dress ripped. Squeak says that the warden has forced her to have sex with him. Squeak tells Harpo and the others that, first, the warden made her talk about her family, and then he asked her to undress. The warden repeated to her that he is not her uncle—he seemed upset at the idea that he could be related to a black woman—and that, since he is not her uncle, their having sex would not be not immoral.

Again, one of the great fears of white society in the South, at the time, was the idea that the races could mix, that the lines separating white from black could be broken down. Of course, many children of white and black parents were born, but, as above, these children were simply called "black," thus avoiding confrontation of the reality that these racial divisions were socially, and not biologically, constructed.



After telling this story, Squeak, who is understandably traumatized by her encounter with the warden, asks Harpo if Harpo really loves her, or if he just loves the fact that she has "yellow" skin (that she is of mixed white and black heritage). Harpo says he loves Squeak, and Squeak replies that, if this is true, Harpo ought to call her Mary Agnes, as a sign of respect.

A scene of violence against women, directed at Squeak, that echoes the violence to which Celie has been subjected. Squeak only does what her family wants her to do, and it does result in Sofia's release into the mayor's family's custody. But Squeak has had to sacrifice herself in order for Sofia's freedom to be gained, and Harpo seems to acknowledge it here when he calls her by her name.



LETTER 42

Six months later, Squeak begins singing around the house. Her voice is strange and high-pitched, not formally trained, but everyone, Celie included, grows to love it. Harpo is surprised by Squeak's singing, but he lets Squeak continue to sing. One of her songs talks about her "yellow" skin. It is also revealed that Sofia is now in charge of the mayor's children; Squeak's efforts, though traumatizing to her, have been successful, and have earned Sofia a position as maid and servant to the mayor's family.

As above, Squeak's efforts at singing, a form of artistic expression, mirror Celie's efforts, later in the novel, at making parts and starting her own business. Both Celie and Squeak realize that they have more to offer the world than simply their services as wives, mothers, and housekeepers. This realization is an important part of the novel's theme of self-discovery.



LETTER 43

Some months later, Celie visits with Sofia while Sofia is watching the mayor's children on the mayor's property (which is near the town). Sofia asks, half-seriously, whether black people shouldn't just try to kill all the white people, who try to oppress them. But Celie says this wouldn't be possible, nor would it be effective—there would always be more white people to arrive and retaliate against the African American population.

One of the mayor's children, a boy named Billy, tries to kick Sofia playfully, near where Sofia and Celie sit, but ends up kicking a rusty nail and hurting his foot. Miss Millie, the mayor's wife, comes over and asks Eleanor Jane, the little girl Sofia is also watching over, if Sofia did this, but Eleanor says, truthfully, that Billy did it to himself.

LETTER 44

Sofia continues in her conversation with Celie by wondering how white people manage to do anything—Sofia believes white people are ignorant and unlucky. Sofia tells Celie another story of the mayor and Miss Millie. Recently, the Mayor bought his wife a car but didn't teach her to drive it, and because Miss Millie had no friends, she asked Sofia to teach her.

Sofia demonstrated for Miss Millie how to drive, then Millie practiced on her own until she felt she had got it down. One day, Millie asked Sofia if she'd like to go home and see her family. Despite living in the same town, Sofia had not been home to see her family in five years, since the fight with the mayor. Sofia is not permitted to leave the mayor's property—she is forced to look after the children, and care for the house, 24 hours a day. This is why, if Celie wants to see Sofia, she must visit Sofia on the mayor's property.

Sofia agreed eagerly to riding with Miss Millie to see her family. But Miss Millie first told Sofia that she must ride in the back of the car—that, in the South, a black woman cannot ride on the front seat with a white woman, even though Sofia had been teaching Millie to drive from the front seat.

Interestingly, this idea—that somehow black people might rise up against their white oppressors—is echoed much later in the novel, when Celie tells Albert (Mr. _____) about the myths of the Olinka people, which she has heard from Nettie. One such myth states that white people are angry at black people for some perceived ancient slight, and that white people are taking this anger out on the black populations of the present day.



Eleanor, even at this young age, seems to make an emotional and psychological connection with Sofia. Eleanor just as easily could have said that Sofia was in fact trying to hurt Billy, and Millie probably would have believed her daughter, not her maid.



Miss Millie is, in many ways, a character deserving of pity. She does not have any friends, and appears only to be close to Sofia, with whom she has an employer-employee relationship. Although Sofia is more capable, and probably more intelligent, than Millie, Millie benefits from her superior social position.



It is hard to imagine, since Sofia's work is probably only a few miles from her home and children, but Millie and mayor claim that Sofia's services are so important, Sofia is not permitted to leave their sight, even for a moment. Of course, Sofia is still technically serving out a jail sentence, and so Millie and the Mayor are, in effect, her wardens.



Another indication of social and racial rules in the South. Sofia is good enough to teach Millie how to drive, but her blackness means she is not good enough to simply ride with Millie, when Sofia is not serving as Millie's teacher.



Millie drove Sofia to Celie's and Mr. ____'s home. Sofia's children had not seen her in so long, they barely recognized her. But Sofia ended up having only a short time with her children, before she learned that Millie was still in front of the house, in the car—Millie did not know how to put the car in reverse. Sofia went out front to attempt to show her how to drive backward, but Millie stubbornly refused help, grinding the gears and eventually breaking the car.

Sofia said that Odessa's husband, Jack, could drive Millie into town to get a mechanic, but Millie refused, saying she could not ride with a "strange black man." Sofia then had to ride with Jack to take Millie home, get a mechanic, and have the car fixed. Sofia finally drove Millie's car home by five, meaning Sofia only had fifteen minutes with her family, whom she had not seen in five years. Sofia ends the story by saying that Millie was angry with Sofia, afterward, for not thanking Millie for those fifteen minutes she was allowed to spend with her children.

Another instance of Millie's lack of skill and intelligence—also, of her stubbornness. Sofia attempts to help Millie, but Millie insists on driving the car her own way. This has terrible consequences for Sofia, who must then help out Millie, at the expense of seeing her own family.



Once again, Southern social customs rule the day. Millie will not ride with a "strange black man," thus Sofia's vacation is cut short. This section makes it very difficult to sympathize with Millie. Millie's final anger with Sofia points to the deep perniciousness of racial attitudes in the South, where Millie acts with incredible lack of empathy toward Sofia and sees herself as doing a favor for Sofia for which she deserves to be thanked.



LETTER 45

One day Shug sends a letter to Mr. ____, saying she is returning to his home, and that she is bringing a present for Celie and Mr. ____. Shug had left at some point after Sofia was released into the mayor's family's custody, and now she wishes to come back to visit Celie and Mr. ____. Mr. ____ thinks Shug's present is going to be a car for him.

Shug arrives at Mr. ____'s house with a man named Grady, whom she announces as her husband to Celie and Mr. ____. Celie feels at once that she does not like Grady, and Mr. ____ is disappointed that Shug has not brought a car for him, and that she has found a new lover.

Shug shows Mr. ____ a car that she has purchased, which is hers and Grady's. Although Shug has not brought a car for Mr. ____, she does offer to show Mr. ____ how to drive her and Grady's car. Both Celie and Mr. ____, though they are outwardly polite to Shug and Grady, are frustrated that Shug has brought along a new love interest.

Shug has gone off, in the interim, to continue her singing career. It is not clear how much time has elapsed over the past ten or so letters, but it appears that it might be as much as a few years, since Shug left Mr. ____'s house.



Mr. ____, somewhat like a child, expects that Shug will return to him, and that all will be the same. Furthermore, he expects that Shug will have something to give him—as though Mr. ____ had done anything to deserve such a gift.



Grady is more or less "along for the ride." Note again how their mutual love of Shug brings Celie and Mr. ____ together, as they both have the same feelings of resentment toward Shug's new lover.



LETTER 46

Mr. ____ and Grady spend the Christmas holiday drinking, and Shug and Celie catch up and talk. Shug has become incredibly successful, singing all over the country—she has purchased cars and a house in Memphis. She met Grady, who is a mechanic, while he was working on her car at a gas station, and married him quickly thereafter.

Again, Shug's career has really taken off—she sings everywhere, and is beginning to develop a name for herself. But Celie does not care about Shug's fame; she only cares that Shug is living the life she wants to lead.



Shug asks whether Mr. ___ still beats Celie. Celie replies that Mr. ___ is kinder to her, in general, though he still beats her sometimes. Their sex has also improved, with Mr. ___ trying more concertedly to increase Celie's pleasure. But Celie still claims she's a "virgin" as far as her own pleasure is concerned—implying, to Shug, that she has not had an orgasm with Mr. ___.

Celie is not lying here; it does appear that, since Shug left, Mr. ___ has been nicer to Celie. But Celie still craves the kind of independence that Shug has—the ability to go where she wants, when she wants, the ability to determine the course of her own life. Further, she wants to experience the kind of pleasure that Shug experiences, and she can only do that with Shug.



LETTER 47

One day Mr. ___ and Grady go off together, and Celie and Shug talk again. Shug asks Celie about the father of Celie's children. Celie answers by telling the story of her rape, at the hands of Pa, in more detail. One night, when Celie was fourteen, her father said he wanted Celie to cut his hair. He went into her room, and after she began to cut, he held her down and raped her. When he had finished, Pa asked Celie to complete his hair cut.

The story of Celie's rape is even more horrible than could be imagined at the beginning of the novel. Pa takes advantage of one of Celie's talents—her ability to cut hair—and uses it for his own dastardly ends. Although Celie has kept this story to herself for many years, she feels, finally, comfortable enough with Shug to share it. She is ceasing to talk just to God (as she was in her letters) and now is talking to other people.



