

***The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982)**

Overview

The Color Purple follows Celie's letters to God as she grows up, endures physical and sexual abuse, and reclaims her family in the early 20th century American south. It has received both critical acclaim and controversy since its publication. The novel won both the American Book Award and Pulitzer Prize in 1983. Yet its depictions of sexual abuse and racism remain controversial to this day. On the novel's controversial content Walker said, "A lot of the things in *The Color Purple* happened to people in my family long before I was born. [...] Part of the creation of *The Color Purple* is out of a longing to be more intimate with my ancestors at a time when I didn't exist."¹ The novel's language is based on the spoken dialects of African Americans in the twentieth century known as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or more informally as black English. Academics point to the novel as the first time many readers read AAVE in a mainstream novel. Additionally, the novel is part of a rich literary tradition of African American women writers as seen in the works of Toni Morrison, Zora Nelle Hurston, and Nellie Larson. *The Color Purple* was also made into a popular movie starring Whoopi Goldberg in 1985 and adapted into an award-winning musical in 2004.

Why was it banned?

According to the American Library Association, the novel has been banned for offensive language and depictions of sexuality, abuse, and incest.

Discussion questions

1. The novel has been criticized, and banned, for both its portrayal of black men and Celie and Shug's relationship. However, Alice Walker is an out-spoken member of the Civil Rights movement and a "womanist," or feminist calling for greater inclusivity among women. What do you make of the novel's portrayals? How do you see characters both reinforcing and moving beyond stereotypes?
2. Many well-known American novels take place in the American south including William Faulkner's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. How does Walker's novel fit in with other works set in the American south? What roles do race, social class, and gender play in these works?
3. What were your reactions to the novel's language? What was the effect reading the character's spoken language as opposed to Standard Written English? How did the novel's language influence how you understood Celie and her story?
4. Many novels leave sexual relationships implied rather than described. The novel's depictions of sex, ranging from Celie's father sexually abusing her to her relationship with Shug, have been used as justification for banning the novel from schools and libraries across the country. What is your reaction to sexual depictions in the novel? What do they add to Celie's life story?
5. This novel was published in 1982 yet continues to be banned. What do you think it is about this novel which continues to stir controversy? How have depictions of African

¹ NJPAC interview https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uALf_v0zxcgE

American women characters changed or failed to change in the decades since the novel's publication? How do you place this novel in terms of the Civil Rights movement and Black Lives Matter?

Similar works

The Salt Eaters by Toni Cade Bambara

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

Passing by Nellie Larson

Beloved by Toni Morrison

Recommendations for additional information

"Womanist" by Alice Walker

ALA 100 banned books website

<http://www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/classics/reasons>

The Color Purple (movie) directed by Stephan Spielberg

The Color Purple (musical) produced by Oprah

Alice Walker interview https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uALf_v0zxgE