THE COLOR PURPLE (1982) by Alice Walker

QUICK FACTS

narrator · Celie (and Nettie at times)

point of view · Celie speaks in the first person through a series of private letters she writes to God and, later, to Nettie. At first, Celie’s letters focus only on what she does, hears, sees, and feels. Over time, they grow to include more complex themes and insights. Later in the novel, the narrative shifts back and forth between letters written by Celie and letters written by Nettie. However, the letters from Nettie are still read through Celie’s eyes.

tone · The tone is very confessional and uninhibited, as Celie’s letters to God are private, much like journal entries.

tense · Present

setting (time) · 1910–1940. Though The Color Purple is a historical novel, it never refers to any factual events. There are no dates, little sense of the passage of time, and very few mentions of characters’ ages.

setting (place) · Rural Georgia in the early 20th century; Western Africa in a small village in the early 20th century

The book begins about 30 years before World War II. It covers the first half of the 20th century, as we follow Celie through thirty or forty years of her life. The setting of Celie’s story is unmistakably among poor blacks in rural areas of the South. As a poor black woman in the rural south, Celie’s bad treatment is largely ignored. Having very little exposure to education or the outside world, Celie lives most of her life very isolated and ignorant.

Celie starts to learn more about herself and the world from people who enter into her life from very different settings than her own. Shug Avery comes from the city – Memphis, Tennessee – where she lives a much more liberated life than Celie. Shug owns her own home, has a car, wears fashionable clothing, is outspoken, and thinks life is meant to be enjoyed. When Celie leaves home and joins Shug in Memphis, Celie also becomes more liberated. Whereas Celie had never before even dreamed of wearing pants (to her they were men’s clothes), Celie now starts a company making pants for both men and women. She also learns to speak up for herself.

Celie’s world is also dramatically expanded as a result of her sister’s travels in Africa. Living a poor, downtrodden life in the South, Celie had never stopped to consider her African heritage until Nettie sends letter describing the West African village she’s living in. Nettie describes her first experiences in Africa as "magical." For the first time, Celie (via Nettie’s letters), comes to see black people not as downtrodden, but as beautiful, noble, and proud. Celie learns that the first humans in the world were black people, originating in Africa. She also learns that Africans had
an extremely rich culture and had thriving civilizations far before Europeans did. Although the Olinkan village that Nettie lives in eventually is destroyed by Europeans, through the African setting, both Celie and Nettie begin to feel that their black heritage is a source of pride rather than a cause for shame. They learn that though black people are currently oppressed, that wasn’t always the case, and therefore need not be the case in the future.

**protagonist** · Celie

**major conflict** · Celie is verbally, physically, and sexually abused by several different men, leaving her with little sense of self-worth, no narrative voice, and no one to run to.

**rising action** · Shug teaches Celie about God, sexuality, and love, and helps Celie locate Nettie’s lost letters. These actions enable Celie to find her voice and sense of self.

**climax** · Bolstered by the self-confidence she has gained through her relationship with Shug, Celie suddenly lashes back at Mr. ______ in an angry verbal tirade. She then moves to Tennessee with Shug and opens her own clothing store.

**falling action** · Celie returns to Georgia as a successful entrepreneur and finds that Mr. ______ has undergone a personal transformation. After Alphonso’s death, she inherits her family’s home and welcomes the returning Nettie, Samuel, Olivia, and Adam into the house.

**ANALYSIS**

**themes** · The power of narrative and voice; the power of strong female relationships; the cyclical nature of racism and sexism; the disruption of traditional gender roles

**motifs** · Letters; the rural farm community; colors

**symbols** · Sewing and quilts; God

**Character List**

**Celia** - The protagonist and narrator of *The Color Purple*. Celie is a poor, uneducated black woman with a sad personal history. She survives a stepfather who rapes her and steals her babies and also survives an abusive husband. As an adult, Celie befriends and finds intimacy with a blues singer, Shug Avery, who gradually helps Celie find her voice. By the end of the novel, Celie is a happy, independent, and self-confident woman.