At the end of the story, Celie begins to cry—the enormity of these feelings, about which she rarely speaks, having come back to her during the conversation with Shug. Celie then talks briefly, about her mother's death, her sister Nettie's departure, and her terrible time raising Mr. ___'s children—all of whom, except for Harpo, hate Celie and refuse to obey her. When she stops talking, Shug kisses Celie on the mouth and tells her she loves her. It is strongly implied that Shug and Celie then make love.

Shug has shown that she realizes just how difficult Celie's life has been, and Shug does want to care for Celie. But at this point in the novel, Shug also desires Celie, sexually, and this desire fuels their relationship and friendship, at least in part. Celie is disappointed, later on, when Shug runs off with another man, a person who can provide her with a newer and more exciting sexual experience.



LETTER 48

Grady and Mr. ___ return, and Mr. ___ tells Shug to leave the bed she's sharing with Celie (they have finished making love), so he can sleep with Celie, and Shug can sleep with Grady. As her visit to Celie's home continues, Shug begins encouraging Squeak to sing, saying that singing would do Squeak good, and build her confidence. Shug believes that Squeak's strange and interesting voice would be a hit at Harpo's bar.

Shug serves as the motivating force for Squeak's musical career. Shug has a talent for recognizing the talents of others. It is, of course, also Shug who recommends that Celie pursue her passion for fashion, and that Celie go on to expand this passion into a small business.



Harpo doesn't like the idea of Squeak singing, but Shug tells him it will be OK—she'll look after Squeak—and that Squeak's performances will bring in lots of money for the bar and for Harpo. This convinces Harpo to give Squeak's singing a try.

Although Harpo wants to control Squeak in a way he could not control Sofia, he wants money more, and therefore allows Squeak to perform at the bar.



LETTER 49

This letter includes the full text of another letter Celie has received—from Nettie. The letter from Nettie says that she, Nettie, is safe and happy, and so are Olivia and Adam. The letter implies that Nettie has been writing to Celie all along, but that, somehow, the letters have not reached Celie, since Celie has not responded. It is not clear when exactly this letter was sent to Celie, but it appears Nettie wrote it shortly after leaving Mr. ___'s house, and moving in with Samuel and Corrine.

Shug reports to Celie that she has seen Mr. ___ at the mailbox, taking letters with "funny stamps" and putting them away, not showing them to Celie. Shug asks Celie about Nettie—if she was smart and what she looked like—because Shug knows that Nettie is the only woman, other than Shug, that Celie has ever loved. Shug and Celie begin to suspect that Mr. ___ has been hiding Nettie's letters to Celie. Celie, for her part, had no idea that Nettie was even alive and writing to her.

LETTER 50

Shug and Mr. ___ become physically intimate again, and Grady and Celie are upset—since they both love Shug. Celie has trouble believing that Mr. ___ could be so cruel as to keep the letters from Nettie without sharing them with Celie, but Shug assures Celie that Mr. ___ can be "that mean." Celie vows to find the letters and read them.

One day, Celie becomes so enraged with Mr. ___ that she picks up a razor and considers slitting Mr. ___'s throat with it, but Shug, seeing what Celie is considering doing, takes the dull razor out of Celie's hands, averting the crisis without Mr. ___'s noticing. Celie is still extremely upset with Mr. ___ for keeping Nettie's letters, though she has not had a chance to find them yet.

Shug lies with Celie in Celie's room one night, and tries to talk with her, while Celie stewes over Mr. ___. Shug tells how she and Mr. ___ fell in love, and how Mr. ___ was once a charming young man, attractive and a good dancer. Shug wonders what has happened to the man she "fell in love with," since Mr. ___, now, is ornery, lazy, and abusive.

One of the novel's shocking discoveries. It turns out that Nettie has, in fact, followed up on her promise to write to Celie. It is not clear whether Nettie is still alive, as this letter was sent years ago, but it does appear that Mr. ___ has been hiding evidence of Nettie from Celie. Celie cannot believe that Mr. ___ would be capable of such cruelty.



Shug has spotted Mr. ___'s perfidy, but until now, she did not realize what exactly Mr. ___ was doing. Shug recognizes the importance of Nettie's relationship with Celie. In some sense, Shug and Nettie are the most immediate of Celie's family—the only two people in the world Celie trusts to share her darkest secrets. Shug's questions about Nettie suggest a little bit of jealousy; that she perhaps likes being the sole living person whom Celie loves.



Although Shug understands that Mr. ___ has severely wronged Celie, by keeping away Nettie's letters, Shug is not capable of holding herself back from making love to Mr. ___. She claims that her passion for him is purely physically, having nothing to do with his cruelty.



It is hard to imagine Celie actually going through with this plan, based on what we know of her up till now in the novel, but it seems that Mr. ___'s hiding of the letters has pushed her over the edge. Shug keeps Celie from doing something that very likely could put her in prison for the rest of her life—even though Celie's anger, at least, is justified.



Shug laments the man she used to know, but Celie does not have much patience for Shug's nostalgia. Celie's life is now dominated by the idea that Nettie is still alive. And because Mr. ___ has kept knowledge of Nettie from her, she sees him as evil beyond all bounds.



Shug continues telling of her romance with Mr. _____. Mr. _____ eventually married Annie Julia, his first wife, because Mr. _____'s parents would not permit him to marry a dissolute woman like Shug, even though Mr. _____ already had several children with Shug. Out of revenge, Shug swore that she would continue seeing Mr. _____ despite his being married; sometimes she would keep Mr. _____ away from Annie Julia for weeks at a time.

Annie Julia's life, sketched here, is one of tragedy comparable to Celie's. Just when Annie Julia felt she was getting away from a terrible marital situation, she was murdered by the very lover in whom she sought refuge. If Celie were not so angry at Mr. _____, she might even feel sorry for Annie Julia here.



Shug says that, first, when she came to Celie's house, she wanted only to come between her and Mr. _____. But Shug quickly realized how much she cared for Celie, and how much Mr. _____ had changed—into a humorless, lazy man. Shug then wanted only to satisfy her physical desires with Mr. _____, and she found that she cared a great deal for Celie—both as a friend and as a romantic partner.

Shug has the candor to admit that, as with Annie Julia, Shug originally only wanted to interrupt Celie's relationship with Mr. _____. Little did Shug know how little there was to interrupt, since Celie did not care that Shug was sleeping with her husband.



LETTER 51

Shug and Celie realize that Mr. _____ keeps the letters from Nettie in a trunk in his bedroom. Shug and Celie plan to slip the letters out of the trunk when Mr. _____ and Grady are out, steam them open, and read them, one by one. They start with the first letter from Nettie, which is the next letter printed in the novel.

Mr. _____ has not gone to great lengths to hide the letters. This is an indication of the fear he strikes in Celie's heart—never once has Celie had the boldness to ask her husband what he keeps in a chest in their own bedroom.



LETTER 52

Nettie's first letter describes the immediate aftermath of her departure from Celie's and Mr. _____'s house, when Mr. _____ chased her down the road and tried to drag her into the woods and rape her. Nettie fought back, and Mr. _____ vowed that she would never again be able to communicate with Celie.

Mr. _____ was not content simply to let Nettie leave. Instead, he did everything he could to get her to become his mistress, and his desires for Nettie, here, perfectly echo Pa's desires for his own children.



Nettie fled into the town and stopped at the Reverend's house, where Celie had told her to go. Nettie recognized the young girl, the Reverend's daughter Olivia, as having Celie's eyes.

Nettie, like Celie, recognizes Olivia's parentage by the color and shape of her eyes, which resemble her mother's to an uncanny degree.



LETTER 53

Nettie's next letter says that she has settled in with Samuel and Corrine (the Reverend and his wife). Nettie wonders whether Celie will read Nettie's letters and respond to them, but she thinks that it is perhaps too soon to receive a letter from Celie.

Nettie worries, at first, that something has happened to Celie, since she cannot believe that Mr. _____ would be so heartless as to follow up on his promise to keep all Nettie's letters from her sister.



Nettie repeats that Celie's two children, being raised as adopted children by Samuel and Corrine, are named Olivia and Adam. Nettie promises to take care of these children in Celie's absence.

It is saddening to think that Celie receives confirmation that her children are alive many years after Nettie arrives in the Reverend's home—but at least she is able to find out at all.



LETTER 54

Nettie's next letter shows Nettie's increased anxiety that Albert is following through on his promise—that he is not, in fact, delivering Nettie's letters to Celie, but rather hiding them somewhere, and that this is preventing Celie from responding to Nettie. Nettie says that Samuel will not let Nettie visit Celie, since he believes it is wrong to "come between a man and his wife." Nettie begs Celie to write back, and includes stamps in her letter to her sister.

The Reverend, who is a man of principle, nevertheless acts on a Christian principle, here, that some might find misguided. Sure, marriage is a sacred contract, but Nettie has good evidence that Mr. ___ has been abusing Celie. This, however, is not sufficient cause for Samuel to get involved in the affairs of another couple.



LETTER 55

The next letter from Nettie arrives two months later. Nettie has been writing Celie letters from a steamer ship; she is headed to Africa, with the Reverend and Corrine, as a missionary. But out of despair, Nettie destroys her letters, written on the boat, before sending; this new letter to Celie is her first in months, and contains some of the information from the ripped-up and undelivered letters.

This letter has an interesting structural quality: it is a compendium of the letters Nettie had written to Celie while on-board the ship, but which she tore up, out of frustration, before reaching land. In this way, letter 55 is in fact a reconstruction of other letters that were never delivered.



Nettie reports that she has taken the job as an assistant to Samuel and Corrine, and as a maid to Adam and Olivia, overseas in Africa. Nettie also reports that she saw a woman acting as maid to the mayor's wife, just before she left for Africa. Nettie was struck by how lifeless the maid looked, working for her white bosses. (Nettie does not know that this woman was Sofia.)

Another of the novel's coincidences. Nettie happened to see Sofia on the street, but of course does not know, at this point, that Sofia and Harpo are married, or the reason why this woman, Sofia, is acting as maid to a white family. But Nettie is astute enough to see Sofia's anguish at having to serve a white family.