**Nettie** - Celie’s younger sister, whom Mr. ______ initially wanted to marry. Nettie runs from Alphonso to Mr. ______, and later runs away from Mr. ______. She meets a husband-and-wife pair of missionaries, Samuel and Corrine. With them, she moves to Africa to preach. Nettie becomes the caretaker of Samuel and Corrine’s adopted children (who, Nettie later learns, are Celie’s biological children, whom Celie and Nettie’s stepfather stole and subsequently sold) and faithfully writes letters to Celie for decades. Nettie’s experiences in Africa broaden the novel’s scope, introducing issues of imperialism and pan-African struggles.
Mr. ______ - Celie’s husband, who abuses her for years. Mr. ______, whose first name is Albert, pines away for Shug during his marriage to Celie and hides Nettie’s letters to Celie in his trunk for decades. After Celie finally defies Mr. ______, denouncing him for his abuse, he undergoes a deep personal transformation, reassessing his life and eventually becoming friends with Celie.

Shug Avery - A sultry blues singer who first appears as Mr. ______’s mistress. Shug becomes Celie’s friend and eventually her lover, all the while remaining a gentle mentor who helps Celie evolve into an independent and assertive woman. Shug does not at first appear to be the mothering kind, yet she nurtures Celie physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Shug gives Celie the idea of sewing pants for a living.
Read an in-depth analysis of Shug Avery.

Harpo - Mr. ______’s eldest son. Many of Harpo’s actions overturn stereotypical gender roles. He confesses to Celie about his love for Sofia, cries in her arms, enjoys cooking and housework, kisses his children, and marries an independent woman, Sofia. However, Mr. ______’s expectations of stereotypical male dominance convince Harpo that he needs to beat Sofia. His efforts at abusing Sofia fail, since she is much stronger than he is. At the end of the novel, Harpo reforms his ways, and he and Sofia reconcile and save their marriage.

Sofía - A large, fiercely independent woman who befriends Celie and marries Harpo. Sofia refuses to submit to whites, men, or anyone else who tries to dominate her. After defying the town’s mayor, Sophia is sentenced to twelve years in jail, but the sentence is later commuted to twelve years labor as the mayor’s maid. The hardship Sofia endures serves as a reminder of the costs of resistance and the difficulties of combating cultural and institutional racism.

Squeak - Harpo’s lover after Sofia leaves him. As a mulatto, a person of mixed black and white ancestry, Squeak highlights the complex nature of racial identification. Although abused like many of the women in the novel, Squeak eventually undergoes a transformation much like Celie’s. She demands to be called by her real name, Mary Agnes, and she pursues a singing career.

Alphonso - Celie and Nettie’s stepfather, who the sisters think is their real father until Nettie learns the truth years later. When Celie is young, Alphonso rapes and abuses her until she moves out of the house. Unlike Mr. ______ and Harpo, who are transformed, Alphonso remains an abuser until his death. Celie inherits her house and property after Alphonso dies.

Samuel - A minister who, along with his wife, Corrine, adopts Celie’s biological children, Olivia and Adam. A wise, spiritually mature black intellectual committed to “the uplift of black people everywhere,” Samuel takes Corrine, Nettie, and the children to Africa for missionary work. He tells Nettie the story that makes her realize Alphonso is her stepfather rather than her biological father. After Corrine’s death, Samuel marries Nettie.

Corrine - Samuel’s wife. After moving to Africa, Corrine grows increasingly suspicious and jealous of Nettie’s role in her family, convinced that Nettie and Samuel have had an affair. While still in Africa, Corrine dies from a fever, opening the opportunity for Nettie and Samuel to marry.

Olivia - Celie and Alphonso’s biological daughter, who is adopted by Samuel and Corrine. Olivia develops a close sisterly relationship with Tashi, an Olinka village girl. This friendship,
which crosses cultural boundaries, serves as an example of the strength of relationships between women.

**Adam** - Celie and Alphonso’s biological son, who, like Olivia, is adopted by Samuel and Corrine. Adam falls in love with Tashi, a young Olinka girl. By marrying Tashi, Adam symbolically bridges Africa and America, and his respect for and deference to her subverts patriarchal notions that women are subordinate to men.