Nettie says that, after she learned she would be going to Africa as a missionary, she read as much as she could about the continent and its people. She also reports that Samuel and Corrine believe Olivia and Adam have been sent to them by **God**. Only Nettie knows that Celie is their real mother—but Nettie derives comfort in knowing that she can serve as a loving aunt and caretaker to the children.

Nettie, whose education was always stronger than Celie's, since Celie got pregnant at a young age, takes advantage of her new living situation to learn as much as she can. It is implied that Samuel and Corrine are somewhat comfortable, financially, since these books would not be cheap or easy to come by.



LETTER 56

Nettie tells of their preparations before their trip for Africa: Corrine made traveling outfits, and Nettie, in church, realized that "Ethiopia," in the Bible, refers to all of Africa, and that Jesus' hair, described as being like "lamb's wool," implies that Jesus was not white-skinned, as many white people wish to believe.

Nettie reports on their train-trip from Georgia to New York City, from which they set sail. Nettie sees Harlem, the largest black community she has ever experienced, and Samuel, Corrine, and Adam and Olivia collect money for their missionary activities from preachers and members of church congregations throughout New York.

Nettie tells of her brief, two-week training in New York in the Olinka dialect—the Olinka are the African people they will be serving overseas. Nettie is confused by the white members of the Missionary Society of New York, who make it seem that their white missionary workers are better suited to tending to their African congregants than are black people like Corrine, Samuel, and Nettie.

LETTER 57

Nettie and the Reverend's family next sail from New York to England, where they meet with more missionaries and further prepare for their work in Africa. Nettie sees some of the pottery and other artifacts, in British museums, that have been taken from Africa, and is astounded by the quality of the workmanship, and by the culture she learns more about once overseas.

Nettie also learns that some of her brethren in Africa sold her ancestors to white slave-traders, thus causing her family, and many African American families, to be taken to the American South. Nettie is shaken by this knowledge, which complicates her vision of African culture, and of the village she is to serve.

As Nettie becomes more knowledgeable about the world and more comfortable in it, she starts to see that the ideas forced on her by white culture aren't necessarily truth. In seeing Jesus as being non-white she begins to see worth in being non-white; she begins to see worth in herself.



Harlem, at this time, was a Mecca of African American culture—music, religion, poetry, and art. Nettie is exposed to this culture and hopes to relate it to Celie, as a means of showing that African Americans, despite their social subjugation in the South, are producing great works up North, and are participating in New York City's economic and social life. In other words, that the African Americans situation in the South is imposed upon them, not something they deserve. In relating this information, Nettie is relating her realizations about the potential of black people, which is so stunted by racism in the South.



Nonetheless, there is still racism in the North, too. And even those whites who want to do good, who want to help the people of Africa, instinctively think of themselves as superior to black Americans wanting to do the same work.



It is ironic that Nettie's first exposure to the artistic production of Africans comes in this colonial institution that has taken the art from Africans and collected it here. At the same time, Nettie is still furthering her understanding of the immense culture and skill of the Africans in Africa—of black people in general.



Nettie's understanding of the world grows more complicated too, as she learns that both blacks and whites were complicit in the slave trade. She is used to seeing herself and her people as the victim of slavery—and certainly they were—but it is strange to see other blacks who were profiting from it.



LETTER 58

In her next letter, Nettie tells of their arrival in Dakar, the capital of Senegal, which is filled with white and black traders speaking French and Senegalese, and with "some of the blackest people" Nettie has ever seen. Nettie observes activity in the market in Dakar.

Their next stop is Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. There, Nettie and the Reverend's family meet the President of Liberia (named Tubman) and a large part of Tubman's cabinet, many of them white people. The social divisions in Monrovia surprise Nettie: many of the workers seem not dissimilar from black farm-workers in the US, and Dutch companies own the farms. Nettie is surprised by the inequality in Monrovia, and she realizes, slowly, that Africa is not a distant utopia, but a land afflicted by many of the same problems as the United States.

LETTER 59

After finishing reading these letters from Nettie—and puzzling over the words in them she does not understand—Celie tells Shug that she again wishes to kill Mr. ____, for hiding the letters away from Celie for so long. Shug tells her not to kill Mr. ____—that would leave Shug only with Grady, and Shug still loves Mr. ____. Celie is excited to have heard from her sister, but so angry with Mr. ____ she can barely think.

Celie says, by way of bargaining, that she won't kill Mr. ____ if Shug can convince Mr. ____ that Shug should sleep in Celie's room from now on. Shug succeeds in doing this, although Celie is not sure how Shug has convinced him.

Nettie inadvertently participates in a kind of racial categorization that a white slave trader might also use. Scales of blackness were commonly referenced by white traders when discussing Africans from different parts of the continent.



Although Nettie arrives in Africa incredibly idealistic about the prospects of her mission there, and her ability to effect change among the Olinka, she begins very quickly to see that life in Africa is far from utopic. Indeed, because political institutions in Africa are not so stable, and are always changing, instances of discrimination and political unfairness are just as likely in Africa as in the Southern United States.



Interestingly, Celie becomes aware, through her sister's language, of the vast education she herself has not had the benefit of experiencing. Although it is only referenced subtly in the remainder of the book, it does become clear that Nettie is teaching Celie new words and concepts, however indirectly, through these letters.



Again, Shug is capable of getting what she wants from Mr. ____, who has a hard time standing up to her. But it is important to note that Celie is the one behind the idea, and who ensures it will happen with her threat to kill Mr. ____ if it doesn't. Her anger has pushed her out of her habitual passivity. It is not clear whether Mr. ____ suspects, at this point, that Shug and Celie have a romantic relationship.



LETTER 60

Celie is still angry with Mr. _____, and this dampens her sexual desires for Shug. Shug suggests that Celie needs an outlet for her aggressions. She suggests that Celie ought to try her hand at making pants, since Celie still plows the fields in a dress, and pants would make this work quite a bit easier. Shug and Celie plan on using Jack's (Odessa's husband's) Army pants as a pattern for Celie's first effort.

As with Squeak, Shug here encourages Celie to indulge in a desire that will eventually become a job—the making of pants. Celie's talents for craftsmanship, honed over many years, become a useful way of diverting her attention from Mr. _____'s cruelty, and connect her to the artistic and crafts created by African Americans and Africans that Nettie tells her about in her letters. Further, the making of something, even pants, is a kind of assertion of one's being and thoughts in the world. Guided by Shug, Celie is in the early stages of finding a voice of her own in the world.



LETTER 61

Celie begins to feel proud that Nettie and her children are still alive—she "struts" around her home with the news. Celie wonders, however, whether her children, who she believes are born of incest, will be "affected" by their incestuous parentage, since she has heard that incest causes mental handicaps in children.

The impact of incest has not yet been mentioned in the novel, but it is a legitimate concern. Although many children born of incest are unaffected by birth defects and other disabilities, there is an increased likelihood of these disabilities in incestuous parental unions.



Celie opens another letter from Nettie; Celie and Shug have stolen all the trunk's letters, hiding them in their own room, and replacing them, re-sealed, in the trunk when they have finished reading. In the letter, Nettie describes how an African man named Joseph welcomed Nettie, Samuel, Corrine, and the two children at the port near the village where they would be serving as missionaries. Joseph then took them, first in dug-out canoes and then in hammocks over land, into the Olinka village.

Nettie is understandably excited by a series of ceremonies she finds wonderful and beautiful. It is not clear, however, whether the Olinka are not somewhat embellishing these ceremonies—making them even more elaborate—for their visitors from the United States. But in the beginning, the Olinka seem very happy to welcome their guests.



Nettie is surprised by the size of the Olinka—they are very tall and broad-shouldered—and by the whiteness of their teeth. The Olinka, in turn, marvel to meet the family and Nettie; they wonder if Nettie is the mother of the two children, and they ask if Samuel is married both to Corrine and Nettie, as is possible in Olinka culture. Samuel and Corrine attempt to explain to the Olinka that Nettie is there in her capacity as the children's maid and assistant.

Again, Nettie falls into a commentary that is very similar to something a white slave-trader might say about the Olinka. In particular, commentary on the size and shape of Africans' teeth was common among whites who owned plantations in the American south. Meanwhile, the Olinka are just as curious about the American missionaries' customs as Nettie is about theirs.



Nettie discusses the village's welcoming ceremony, in which the story of roofleaf, or the village's most important crop, is detailed. Roofleaf, a broad, palm-like leaf used to create the village's roofs, was grown in increasing amounts by a village chief many years before, who ended up buying much of the village's land. But a great storm destroyed almost all the roofleaf crop, and other crops as well, on this chief's farmland.

Roofleaf is, by far, the Olinka's most important crop. It provides them with roofs, and therefore makes it possible for the Olinka to withstand the terrible rainstorms plaguing their part of the world. It is in fact unthinkable that the Olinka could continue their way of life without the roofleaf plant.



Many of the villagers died over the ensuing winter, without protection from the winds and rain afforded by the roofleaf. But after winter was over, they found a few straggling roofleaf roots and planted them; in five years, the roofleaf had returned plentifully, and had become elevated to god-like status within the village.

Joseph tells the missionaries that, although the roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, it is a symbol of life and of earth's abundance: therefore, he goes on, does it not resemble a **God**? Nettie finds this ceremony, and her entrance into the village, to be a thing of wonder.

LETTER 62

Celie reads another of Nettie's letters. Nettie has been working hard in the village, from early in the morning till late at night, helping with every aspect of life there, and with Samuel and Corrine's missionary labors. Nettie enjoys the work, but finds it utterly exhausting.