**Tashi** - An Olinka village girl who befriends Olivia and marries Adam. Tashi defies white imperialist culture and embodies the struggle of traditional cultural values against colonization. She chooses to undergo two painful African traditions—facial scarring and genital mutilation—as a way to physically differentiate her culture from imperialist culture.

**Miss Millie** - The wife of the mayor of the town where Celie lives. Miss Millie is racist and condescending, but she admires the cleanliness and good manners of Sofia’s children, so she asks Sofia to be her maid. Sofia replies, “Hell no,” and is sent first to jail, then to Miss Millie’s, where she ends up working as her maid after all.

**Eleanor Jane** - The mayor’s daughter. Eleanor Jane develops a strong attachment to Sofia and turns to her for emotional support. However, Sofia does not reciprocate Eleanor Jane’s feelings because of the years of mistreatment she suffered at the hands of Eleanor Jane’s parents. Toward the end of the novel, Eleanor Jane finally begins to understand the injustices Sofia and other blacks have suffered. She attempts to atone for her part in the unjust treatment of Sofia by caring for Sofia’s daughter Henrietta.

**Grady** - Shug’s husband. Grady is a loving and sweet man, but also a womanizer. He spends Shug’s money flamboyantly and frequently smokes marijuana. When Grady and Squeak begin an affair, Shug seems relieved to be rid of any responsibility to her relationship with Grady.

**Kate** - One of Mr. ______’s sisters. Kate urges Celie to stand up for herself and defy Mr. ______’s abuses.

**SUMMARY OF LETTERS 1-90**

**Letters 1–10**

**Summary**

*The Color Purple* opens with Celie’s memory of her father’s command that she stay quiet about his abuse of her. The rest of the novel is composed of letters, and we begin with the first of many private letters Celie writes to God. In her first letter, Celie asks for guidance because she does not understand what is happening to her. Only fourteen, Celie is already pregnant with her second child—the result of rape and incest. Alphonso, Celie’s father, has turned to Celie for sexual gratification because Celie’s mother is ill and can no longer endure Alphonso’s sexual demands.
Celie’s mother dies. Celie writes that Alphonso stole Celie’s first baby while she was sleeping and killed it in the woods, and she believes he will kill her second baby as well. However, Alphonso does not kill the second baby, and Celie suspects that he instead sold the child to a married couple. Celie is left with her breasts filled with milk for no one.

From Celie’s fourth letter to God, we learn that Alphonso has brought home a new wife, though this marriage does not end the physical and sexual abuse Celie endures. Alphonso beats Celie for winking at a boy in church, though she may have just had something stuck in her eye. Later, he beats her again for dressing “trampy.”

Celie and her younger sister, Nettie, learn that a man, to whom Celie refers only as Mr. ______, has shown an interest in marrying Nettie. The man is recently widowed because his first wife was murdered by her lover. Alphonso’s new wife tells Celie and Nettie that Mr. ______ also had a lover outside of marriage, a woman named Shug Avery. The girls find a photograph of Shug, and her bright, glamorous face captivates Celie, who has never seen anyone like her.

Alphonso refuses to hand Nettie over to Mr. ______, stating that she is far too young and inexperienced to marry a man with children. Alphonso wants Nettie to continue her schooling and offers the man Celie instead. Alphonso claims that though Celie is ugly, a liar, and “spoiled twice,” she is older and hardworking and owns her own cow, which she could bring into the marriage.

After brooding over the offer for a few months, Mr. ______ makes up his mind to take Celie. Celie desperately wants to stay in school, but Alphonso says she is too dumb to learn anything. Celie spends her wedding day bandaging a wound from a rock Mr. ______’s son throws at her, untangling her screaming stepdaughters’ hair, and cooking dinner. Celie spends a joyless wedding night with Mr. ______ on top of her, all the while worrying about Nettie’s safety.