Catherine, a woman in the village, has a daughter named Tashi, who enjoys playing with Olivia. Catherine says Tashi does not need to be educated, since her only job will be to act as a good wife to a man one day. Nettie disputes this, and says she herself is not married. Catherine counters that, for this reason, Nettie does not matter very much, since she has no husband and no family.

But Olivia is very smart, and she learns a great deal in school, even teaching some to Tashi when they are playing. Corrine tells Nettie, later, that, to avoid confusion, Nettie should make clear to the villagers that she is not married to Samuel, and that Corrine is. Nettie is slighted and upset by this, but she nevertheless agrees. Nettie does not understand why, all of a sudden, Corrine seems to treat her with the greatest circumspection.

Nettie then describes her small hut, and says that she wishes she had a picture of Celie to put in it, next to her picture of Jesus Christ.

This small story is, in many ways, a parable for the beginning of all sorts of religions. Alice Walker here realizes—and asserts—that religions spring from dual concerns of scarcity and the future. Any society naturally wants to protect, and venerate, something that makes life possible and more pleasant.



An instance of a kind of religious feeling that will become more pronounced as the novel progresses: the idea that God can be found in all things in nature, a broadening of the idea of God that has pounded into the blacks of the South—that God is a white male.



Nettie begins her missionary post with a great deal of idealism. Although the work taxes her physically and mentally, she, at the very least, has been allowed to come to Africa as a free and independent woman, in command of her own future.



Immediately, however, Nettie is confronted with the Olinka's view of Nettie's unmarried life. Catherine thus perfectly recapitulates a feeling that Nettie and Celie had when living in America: that women can only matter if they are mothers, taking care of households, children, and their husbands.



Corrine's jealousy is here made plain. It is hard for Corrine to imagine that Nettie would be willing to move to Africa without somehow having designs on her husband. The Olinka, interestingly, also believe, at first, that Samuel has two wives, as is permitted in their culture.



Although the move is not subtle, Walker appears to equate Nettie's powerful religious feelings with her devotion to her sister, so many thousands of miles away. She puts the connections and love between family on the same level as connection with and love for God.



LETTER 63

Celie reads another of Nettie's letters. Nettie is visited by Tashi's father and mother, who argue that they know the Western world is different from the Olinka village—that, elsewhere, women take on more responsibility and are more educated than in the village. But the Olinka do not approve of this behavior for Tashi and for other women. Tashi's parents ask Nettie to stop trying to educate Tashi.

They explain that Tashi has become upset, since she knows that she is learning, from Olivia, things about the world she will never be able to put into practice, as an Olinka woman. Tashi's father tells Nettie that they do not need to listen to the missionaries—there are only five of them, and some will die during the rainy season. Some missionaries, he continues, always pass away each year—they do not matter much to the villagers, who consider them something akin to tourists.

Nettie comments in the letter that the way the men treat women in the village reminds her of their father, and the way they were expected not to look into a man's eyes when they were being spoken to or told what to do. Nettie is upset that male-female relations in the village are so similar to the abusive relations she and Celie experienced in Georgia.

LETTER 64

Nettie reveals, in her next letter, that she has lived with the Olinka for five years. An English rubber company is slowly building a road to the village, and Olinkans greet the road-builders with food and drink to celebrate this achievement. The Olinkans do not yet distrust the motives of the English company building the road.

Nettie feels extremely close to Olivia and Adam, but wonders whether, at this point, they should be sent back to Europe or America to be educated, since they can only be educated in limited fashion among the Olinka. Corrine has grown even more distant from Nettie, asking that Nettie not visit Samuel's hut unless she (Corrine) is present.

Here, the Olinka actively attempt to disrupt Nettie's efforts in educating the young women of the tribe. This, again, is very similar to Mr. ___'s efforts at disrupting Celie's education at the very beginning of the novel. The Olinka see the education as actually harmful, as teaching things that will make her less interested in fulfilling the specific role they expect women to play in their society.



Tashi's father speaks quite plainly to Nettie, saying that, most important for the Olinka are the ties of marriage and of family. Because Nettie does not have a family, and is not tied to the Olinka culture, she cannot truly be a part of that culture. But Tashi was born to the Olinka, and she must carry out the traditions demanded of her by the village's elders. Further, his words reveal the Olinka's true feelings about the missionaries—that they are annoyances that will pass as they succumb to the diseases of Africa.



Nettie emphasizes, to Celie, that the Olinka men behave very similarly to the men back home. Nettie wonders whether this sort of behavior doesn't come naturally to certain kinds of men—it is an urge simply to dominate women.



The English rubber company's road seems like it will benefit the village, connecting it to the outside world and the opportunities the outside world offers. Yet Nettie has an instinct that the Olinka's lack, sensing that the White men of the rubber company are not acting out of a pure desire to benefit the Olinka.



Nettie originally saw Africa as a Utopian place for black people. Now she sees it as a place where children cannot get the education they need to thrive in the wider world. Jealousy once again rears its head as an obstacle in relationships between women.



Tashi and Olivia share stories of their cultures, and Nettie encourages Olivia to write down these stories from Tashi, to preserve them. Tashi's father passes away from malaria during the rainy season, having refused all "Western" treatments, and accepting only Olinkan traditional medicine, which does not halt the advance of the disease.

Interestingly, this novel itself represents an attempt to "preserve the stories" of women both in Africa and in the rural South of the United States. Note that Tashi's father had earlier commented that the Missionaries always die, but here he died because of his unwillingness to use Western Medicine. The picture of what is good and what is bad keeps getting muddier and muddier in the novel.



Nettie relates how Olinkan women are friends to one another, in a way she finds mostly inspiring, although the friendship between common wives (to the same man) confuses Samuel, who believes it is not Christian. Olinkan women typically support one another, and give one another advice. They help to raise each other's children. The only hitch in this social system (with many wives for one husband) occurs when a favorite child dies, and wives begin accusing one another of sorcery as an explanation for the child's death.

One might argue that the Olinkan women's relationship to one another are defined by men, since one man can have many wives. But these women use this position to their advantage—they provide for one another, and consider each other to be "sisters." This is in stark contrast to the way Corrine begins to treat Nettie, based on her seeming belief that Nettie has designs on Samuel.



LETTER 65

The previous letter (64) from Nettie was written during the Christmas holiday, and the current letter dates from Easter. Nettie has learned, in the intervening time, that the road is not to stop in the Olinka village, but to continue through it for thirty miles, to the coast. This means that much of the village will be destroyed. After a trip to the coast with Corrine and Samuel, Nettie also learns that the Olinkan land has been purchased by an English rubber company.

Nettie's suspicions were right: the rubber company wasn't building a road to benefit the village. They were building it to benefit themselves, and didn't care if it harmed the village at all. That the rubber company could buy the land without the Olinka even knowing—as if the Olinka, despite living on the land for generations, did not own it themselves—seems shocking and unfair. But it was common practice in Africa at the time of the novel's setting.



The Olinkan chief was forced, after the "sale" of his village's land, to talk to the British "governor" of the region, who told him that the Olinkans must pay rent to the English for their own land, and a water tax as well. Nettie is concerned, and Corrine has fallen ill with "African fever," but the Olinkans in general are so worried about their future, they refuse to act.

The British forcing the Olinkan's to pay rent for their own land echoes Millie's insistence that Sofia thank her even though she messed up Sofia's visit to her family. The powerful white's seem to think it is their right to just take possessions from the weaker black people, and then are astonished when the black people are upset. Corrine's disease is never described, but it might be the same disease experienced by other missionaries who have come to live with the Olinka, and who do not possess the natural immunities required to live in the jungle.



Nettie therefore waits for new developments. In the meantime, Olivia and Tashi continue going to school with the boys—the villagers have tended to accept the fact of Tashi's and Olivia's education, seeing that the missionaries insist upon it.

Tashi and Olivia have succeeded, at least temporarily, in their mission. They are able to sneak in an education as the village is concerned with its own survival.



LETTER 66

When Nettie is tending to the ill Corrine one day, Corrine asks when exactly Nettie met Samuel. It is revealed that Corrine believes Nettie to be the biological mother of the children Adam and Olivia—and that Samuel is the father. Corrine has been living with this anger for years, hence her ill-treatment of Nettie.

The source of Corrine's jealousy is finally made plain. For some reason, the many years in Africa, and perhaps the isolation and difficulty of the life there, have caused Corrine to fixate on this one particular idea, even though there is no evidence to support a relationship between Samuel and Nettie. Though Corrine's belief also suggests that the children may resemble, which further suggests that they likely resemble their true mother: Celie.



Corrine forces Nettie to swear on a Bible that Nettie met Samuel the day she met Corrine. Corrine examines Nettie's stomach to see if there are signs Nettie has ever given birth (she has not). Samuel apologizes to Nettie, in private, for Corrine's behavior. In the meantime, the village lands keep being destroyed by the rubber company, and the men of the village must travel great distances to find wild game to hunt.

The examination of Nettie's stomach is a particularly graphic example of the extent to which Corrine has become fixated, the depth of her jealousy.



LETTER 67

It turns out that Samuel also assumed the children were Nettie's biologically—this is why he was so eager to have Nettie join the family on their mission to Africa. Nettie says they are not her biological children, and asks Samuel to explain where the children were found.

Of course, the children do have a biological relationship to Nettie; Nettie is their biological aunt. It seems that Samuel, too, picked up on the resemblance between the two children, especially Olivia, and Nettie.



Samuel explains that, back in Georgia, many years ago, a black man owned a dry goods store with his two brothers. This store began attracting too many customers for the liking of the white store owners in the town, so these white owners lynched (killed) the three black men and burned down the store. The owner they killed was Celie's and Nettie's biological father.

At last, the story of how the children came to Samuel is revealed, and in the process Nettie and Celie learn of their own true past: that Pa was not their father. Of course, there is the tragedy of racism in the story as well, given that the man was killed by whites who disliked his growing economic power.



Upon learning of her husband's death, Celie's and Nettie's mother then began a long slide into mental illness. A new man began courting Celie's mother—the man Celie and Nettie called "Pa"—and married their mother, despite her mental illness. Pa had many more children by her, and, as the reader knows, goes on to rape Celie and have two children by her as well.

Here is the story of how Pa came into Celie and Nettie's lives. It once again captures what seems to be a trend among relations between black men and women, in which the man is charming and kind in his courtship but, once married, becomes cruel, interested only in control, and sexually abusive.



Pa knew Samuel from the community, and pretended that the children Olivia and Adam were children he had by Celie's and Nettie's mother's, and not by Celie. Pa lied to Samuel, saying that the family was now too large, and that he (Pa) could not care for all his children. Samuel therefore offered to take in Adam and Olivia. Samuel told Corrine, simply, that the children were **God's** gift to them. Samuel never explained to Corrine the circumstances of the children's origin. Nettie ends the letter exclaiming, once again, that "Pa" is not their biological father.

Nettie is able to piece together this accurate story of what happened from her own knowledge of the story and from Samuel's piece of the story. Nettie, in effect, is writing her and Celie's own true story. Nettie's exclamation that Pa is not their biological father has deep significance. In a novel that displays cycles of violence or bad behavior within families and focuses on resemblance (physical and behavioral) from one generation to the next, it is a tremendous deal that Nettie and Celie are not actually related to Pa, but rather to a loving, successful businessman. It provides them with a different foundation, a different model to replicate, one of love and success and self-possession.



LETTER 68

Celie writes a brief letter to **God**, in response to Nettie's information, saying she cannot believe that her children were not born of incest, and that her biological father is in fact dead. She adds that Shug says she is going to take Celie to Tennessee with her—that she loves her and wants to live with her. Celie does not know how to process all the new information she has learned about her family.

And, of course, the revelation about Pa also eliminates Celie's shame about incest with Pa and how that might affect her children. It is noteworthy that just as Celie learns about the truth of her background—that she was born out of love, to a loving, successful father—that Shug declares her own love for Celie in preference to Mr. ____ and develops a plan for Celie to escape her limited life in Mr. ____'s house. Celie is still financially dependent—now on Shug, rather than Mr. ____—but her emotional life will be full of love rather than restricted by efforts by men to control her.



LETTER 69

Celie decides that she wants to see Pa, to ask about the information she has just learned from Nettie. Celie has only seen Pa once since leaving home, and only briefly and from far away, in town.

Though Pa lives not far away, Celie has cut herself off from him—no surprise given all that he did to her. But Celie's new knowledge of her background gives her new strength, and an ability to escape her former passivity.



Shug and Celie drive to Pa's house, which is a now a large white structure, on beautiful land, that Shug believes must be owned by white people. Shug tells Pa, who is now married to a very young girl (Daisy), that Celie has come with her to visit Pa, and that Celie would like to ask Pa a few questions.

Pa has, by all accounts, done very well for himself. It was not totally apparent when Celie was young, but Pa was running the dry-goods business successfully, and pulling down a large income as a result. It is instructive that Shug assumes that any beautiful land must be owned by whites. Also note Pa's continuing predilection toward young girls.



Celie tells Pa, in front of Daisy and Shug, that she knows he is their stepfather. Pa pretends, for Daisy's benefit, that he took Celie and Nettie in because it was the nice thing to do, the Christian thing, and Daisy lauds him, now, for his generosity. Pa sees, from Shug's expression, that Shug knows Pa assaulted Celie. But Pa doesn't care, and knows that neither Shug nor Celie will mention Pa's abuse in front of Daisy.

Another instance of Pa's power over the women in his life. It's not clear whether Daisy would even believe Celie's story that Pa sexually abused her, but the very fact that Pa can anticipate, and silence, this story by simply looking at Celie and Shug, points to his continued influence over the family. At the same time, the fact that Daisy wouldn't believe the story also suggests that Pa doesn't abuse her, which is at least an improvement in his behavior.



Celie asks Pa where her biological father and mother are buried. Pa says he does not know, since a lynched man gets no head-stone in the South. Celie and Shug leave the house and look for the graves in the cemetery anyway. Not finding them, Shug announces to Celie that Shug and Celie are "family now."

The racism among Southern whites in the novel is so strong that it extends through life and beyond, into death. Not only do whites kill blacks who get too "high," they refuse even to acknowledge those blacks in death. Shug's comment that she and Celie are family now attests to their shared love and shared knowledge; they know each other and they know each other's stories and history. That is the foundation of a family.



LETTER 70

Nettie, in another letter, tells how she and Samuel attempt to convince Corrine that Nettie is the children's biological aunt, and that Celie is their biological mother. But Corrine refuses to believe, even though she has observed Nettie's stomach and has seen no signs of childbirth.

Corrine's refusal to believe attests to the power of jealousy, how it can blind one to the truth despite all evidence to the contrary, how it can tear women in particular apart.



LETTER 71

Nettie tries again to convince Corrine, attempting to remind Corrine of the time she and Olivia met Celie in the cloth store back in Georgia. Nettie brings out a quilt made with the material Corrine purchased that day, while Celie was in the store, in an attempt to jar Corrine's memory.

One might assume that this event only had importance for Celie, since Celie experienced the shock of seeing her child, whom she believed dead, out in the world. But as is evident below, the event was also deeply important for Corrine—so important, she had to suppress it.



Corrine suddenly announces that, on that day, she was afraid Celie was the real mother to Olivia, and that Celie would want to take Olivia back. Thus Corrine reveals that she has in fact known about Olivia's possible biological relation to Celie, and has had suspicions about her children's parentage, for many years. In the middle of the night, Corrine tells Samuel that, finally, she believes Celie is the children's mother. Samuel is relieved to hear this. But Corrine is very ill, and dies upon affirming this belief, with Samuel by her side.

As a component of Christian belief, it is important to die having repented one's sins—thus the value placed on deathbed confessions and conversions. Although Corrine has spent a great many years silently, and then openly, resenting Nettie, her desire for forgiveness at the end of her life means that Corrine will, according to her beliefs, go into the afterlife a repentant, or saved, individual.



LETTER 72

Nettie describes Corrine's burial, which took place in the Olinka way. Nettie also says that Olivia has gotten her first period, and that Olivia and Tashi (who is also now a woman) take care of one another in their new womanhood.

Although Corrine was angry with Nettie for many years, fearing that she was the children's true mother, Nettie still believes she ought to forgive Corrine, who died a terrible death, and finally believed Samuel and Nettie upon her deathbed.

Nettie ends the letter to Celie hoping that the Olinka can somehow preserve their land in the face of the English rubber company's incursion. But Nettie is rapidly losing hope in the village's ability to withstand this onslaught of Western "culture" in the village.

Even as Corrine dies Olivia emerges into womanhood. And Olivia and Tashi's relationship offers an alternative to the jealousy Corrine felt toward Nettie. Olivia and Tashi share a relationship of helping and supporting each other.



It would be understandable for Nettie to remain angry at Corrine, since Corrine did make life difficult for Nettie and for Samuel. But Nettie tries her best to approach the question in a Christian manner—to ask forgiveness of God on Corrine's behalf.



Nettie seems, here, to realize the inexorability of change in the Olinka village. If it isn't the road—which would be hard to stop regardless—it will be something else. The Olinka will be overrun by the strength of the forces of Western "development" and change.



LETTER 73

Celie tells Shug that she no longer writes to **God**—she writes to Nettie. This letter is addressed to Nettie. Celie says that God would never listen to a poor black woman—that God has not listened to her throughout her life. Thus she desires to write to someone, like Nettie, who might actually one day read her letters.

Celie and Shug have a discussion about religion, after Celie decides to stop writing to **God**. Shug says that, just because she (Shug) has behaved immorally in her life, she is not without religion, and she tells Celie not to blaspheme against the God that she (Shug) believes in. Shug says she believes God wants people to be happy, and that is the God she worships: not the God that white say she ought to believe in.

Shug asks Celie what her God looks like, and Celie replies that her **God** is a white man. Shug says this is the problem—that God can be whatever she wants, and that Celie ought not to internalize a conception of God that is foreign to her, created by white people. Celie thinks this make sense, in light of what Nettie once told her: that Jesus had hair "like lamb's wool."

This is an important shift. Celie began writing letters to God when she was being abused, told to stay quiet, and had no one else to turn. Now she does have family and connections, and so she writes to them.



Shug introduces a new, spiritual dimension for the divine. Although Shug does not live her life strictly in accordance with Biblical teachings, she nevertheless lives according to the idea that God wants love, just like humans, and that we show our love for God by loving others.



Another important moment, commingling ideas of race and religion in the novel. Moment's earlier Celie had rejected God because she had been taught to see God as white, as being like the people who had oppressed her and her people. But Shug makes Celie see that it's not God she needs to reject, but rather her old idea of God. That her God doesn't have to be the white people's God. That she can have a God who does listen to her.



Shug goes on to say that **God** is inside her and all around, and that she, when younger, went from believing that God was a white man, to believing that God was found in nature, even found in human pleasure. Celie has trouble believing this at first, thinking that perhaps Shug is the one blaspheming, but Shug replies that all God wants to do is love, and be loved.

Shug sees God as being everywhere, in the beauty of the world and the pleasure of experiencing that world. It's ironic that Olinka culture shares this sense of God being found everywhere in nature. And Nettie, Samuel, and Corrine first arrive among the Olinka to stamp out this idea, and to replace it with the idea of a single Christian God. Of course, Nettie comes to feel differently, too, and to develop sentiments that echo Shug's here.



Celie continues, in the letter, by saying to Nettie that she is trying to find **God** outside of man—to find God in nature, in rocks and trees and grass. But this is hard work, because it involves un-learning a lifetime of white Christian teaching. Celie says she is doing her best to be spiritual in this new way, Shug's way.