While in town one day, Celie catches sight of a young girl who she thinks may be her lost daughter. The girl closely resembles Celie, especially her eyes. The little girl’s mother talks kindly with Celie after she follows them into a fabric store, where Celie learns that the mother calls her daughter Olivia, the same name Celie gave her own daughter and embroidered on her diapers before the infant was taken away. In the store, the racist shopkeeper treats Olivia’s mother poorly, making her buy thread she does not want and tearing off her new fabric without bothering to measure it.

Analysis

The epistolary, or letter-writing, form of The Color Purple resembles a diary, since Celie tells her story through private letters that she writes to God. Therefore, Celie narrates her life story with complete candor and honesty. As a poor African-American woman in rural Georgia in the 1930s and a victim of domestic abuse, Celie is almost completely voiceless and disenfranchised in everyday society. However, Celie’s letters enable her to break privately the silence that is normally imposed upon her.

Celie’s confessional narrative is reminiscent of African-American slave narratives from the nineteenth century. These early slave narratives, which took the form of song, dance, storytelling,
and other arts, ruptured the silence imposed on the black community. Yet, unlike Celie’s letters, these slave narratives employed codes, symbols, humor, and other methods to hide their true intent. Slaves took these measures to prevent slave owners from discovering the slaves’ ability to communicate, articulate, and reflect on their unhappiness, but Celie takes no such protective measures.

Celie’s letters, though completely candid and confessional, are sometimes difficult to decipher because Celie’s ability to narrate her life story is highly limited. When Celie’s cursing mother asks who fathered Celie’s baby, Celie, remembering Alphonso’s command to keep quiet, says the baby is God’s because she does not know what else to say. Similarly, Celie does not know what to say about her mother’s death, her abuse, or her stolen babies. Celie knows how to state the events plainly, but often does not know how to interpret them. Despite the abuses she endures, Celie has little consciousness of injustice and shows little or no anger.

Walker’s use of Celie’s own voice, however underdeveloped, allows Walker to tell the history of black women in the rural South in a sympathetic and realistic way. Unlike a historian’s perspective, which can be antiseptic and overly analytical, Celie’s letters offer a powerful first-person account of the institutions of racism and sexism. Celie’s simple narrative brings us into her isolated world with language that reveals both pain and detached numbness: “My momma dead. She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me.”

Like her voice, Celie’s faith is prominent but underdeveloped. Celie relies heavily on God as her listener and source of strength, but she sometimes blurs the distinction between God’s authority and that of Alphonso. She confesses that God, rather than Alphonso, killed her baby, and she never makes any association between the injustice she experiences in her life and the ability of God to overturn or prevent this injustice.

Letters 11–21

Summary

Nettie runs away from Alphonso and finds refuge with Celie and Mr. ______. It quickly becomes clear that Mr. ______ still has an eye for Nettie. Whenever Mr. ______ pays Nettie a compliment, she passes it on to Celie. However, Nettie refuses Mr. ______’s advances, and she is soon forced to leave. Never hearing from Nettie again, Celie presumes her sister is dead.

Mr. ______’s two sisters, Kate and Carrie, visit and treat Celie with kindness, complimenting her on her housekeeping and her care of the children. Kate tells her brother that Celie needs new clothes, and though he seems surprised to learn that Celie would have needs, he allows the purchase. Celie is so grateful for her new dress, she does not know how to thank Kate. Kate also demands that Mr. ______’s eldest son, Harpo, help Celie with chores. Harpo has refused to help because he considers chores a woman’s job. Kate’s demand angers her brother, and the two get in a heated fight. When Kate leaves the house, she tells Celie to fight back against Mr. ______, but Celie does not see what good fighting will do.

Harpo confides in Celie that he has fallen in love with a spunky, robust young girl named Sofia. Celie’s thoughts linger on the sexy Shug Avery, who she learns is coming to town to sing at a
local bar called the Lucky Star. Celie longs to go to the bar, merely to lay eyes on Shug. However, the only member of the household who sees Shug is Mr. ______, who spends the weekend with her. When he returns, Celie resists the temptation to ask Mr. ______ all the questions she has about Shug’s dresses, her body, and her voice. Instead, Celie and Harpo toil silently through the extra work they are given while Mr. ______ is lovesick and depressed after Shug’s departure. Harpo tries to complain to his father about the heavy workload, but Celie notes that Harpo is just as unskilled at arguing with Mr. ______ as she is.

Sofia’s parents will not let her marry Harpo because of the legacy of his murdered mother, and Mr. ______ is also opposed to the idea. However, after Sofia gets pregnant, marriage becomes inevitable. Celie is struck by the vivaciousness and unflinching strength Sofia displays as she talks back to Harpo and Mr. ______, as defiance is foreign to her own relationships with the two men.

When Sofia and Harpo marry, Celie helps them fix up an old shack on Mr. ______’s land, which they use as a home. Sofia and Harpo are happy newlyweds and doting parents, and Sofia keeps up her spunky spirit, demanding that Harpo help with the chores and refusing to acquiesce to her husband or father-in-law. Frustrated, Harpo asks both Celie and Mr. ______ how to get Sofia to behave, and both give him the only advice they know: to beat her. However, Sofia is physically very strong, and Harpo’s attempts to beat her typically result in more injury to himself than to his wife.

Cemie worries that in advising Harpo to beat Sofia she has somehow committed a sin against Sofia’s spirit, and she has trouble sleeping for more than a month. Sofia learns that it was Celie who advised Harpo to beat her, so she angrily confronts Celie. Celie confesses that she is jealous that Sofia knows how to defend herself and fight back against her husband. Sofia feels sorry for Celie’s timidity and submissiveness, and the two make up and laugh about the incident. They talk about their families, and Sofia mentions she has six brothers. She also has five sisters, and all six girls are strong and “stick together.” Now friends, Sofia and Celie decide to make quilt pieces out of the curtains that were torn during Sofia and Harpo’s recent fights. Celie no longer has trouble sleeping.

In this section, Walker begins to develop the idea that people can attain power by strengthening their own voices. The Celie we have seen so far completely lacks power. She is essentially an object of others who is very passive in her interactions, especially those with men. However, Celie shows she is aware that others see her as a powerless object when she tells Sofia she is jealous of her assertive, self-defensive personality. When Kate tells Mr. ______ that Celie needs new clothes, Celie is acutely aware that Mr. ______ thinks of her as little more than dirt, saying that when he looks at her, it’s like he’s looking at the earth, trying to determine if it needs anything.

Initially, Celie’s advice that Harpo beat Sofia seems out of character, but we see that it is a result of the cyclical nature of abuse and oppression. When Harpo asks Celie for advice, Celie is given a rare opportunity to participate in the control and abuse of a woman other than herself. In her weakness and pain, Celie seizes this opportunity, but she quickly realizes that it represents a “sin against Sofia spirit.” Celie interprets her own act with surprising sophistication, realizing and
admitting to Sofia that she gave the advice because she is jealous that Sofia knows how to fight back against abuse.

Sofia’s comment to Celie that she has tight-knit relationships with her five strong sisters implies that deep ties among women are a powerful means to combat sexism and abuse. Celie first witnesses Sofia’s assertiveness and autonomy when Sofia meets Mr. ______ and defies his attempts to control her. Sofia denies Mr. ______’s accusation that she is in trouble and therefore will end up on the streets. Sofia refuses to despair at her own pregnancy and rebuffs Mr. ______’s attempts to make her miserable. Likewise, Sofia’s refusal to stop talking when Mr. ______ or Harpo enters the room demonstrates that she does not view her identity as a woman simply in terms of reliance on and subjugation to men. Sofia’s defiance of the customs of patriarchy amazes Celie.

Walker argues that mastering one’s own story and finding someone to listen and respond to it are crucial steps toward self-empowerment and autonomy.

Celia’s lack of voice becomes more obvious in this section, as Nettie observes that seeing Celie with Mr. ______ and his children is like “seeing [Celie] buried.” Nettie is the first of several women who tell Celie to fight back. Celie’s explanation to Kate that she does not want to fight because it is too risky seems fatalistic and self-defeating, but Celie is right—there are significant, possibly even fatal, dangers inherent in resistance. Walker explores this tension between safety and danger throughout the novel.