Celie takes Shug's ideas to heart. In seeing God as something that is not linked to white men, she also de-legitimizes any claim that white men have to power over her through religion.



LETTER 74

Sofia has been let off her twelve-year sentence, as maid to the mayor and his wife's children, six months early, and is released to Celie's and Mr. ___'s home. Her children have barely seen her and have grown up with Squeak as their mother. The children barely recognize Sofia, and call her Miss.

The novel portrays a multitude of women. Sofia is a "strong" woman—but she is reckless with her strength, and it cost her years of her life in servitude to those she tried to resist. It cut her off from her family.



After dinner one night, Shug announces that she and Celie are leaving for Memphis, along with Grady, who is still living with Shug at Celie's house. Mr. ___ says he won't allow Celie to leave. But Celie has had enough: she talks back to Mr. ___, and says he's a terrible scoundrel who has kept Nettie's letters from her. She says she's had enough of caring for his "rotten" children and living in his home. The others at the table are completely surprised, and emboldened, by Celie's outburst.

This is another critical turning point for Celie. She has always been passive, always endured under the abuse and control directed at her from the men in her life. Now, finally, she talks back (though note how she doesn't physically fight back, as Sofia might have). Celie makes her thoughts and desires understood. She makes her voice heard, and in so doing takes control of her own life.



Celie tells Harpo, too, that he is partially responsible for Sofia's service to the mayor's family, since Sofia never would have run away from him in the first place if he hadn't tried to beat her and control her.

This is, of course, more or less true. If Harpo had not wished to control Sofia, they might have lived together happily for the intervening twelve years.



Shug announces that Squeak, too, will be going with them to Memphis, in order to try to sing professionally. Eleanor Jane, the white girl Sofia cared for, comes over at this point and interrupts the meal. Eleanor Jane asks to speak with Sofia; her family, the mayor's family, is having many problems (the younger son appears to be an alcoholic), and Sofia still helps the family out a great deal, giving Eleanor advice, even though Sofia is no longer their servant.

Squeak follows a path toward independence similar to Celie, but she needs to be shepherded along by Celie and by Shug. She doesn't yet have Celie's strength. Eleanor treats Sofia like a mother, which contrasts Sofia's relationship to her own children who hardly know her. Eleanor's bond to Sofia seems to be genuine, one of love—she seems to value Sofia's ideas, rather than think of her as a servant.



After returning from talking to Eleanor Jane, Sofia says she will look after Suzie Q, Squeak's youngest child, and the other children while Squeak is in Memphis. Suzie Q. has already taken to Sofia, whom she does not know is her father's first wife.

At this point, Sofia becomes the mother to Harpo's children with Squeak. This is an interesting inversion, since Sofia is no longer recognized by her own biological children—the children she had with Harpo.



LETTER 75

Celie begins to recognize that Grady is falling for Squeak, as they prepare (Grady and Squeak, and Celie and Shug) to leave for Memphis. Mr. ____ tries, halfheartedly, to make Celie stay, saying that she will come back from Memphis, broke, before too long. But Celie tells Mr. ____ that he will be punished in the afterlife for the hurt he has caused her, and that his attempts to imprison her, as a mother and a laborer, will only cause him to suffer in Hell.

An addendum to the curses Celie hurls at Mr. ____ in the previous chapter. Celie is motivated by a righteous anger, here, unseen in previous letters. She is speaking her mind so as to cause the same hurt in Mr. ____ that he caused in her. What she says is true, but it is also destructive, and it is important to note that this is not the end of Celie's journey in terms of finding herself and her strength. She must, and will, learn also to forgive.



LETTER 76

Celie loves Shug's house in Memphis, which is large and pink, and built on a circular floor plan. Sometimes, when she and Shug have time, they imagine the dream home they would love to build, and draw pictures of it late into the evening.

A large pink circular house is deeply symbolic. The pink implies that this is a home run by women, as opposed to every other house in the novel. Its circularity implies a kind of equality among its members, as opposed to hierarchy so rigidly imposed by men.



When Shug is home, she cooks large meals for Celie and Grady and Squeak, but when Shug is on the road she works hard, sings a lot, and eats unhealthy meals. During these tours, Celie begins making pants in Shug's house—all sorts of pants, of many shapes, sizes, and types of fabric. Celie finds the making of pants to be therapeutic, and a creative outlet she has long been looking for.

Interestingly, both Shug and Celie participate in parts of the typically "feminine" economy (housekeeping, cooking, making pants), but these chores are part of a new system run by and for women. Also note how Celie turns her domestic chore into a moneymaking business, and in so doing can express herself creatively and begin to build financial independence.



Shug encourages Celie to make more pants and to start a small business selling these pants. For the first time, Celie has a job where she is working for herself, doing what she wants, and making a small but substantial amount of money. The making of these pants causes Celie to feel an enormous amount of happiness, which is only multiplied by the love she feels for Shug.

Celie's success in her personal and business life is mirrored by a feeling of total acceptance on Shug's part. Celie feels, for the first time, that she is in a loving relationship that recognizes her importance as a person. This relationship will not be perfect, but it will persist, in some form, for the rest of the novel.



LETTER 77

Celie hires two older unmarried women to help her to make the pants that she (Celie) designs. One of the women attempts to teach Celie to speak in proper English, using proper grammar, but Celie says she's too old to learn now, to change the way she speaks and writes.

Celie's response to the woman who wants to teach her proper grammar is significant: Celie feels she has found her voice, found herself. She has spent so much of her life feeling shame for being a woman, for being black. But now that she doesn't she doesn't care about "proper" grammar. She likes who she is; and wants to speak as she speaks, in the voice that is hers.



LETTER 78

Celie goes back to Georgia, from Memphis, to visit Harpo and Sofia, who are having arguments, just like old times, although they appear to have settled into a stable relationship (it is unclear if this relationship is still romantic). Celie asks about Suzie Q., who is doing well in school, and Henrietta, another of Harpo's children, who is, according to Harpo, a troublesome child.

Harpo and Sofia have recommenced their disagreements, and appear, in many ways, like an old married couple. But their arguments are no longer as violent, and they both, in their middle age, have mellowed toward one another—they do not beat each other as they once did.



Celie reports to Harpo and Sofia that, in Memphis, Grady and Squeak have been smoking large amounts of marijuana together, which Grady grows behind Shug's house. Celie has brought some with her, and the four of them smoke it. Celie then attends the funeral of Sofia's mother, and finds that, on this visit to Georgia, she feels happier, and even more affection toward Harpo and Sofia.

Celie does not depend on marijuana for excitement or happiness the way Grady and Squeak seem to. Celie just likes the feeling of smoking it every now and again. More important are Celie's feelings about being back in Georgia—as she feels better about herself, she is better able to connect with her old home and the people in her life.



LETTER 79

Celie sees Mr. ____ at Sofia's mother's funeral. Mr. ____ has "found religion," and appears to want to mend his previous wayward ways. Mr. ____ informs Celie that Henrietta has a disease (probably sickle-cell anemia) that causes her to get sick periodically, and that this sickness can only be treated with large amounts of yams, cooked into various kinds of dishes. Henrietta does not like the taste of yams, and so must be tricked into eating them, in order to treat her illness.

Mr. ____ finding religion may at first seem like a ploy of some sort to get Celie to return to him. But the way he talks about Henrietta, about the efforts needed to care for her, suggests that his focus really has shifted from what he can get for himself, which had always in the past been the only thing he cared about.



Celie remembers that Nettie once mentioned "African sickness" to her in a letter, and that this sickness, sickle-cell anemia, is the same as the sickness Henrietta appears to suffer from.

Another link between Olinka culture and the difficulties of African American life.



Sofia tells Celie, later, about Mr. ____: how, after Celie left for Memphis, Mr. ____ seemed to lose all will to live. He and Harpo would lie around together in their house, doing very little, saddened by their wives' departures (as Squeak also ran off, with Grady, to Memphis). But Sofia eventually felt sorry for Harpo, and helped Harpo and Mr. ____ to get back on their feet, to eat right and begin working again. Now, Mr. ____ has become more ardently Christian, and is trying to live a better life.

It seems that Celie's departure really did affect Mr. ____; he seemed to recognize that he had finally pushed Celie away completely. For Harpo, this is the second time a wife of his has left him. Both men seem eventually to realize that their effort to exert control resulted in them having nothing. Faced with this realization, both seem to have become better men, particularly Mr. _____. Note also how it is only through the help of a woman, to support them, that they are able to do so. Sofia is willing to help, as long as they are not trying to force her to do as they say.



LETTER 80

Celie reads another of Nettie's letters. Nettie reports that she has married Samuel, and she begins to explain how this has happened. Over the past year, the British rubber company moved the Olinkans to new land, and destroyed all their roofleaf crop, replacing their roofs with hot tin, which baked in the sun. The Olinkans were terribly upset by the loss of roofleaf, which they worshipped as a god.

The loss of roofleaf is as important for the Olinka symbolically as it is in actual fact. The roofleaf really was a god to them, an embodiment of religious power on earth. When the roofleaf is taken away, it seems, truly, that god has abandoned their people, their village.



Conditions became so unbearable for the Olinkans—they even had to buy their own water from the British—that Samuel, Nettie, and the two children sailed back to England, to figure out what they could do to prevent the village's total destruction.

Samuel and Nettie have finally reached a point where they no longer know whether their missionary services can be of any use. The Olinka may no longer even exist as a tribe.



Nettie and Samuel meet a white woman on the boat back to England named Doris, who has black grandchildren. Doris explains that she was an heiress in England who decided to become a missionary to Africa, and that, after many years in a village, the village chief declared her an honorary man and presented her with "wives." These wives had children who then had their own, making Doris an honorary grandparent of Africans.