Celia is also reluctant to resist because she lacks the tools she needs to fight back successfully—namely, a sense of self and an ability to create and express her own story. Nettie tries to help build Celia’s sense of self by passing along to Celia Mr. ______’s compliments, which Celie admits bolster her self-image. Soon after, Celie begins her first efforts at self-expression when she tries to thank Kate for buying her a new dress. She becomes frustrated and flushed, unable to find the words. When Kate tells Celie not to worry and that she deserves more, Celie thinks, “Maybe so.” Celie’s strained attempt to communicate her own feelings and her admission that she feels she deserves more than she has are important first steps in Celie’s process of empowerment. At the same time, Celie’s inability to convey her feelings of gratitude to Kate, a sympathetic audience, demonstrates the depth of Celie’s lack of self-understanding.

Celia has difficulty defining, interpreting and speaking about her self because, as she confesses to God, she has grown so numb in the face of adversity. She admits that, to get by, she pretends she is a tree. Rather than react emotionally or intellectually to adversity, Celie has found it easier and less dangerous to become wooden—to remain stone-faced and unthinking rather than attempt to reflect, interpret, or narrate.

**Letters 22–33**

**Summary**

Shug Avery is sick, likely due to a sexually transmitted disease, and no one in the town will take her in. Both her mother and father say that Shug’s promiscuity has gotten her what she deserves. Mr. ______ leaves home unannounced and returns with the feeble Shug in his wagon. Though
weak, feverish, and malnourished, Shug still has a razor-sharp tongue. Her first words to Celie upon meeting her are, “You sure is ugly.” Despite Shug’s nasty demeanor, Celie grows increasingly mesmerized by the sexy singer, whose stylish dresses, makeup, and slender figure are unlike anything Celie has ever seen. When Celie sees Shug unclothed for the first time, she confesses that she feels a sexual attraction.

Shug’s condition improves due to Celie’s care, and the two become friends. Shug’s improved disposition does not change the disdainful way she treats Mr. _______, whose first name, we learn from Shug, is Albert. Shug constantly teases Mr. _______ and calls him weak for not standing up to his own father, but he nonetheless remains love-struck. Harpo has been eating like a horse and has gained such a potbelly that the others laugh and ask when his baby is due. Harpo later confesses to Celie that he has been eating so much in an attempt to get as big as Sofia so that he can finally beat her into submission. This time, Celie advises against beating Sofia, telling Harpo that his relationship with his wife is one of genuine mutual love and should not be compared to the callous, loveless marriage between Celie and Mr. _______.

Mr. _______,’s father and his brother, Tobias, come to visit. Both men disapprove of Shug staying at the house. Celie overhears Mr. _______’s father criticizing Shug’s promiscuity, so she secretly spits in his drinking water. When Mr. _______’s father reprimands his son for his lifestyle, Celie and Mr. _______ share a moment of eye contact that Celie describes as “the closest us ever felt.”

Sofia confesses to Celie that she is sad because, ever since Harpo has been eating and brooding, the two have lost the sexual vitality that was once a central part of their marriage. Sofia is angry with Harpo for his insistence on trying to take away her independence and assertiveness. Eventually, Sofia decides to move in with her sister, taking her children with her. Harpo tries to hide his feelings when Sofia leaves, but Celie sees him wipe away a tear with his baby’s cloth diaper.

Once Sofia has been gone for six months, Harpo and a friend open a juke joint on their land. By hiring Shug to sing there, they draw a crowd to the place. Shug persuades Mr. _______ to allow Celie to go watch her sing. Celie sits with Mr. _______ and admires Shug onstage. She feels confused, sad, and alone when she notices the special eye contact that goes on between Mr. _______ and Shug. Celie’s spirits lift when she hears Shug call out her name and dedicate a song to her, as this is the first time anyone has ever named anything after Celie. Celie knows that it is right for Mr. _______ and Shug to love each other, but she is confused over the pangs in her own heart and her increasing lovesickness for Shug.