Doris is an embodiment of a woman who foregoes traditional gender roles, and who sets out to chart her own path in the world. Unfortunately, Doris' efforts can only be recognized by the African tribe as "manly," rather than, simply, as "successful." But Doris has lived a rich and full life without being married or having biological children of her own.



Samuel begins telling Nettie, on the boat and back in London, where they are visiting, the story of how he met Corrine. Both Samuel and Corrine had aunts who had served as missionaries in the Belgian Congo. As teenagers, Samuel and Corrine used to listen to their aunts' stories of "the bush" in Africa, and laugh about how polite these women now appeared, ensconced in the comforts of Georgia's black society (both their families had small but appreciable amounts of money).

Corrine's and Samuel's family are members of a black upper middle class that was springing up both in the North and in the South around the time the novel follows. In Harlem and in Georgia, educated African Americans were founding churches and universities, traveling the world, and acting as missionaries to all parts of the globe. Corrine and Samuel were excited by the prospect of participating in these missions.



Samuel went to college (at an unnamed school) and so did Corrine, at Spelman Seminary, a school in Georgia created by white women in order to educate black women in the deep south, and train them to help others all over the world. Corrine, with Samuel, did just that, vowing in Georgia that they would make for Africa, and attempt to teach the natives there just as their aunts had done. Only Corrine and Samuel thought that they, unlike their aunts, would be successful—that their missionary work would result in the "modernization" of the ways of life in the Olinka village.

But Samuel wonders whether the twenty years they have now spent with the Olinka have done any good. He recounts how the natives, even after those twenty years, look at him and Nettie with indifference, feeling that they, the African Americans, are not "real Africans." Samuel is reminded that his ancestors, and Nettie's, were sold by Africans to white slave traders, and he wonders whether the Olinka are aware of this fact.

Nettie and Samuel, after this discussion of Samuel's life, soon fall to confessing love for one another, and they tell the same to Adam and Olivia during their month together in England. The children take to this news quickly and cheerfully, and the wedding is a joyous one. Nettie also tells the children that she is their biological aunt, and that Celie is their biological mother.

Meanwhile, Adam is upset because Tashi, with whom he has fallen in love, was planning, before Adam's trip to England, to scar her face and undergo female circumcision, as parts of the Olinkan cultural transition from girlhood to womanhood. Adam does not want Tashi to submit to these rituals of a culture he believes oppresses women. But Tashi wants to go through these rituals in order to be considered a "real" Olinka woman.

LETTER 81

On their return to Africa, Nettie, Samuel, and the two children search for Tashi, who is hiding in the village. It turns out that she has undergone the facial scarring ritual common in the Olinka village, but is now ashamed of her face. Adam is kind to her and tends to her wounds, but Nettie reports to Celie that Tashi is now embarrassed by what she has done, and wonders whether she (Tashi) can love an African American like Adam, though she has been branded with the signs of an African culture she now considers "backward" and embarrassing.

Yet they see their aunts as not actually affecting Africa, as being tourists more than people who made a difference. With the idealism of youth, Samuel and Corrine thought that they would be different.



Another reminder of the horror of the slave trade, which is a dominant undercurrent in the relations between the Olinka and the Reverend's family. The Olinka never address this directly, but it is not far from Nettie's and Samuel's consciousness, when they feel the Olinka are not treating them with dignity.



Corrine feared that Nettie had designs on Samuel. And here, now, Nettie and Samuel do profess their love. But this love seems to have bloomed innocently, with no intent or action during Corinne's life. And the children's reaction makes clear just how much they care for and feel close to Nettie. Note also how the children now have been told their own stories, and know their own place in the world.



Just as Celie long believed that the rules set out for her were "the" rules—that a woman was controlled by a man; that God was a white man—Tashi feels that she must follow the customs of her society in order to truly belong. The oppression of women—and the masking of that oppression by saying that is simply the way it is and should be—occurs in both African and African American society.



Here, Tashi comes to realize that her physical marks on her face will make her seem like a "savage" to some in the West. This, of course, means that she has a conception of how the West views her own culture. By trying to fit into one culture she thinks that she has now excluded herself from another.



LETTER 82

Celie addresses another letter to Nettie (it is implied that Celie has replaced her letters to God, which she has been keeping as a journal, with her letters to Nettie). It is also implied that Celie is not actually sending these letters to Nettie). Celie reports that one recent night Daisy called Celie one night to tell her that Alphonso, "Pa," is dead, and that his house and dry-goods store are now Celie's property. At first Celie claims she does not want them, but Shug convinces her to take them over. When they return to the house, she and Shug run through it burning incense, to drive out Alphonso's spirit, and to claim the home as their own.

Another important scene in the novel. Whether or not Shug and Celie truly believe in exorcism or if the "exorcism" is more symbolic, what they are doing is making the home theirs. Celie had previously learned the true history of her past—now she claims her birthright, the house and store that belonged to her true father. That she claims the house together with Shug attests again to their status of family. Notice also how, to Daisy, Pa is Alphonse. He has a real name to her, and is a real person, because he treated her as a real person.



LETTER 83

Celie writes again to Nettie, saying that Shug has run off with someone else—a very young man named Germaine. Celie also reports that Grady and Mary Agnes (Squeak) have traveled the world, having run off together, and are now operating a marijuana plantation in Panama—or so Celie has heard.

Celie had lived in Memphis with Shug, Grady, and Squeak. Now all of them are gone—for different reasons—leaving her alone.



Celie tells Nettie how Shug described Germaine to her, and asked Celie to understand that her fling with Germaine is the last of her life. Celie curses herself for spending the summer back in Georgia, fixing up her new home, instead of spending it with Shug in Memphis. She feels that, had she stayed in Memphis, she might have prevented Shug's new relationship with Germaine.

Shug has a need to be free; a need for intense experience. That she tells Celie this fling will be her last suggests that she knows that soon she will no longer be able to have such things, or possibly even that she won't want them. Perhaps she is getting it out of her system in order to be with Celie. Of course, Celie is devastated by her abandonment. But there is something else going on here as well. By being abandoned, by being left alone, Celie must for the first time completely support and stand up for herself. She was dependent on Pa, then Mr. _____, and, though she had a loving relationship with Shug, she was dependent on her too. Now Celie will have the chance to depend on herself.



LETTER 84

Shug leaves Memphis with Germaine, and Celie returns to her new home in Georgia. There she watches Henrietta battle her illness. The family has to slip yams into all sorts of dishes to trick Henrietta into eating them, as they help combat her sickle-cell anemia.

The family comes together to care for Henrietta, one of the smallest in the clan, and one of the weakest. Their desire to cook for her is a genuinely heartwarming example of family togetherness and ingenuity.



Mr. ___ and Celie have a conversation about Shug's departure and about Celie's pant business. Celie tells Mr. ___ that she started making pants when living with him in order to channel her rage about Nettie's hidden letters, and, therefore, to keep herself from killing him. Celie also tells Mr. ___ that she is not really attracted to men, and that, without pants, they resemble frogs to her.

An important moment. Celie acknowledges to Mr. ___ both her rage at him and her sexual preference for women. But it is important to know that she is sharing these facts with him—not screaming, not fighting, not even blaming—and that he is listening, understanding. They are starting to build a real relationship, a friendship, of their own.



LETTER 85

Celie writes to Nettie, saying that she has received a note from the Department of Defense that Nettie's ship, from England to Africa, was sunk by a German mine. But Celie refuses to believe this, and tells Nettie, in the letter, that she knows Nettie is still alive.

An indicator of the fact that time in the novel is disjointed. Celie reads Nettie's letters, all taken from Mr. ___'s trunk, as though they are happening in real time, but in fact this "news" (proved false) might have been true, since Celie has not received a letter from Nettie after the last letter placed in the trunk, and the news from the Defense Department comes after this last letter. The note serves to introduce a tension into the novel that perhaps Celie and Nettie will not be reunited, and also indicates Celie's belief that her family connection to Nettie allows her to know whether Nettie has or has not died.



LETTER 86

Nettie writes to Celie, saying that Tashi and her mother have gone into the woods to live with the mbeles, or Africans who refuse to bow down to English authority in Africa. The other villagers, who remained, have begun dying because they no longer have the ability to grow yams, which help treat the chronic blood disease from which Henrietta also suffers, in America.

It is not clear whether the mbeles want to drive the English out of Africa completely, or if they simply want to reassert their ancestral rights to hunt on, farm on, and live on the land they love—the land their ancestors have hunted on and farmed on for generations. It is clear that those Africans who have not taken action are being wiped out by white men who barely even seem to recognize that they are doing it.



Nettie and Samuel worry what is to become of the Olinkans, but they try to find **God** everywhere—in nature, in the trees, as a way of coping with the horrors they see all around them. Nettie wonders how the Africans would take the news that, in America, black people are treated harshly and discriminated against in all walks of life. She also comments on the continued indifference with which the Olinkans view her and Samuel—they are, to the villagers, perpetual outsiders.

Nettie unknowingly mirrors the religious conversion Celie has had in the United States, with Shug's help. Nettie, despite originally wanting to go to Africa to "Christianize" the Olinka, finds that she can only find solace in a more inclusive God, who is everywhere and open to all. Nettie had hoped that Africa would be a place that would open its arms to her, but finds she felt as excluded there (by blacks) as she does in the United States (by whites).



Nettie ends the letter by saying that Adam has also disappeared, and she and Samuel believe he has gone into the jungle to find Tashi, among the mbeles.

Adam, who does not have a large role in the novel, is willing to go to great lengths to be with the woman he loves—which is a notable trait among the men in the novel.



LETTER 87

Celie writes to Nettie, still believing that Nettie is alive, despite hearing no news from her. (The previous letter from Nettie (86) was sent before the time of the supposed sinking of Nettie's ship—it, like the other letters, comes from Mr. ___'s trunk, and is therefore not recent.) Sometimes Celie receives postcards from Shug, with information about Germaine, but this upsets Celie, and she wonders how Shug ever found her attractive, how she ever loved Celie.

Celie's relationship with Shug, by letter, is an interesting counterpoint to her relationship with Nettie. Shug's postcards are short, and seem only to discuss her new life with Germaine. Celie, feeling abandoned, directs her feelings of sadness back on herself, blaming herself based on her insecurities about her looks, as she used to do. This feels sort of like a "first stage of grief" kind of thing.



Mr. ___ tries to talk to Celie, apologizing for keeping Nettie's letters from her. But Celie feels that she does not hate Mr. ___ (whom she now calls Albert), since Shug loves him still, and since he still loves Shug. Celie tells Albert that her children were fathered by her stepfather, and Albert is appalled by this information. He feels even deeper regret for the abuse he handed out to Celie over so many years.

Mr. ___'s transformation seems to be genuine, and his growing relationship with Celie is marked by the fact that she now calls him by his actual name. He no longer is just a man who controls her. He is becoming a person to her, and so she shares her history with him, which affects him deeply.



Sofia tells Celie and Albert stories about Eleanor Jane, who is now married to a man named Stanley Earl, and who has a child named Reynolds. Eleanor wants Sofia to comment on how cute Reynolds is, but Sofia finally interrupts Eleanor, saying that, as her black maid, she was forced to care for Eleanor—that it was her job—but she wants Eleanor to recognize that she, and any other black woman, did not and does not want this work, and that she does not consider Eleanor her child, nor Reynolds her grandchild.

Sofia is permitted this final monologue to describe, to Eleanor Jane, the nature of black servitude in the South. White families tended to believe that their black house-staff genuinely loved the children—that they were sort of less privileged family. Sofia puts that idea to rest, emphasizing that the black staff are servants, just doing a job.



This speech hurts Eleanor, but Sofia is glad to have spoken her mind, finally, to the family that once employed her. Eleanor leaves Sofia's house in tears.

Eleanor will come to realize that Sofia's statement is true, and Eleanor will be saddened by the fact that her family demanded Sofia's services for so long. Yet, at the same time, the degree to which this news hurts Eleanor indicates that Eleanor does feel familial love toward Sofia.



Shug writes to Celie and says that she lives in Arizona, now, with Germaine, who teaches on an Indian reservation, and who is treated with indifference by the Native Americans there. This treatment upsets Germaine, who wants to help the Native Americans as best he can.

Germaine's treatment at the hands of the Native Americans on the reservation exactly mimics Nettie's feeling among the Olinka—that her presence is not wanted, and that she can never "blend in" with society there.



Celie and Albert talk more about Shug, each discussing how much they've loved her, and how they've now spent a good part of their lives loving Shug, even though she continues to run away, and to pursue her own interests and the expense of others' feelings.

Celie teaches Albert how to sew a few stitches, and they begin talking about life in Africa, as they sit on the porch making pants together. Celie tells an African myth that she heard from Nettie (in a letter not included in the novel), in which white people are considered the children of black people.

In this myth, the Olinkans believe that black people, the first people on earth, began having white children, but many of these children were considered abnormal and killed. Adam was the first white child to survive.

Celie continues the story by saying that, when white Christian missionaries told the Africans about Adam and Eve, the Africans laughed, since "white" and "naked" in their language are the same word. Thus Adam and Eve were kicked out of Paradise for their whiteness and their nakedness, whereas black persons are "clothed" by their color.

Celie finishes the story by saying that, for the Olinkans, white anger, and the desire to kill black people, derives from the fact that white people were kicked out of Paradise by black people. White people, therefore, will stop at nothing to harm those whom they believe to have harmed them first. Albert replies that the Olinkans sure have "a heap of time to sit and think about" these things.

LETTER 88

Nettie writes to Celie, saying that Adam and Tashi have returned from the mbeles, where they saw a large number of Africans, from various tribes, living together and attempting to counteract English rule.

Celie and Mr. ____ become united by their love for Shug. Although they develop a genuine friendship, too, their love for Shug is the initial bond that draws them close.



Another inversion of gender roles: Mr. ____, who never wanted to do any work around the house, now spends his time happily sewing—doing "women's work"—with Celie on the porch.



An inversion of the Adam and Eve story, in which Adam is not the first man, but merely the first white man who survives at the hands of his black forebears, who are afraid of his whiteness.



An important "pun" in Olinka. Celie, too, will eventually feel that her blackness is not a mark of sin or evil, but rather a sign that she is clothed, rather than naked—clothed by a loving family, one that respects and reveres her.



The Olinka myth explains why white people seem to want to destroy black life and culture. The Olinka justify this hatred by arguing that, in the past, black people wanted to destroy white culture. The Olinka believe this cycle of destruction will be repeated for all time. Albert's reply is interesting, in that it implies that all of this is overthinking things, that there is no such "single reason" for racism or mistreatment.



Again, it is not clear whether the mbeles want a revolutionary overthrow of colonial forces, or simply a space for Africa villages to coexist with the English.



Samuel and Nettie decide to go back to America, however, because the Olinkan village has shrunk drastically, and most have left it to help the mbeles. Adam wishes to marry Tashi, and to prove this fact, he undergoes her same facial scarification ritual. Tashi takes this as evidence of the seriousness of his request, and their marriage is sealed and celebrated. This new family—Nettie, Samuel, Olivia, Adam, and Tashi—are now to head back to the US.

Adam's gesture to receive the same facial tattooing that Tashi did is an indication of his desire and willingness to be an equal to her. His love is not one of domination but of sharing. The return to America heightens anticipation of a reunion between Nettie and Celie, and Celie and her long lost children.



LETTER 89

Celie has hired Sofia to work in her shop, as a clerk, and Sofia has made amends with Eleanor. Sofia tells Eleanor how she, Sofia, was initially made the family's servant. Eleanor is horrified by her parents' actions long ago, and begins helping Henrietta even more, whipping up various yam dishes in order to alleviate the symptoms of Henrietta's illness.

Eleanor, by way of apologizing to Sofia, does what she can for Henrietta. This inverts the typical black-white service relationship: Eleanor is now, to a certain extent, "working" for Sofia. It also indicates that Eleanor felt true bonds of love with Sofia, whom she, as a child, felt was a true mother figure to her—not a servant. Eleanor seems to be confronting the forces of racism that had before seemed invisible to her.



Celie has another conversation with Mr. ____, whose transition into a good man appears to be complete. He wonders about all he has gone through, all the suffering he has caused Celie and others, yet he also sees how much love surrounds him—Shug's, Celie's now, and Sofia's, and the children's. Albert believes it is his religious duty, while on earth, to wonder at the marvels of **God's** creation, to appreciate the beauty that surrounds him.

Mr. ____, too, mirrors the language of spirituality used, independently, by Celie and by Nettie. He believes that God is all around him, and that, to live a better life, he must refuse to believe in the God of white Christianity. Rather, he must construct his own deity out of love for the people and the natural world around him.



Shug returns, saying that Germaine has left her to go to college. Celie shows Shug her room in the new house, Celie's house, now painted purple and red, and displays a **purple** frog that Albert has carved for her. This frog is an acknowledgment of what Celie once said to Albert—that, to her, all men look like frogs. Celie tells Shug that both she and Albert love her and will take care of her. They consider her part of their large family.

The purple frog is of great symbolic importance. The frog, a joke from Mr. ____, embodies his new friendship with Celie. And the color purple, as before, represents Celie's desires for independence and for freedom—for a splash of "color" and excitement in a life that, for many years, was only difficulty and drudgery. Meanwhile, now Shug returns, having experienced being abandoned, and it is she who is welcomed into Celie's family rather than the other way around. And it truly is a family built around love, and without jealousy.



LETTER 90

Celie addresses this final letter to "**God**," but this time it is a new God—one of the trees, of the land she loves, of everything she cares about. One day, a quiet one at Celie's new house, Celie and the rest of the family spot a car driving quickly up to it. They do not know who it could be, and Celie cannot believe her eyes: it's Nettie, Samuel, Adam, Tashi, and Olivia. Celie and Nettie are so shocked, upon being reunited, that they don't know what to say to each other.

Celie no longer addresses Nettie, who is now living with her, and she does not address the "white male God" of the early letters. Rather, this new God is the God she, Mr. ____, and Nettie have come to believe in—the God that sees and loves all, without regard to race, color, or creed. Early in the novel Celie was made speechless because others controlled her. Now she is speechless from joy.



After a long embrace, the families introduce themselves to one another, and Celie shares time with her two grown children. Everyone is so happy, the scene is nearly quiet—suffused with a total joy.

On July 4th, the families have a large barbecue to celebrate the reunion. Mary Agnes has returned, having left Grady, so nearly all the novel's characters are now in one place for the first time. At the reunion, Celie remarks that the African family, especially Tashi, Adam, and Olivia "speak a little funny," but otherwise everyone feels at home.

Celie closes the novel by saying that, though she knows she is growing older, and has gone through a great deal over the past thirty years, the presence of her children makes her feel young. In fact, on this day, it is the youngest she has felt in her entire life.

The two families are joined, after so long apart. And the God Celie and Nettie have both described—the God who loves love and suffuses everything—seems to be tangible present.



Squeak's return, as Mary Agnes, her real name, indicates that she too has gained her own voice and personhood. There is still difference among them—as indicated by their accents—the differences are accepted as minor things. It is the "feeling at home" that matters.



Celie's search for God and family has also been a search for her own lost youth—a youth mostly spent doing the bidding of abusive men. Now that Celie is independent and free, she is able, too, to relive a childhood she never really had, among the people she loves.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Schlegel, Chris. "The Color Purple." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 20 Nov 2013. Web. 13 Dec 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Schlegel, Chris. "The Color Purple." LitCharts LLC, November 20, 2013. Retrieved December 13, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-color-purple>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Color Purple* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Pocket Books. 1985.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Pocket Books. 1985.