Analysis

Here, as in the previous section, Celie cannot match what she feels with what she says. When Shug arrives and needs care, Celie feels ecstatic, but she says nothing because she does not know anything and because she feels it is not her place to speak. Celie has been silenced for so long that she has become accustomed to having no voice. Her natural reaction is to say nothing.
However, Celie begins to understand that her perception of herself differs from the way others perceive her. Reflecting on herself and on her lot, Celie writes, “I might as well be under the table, for all they care. I hate the way I look, I hate the way I’m dress.” These beginnings of self-awareness represent a foundational first step toward Celie’s empowerment.

As her sense of self develops, Celie begins to perceive weakness and shortcomings in the men who oppress her. She also begins to react in an assertive manner. Looking at Mr. ______, Celie critically notes that he has a weak chin and wears dirty clothes. Angry at Mr. ______’s father for his unkind words about Shug, Celie retaliates secretly but assertively, spitting in the old man’s drinking water and threatening to put Shug’s pee in his glass the next time he visits. Celie also displays assertiveness when Harpo again asks for her advice about Sofia. This time, Celie finds words to express her true feelings, and she tells Harpo that abusing Sofia is not the answer.

Walker’s idea of the varied, multilayered nature of intimacy among women also emerges in Celie and Shug’s relationship. Walker understands sexuality and sexual orientation as a spectrum of possibilities rather than as two, polar-opposite choices. Thus, like race, sexuality can be difficult to define, and more complex than the simple dichotomy of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Celie’s feelings toward Shug are sexual, but they are also based on friendship, gratitude, camaraderie, and admiration. Celie does feel sexually aroused when she sees Shug naked, but just as important are the feelings of maternal tenderness toward Shug that Celie confesses to God when describing how she nurses Shug back to health.

LETTERS 34-43
Ciele is upset that Shug is soon leaving the house. Longing for Shug to stay, Celie tells Shug that Mr. ______ beats her when Shug is away. When Shug asks why he beats her, Celie answers, “For being me and not you.” Shug kisses Celie on the shoulder and declares she will not leave until she knows Mr. ______ would not even think about beating Celie.

Shug and Celie’s relationship grows increasingly intimate, and Shug coaxes Celie to talk about sex for the first time. Celie’s words, not surprisingly, are dismal. She says she despises sex and that during the act she typically pretends she is not even there. Shug tells Celie that, in her mind, Celie is still a virgin. To Shug, a woman’s real loss of virginity is not her first sex act, but the first time she experiences the pleasure of an orgasm. Celie finds the idea of pleasure sexy, otherworldly, and shocking.

Shug makes Celie take a mirror and look closely at her own sexual organs for the first time in her life. They act like little girls, giggling and worrying about getting caught. When Celie gets her first long, bold look at herself “down there,” she is not disgusted by what she sees, but states plainly that it is hers. Celie tells Shug that she does not care if Shug sleeps with Mr. ______, but later when she hears them together Celie cries.

Shug continues to sing at Harpo’s juke joint, to increasingly large crowds. Sofia makes a surprise visit one night, looking healthy and happy with a new boyfriend in her arms. Sofia and Harpo dance and make conversation, infuriating Harpo’s new girlfriend, Squeak, a young mixed-race woman who does anything Harpo says. Not knowing the trouble she is getting herself into,
Squeak calls Sofia a bitch and slaps her across the face. Sofia promptly knocks out two of Squeak’s teeth, and coolly departs with her new man.

Sofia’s boldness soon gets her in trouble. When the mayor’s wife, Miss Millie, notices the cleanliness of Sofia’s children and asks Sofia to be her maid, Sofia responds with a curt “Hell no.” The mayor slaps Sofia for her sass, and Sofia knocks him down, an offense that lands her in jail. Upon visiting, Celie finds Sofia badly beaten, and her ribs and skull cracked. Celie is scared, but sits down and grooms Sofia. At home, everyone decides they need to get Sofia out of jail. Squeak admits that she is the niece of the white prison warden, so Mr. ______ tells her to go plead for Sofia’s release. Celie and the others dress Squeak up “like she a white woman” and send her off, armed with fraudulent words to trick the warden into granting Sofia’s release.

The warden does not release Sofia and instead brutally rapes Squeak, who comes home limping, her dress in tatters. Devastated, she tells the others what happened. She demands that Harpo call her by her real name, Mary Agnes. Sofia, rather than being released from prison, is sentenced to work as a maid for the mayor’s wife. Squeak helps Sofia with the mayor’s children, and begins to sing—first Shug’s songs, then songs she makes up herself.

Analysis

Continuing the trend seen in her previous letters, Celie begins to take more pronounced steps in interpreting herself and the world around her. When Celie tells Shug that Mr. ______ beats her “[f]or being me and not you,” she demonstrates that her self-analysis is becoming increasingly developed and sophisticated.

One reason for Celie’s increased self-awareness is the sexual awakening that she experiences through Shug’s education. Shug declares Celie a virgin and renames her Miss Celie, giving Celie a new identity in both a figurative and a literal sense. Shug’s pronouncement of Celie as a virgin and the new name Shug gives Celie are critical to Celie’s empowerment to tell her own story and to her sense of self.

Shug’s renaming of Celie flies in the face of traditional definitions of virginty. Shug redefines virginity in her own terms, saying it is not lost when a man penetrates a woman but rather when a woman chooses to have sex and finds it physically and emotionally pleasurable. By redefining virginity in her own terms, Shug encourages Celie to take similar control over her own situation by interpreting it in a new way. The fact that Shug can suddenly term a married woman with two children a virgin introduces the possibility that there is a submerged, untold story in Celie’s life. Shug helps Celie realize that there are alternatives to the mainstream ways of thinking, perceiving, interpreting, and behaving that the dominant members of society impose upon her. Recognizing the existence of these alternatives gives Celie a sense of control and is an important step in her move toward independence.

Yet Sofia’s punishment makes it clear that challenging and reinterpreting mainstream perspectives often comes at a price. Sofia, who is robust and healthy and has a loving family and a comfortable material existence, is vastly different from white society’s stereo-type of the subservient black woman. Sofia bluntly asserts her unwillingness to conform to this stereotype.
by answering Miss Millie’s employment offer with a resounding “Hell no.” However, this resistance costs Sofia a cracked skull, broken ribs, a body covered with bruises, and twelve years of her life. Likewise, when Squeak resists by venturing forth in an attempt to free Sofia from prison, she is raped. It is clear that although Walker views resistance as crucial, she does not want to romanticize it as an act free of pain or consequences.

Ultimately, neither Sofia’s nor Squeak’s misfortunes defeat them. For Walker, the most basic indication of victory is the ability to tell one’s story, and neither Sofia nor Squeak loses her voice. Sofia maintains her resistance even when pressed into service as Miss Millie’s maid. Likewise, when Harpo tries to tell the others the story of Squeak’s rape, Squeak interrupts him, telling him to be quiet because she wants to tell her own story. Additionally, in the same way Shug renames Celie a virgin, Squeak renames herself to Harpo, rejecting the diminutive nickname he has given her in favor of her real name, Mary Agnes. Just as Celie’s renaming is enabling her to reinterpret the world, Squeak’s renaming opens up the gifts that have long been hidden inside her, and she starts to sing.

Summary

Us sleep like sisters, me and Shug.

(See Important Quotations Explained)

Sofia complains that the mayor’s family is backward. To illustrate its backwardness, she tells a story: Miss Millie pestered her husband into buying her a car, but he refused to teach her to drive. Miss Millie finally asked Sofia to teach her to drive, which she did, with some success. As a Christmas reward, Miss Millie said she would drive Sofia to see her children, whom she had not seen in five years. Miss Millie said Sofia could visit the children for an entire day. However, only a few minutes into the visit, Miss Millie tried to drive back into town but got stuck in the driveway because she did not know how to operate the car in reverse. Frustrated that she had stripped the car’s gears, Miss Millie refused to allow Sofia’s brother-in-law to drive her into town, saying she could never ride in a car “with a strange colored man.” Miss Millie demanded that Sofia drive her home, even though Sofia had been able to spend only fifteen minutes with her children. Whenever Sofia mentions this incident, Miss Millie calls her “ungrateful.”

Shug writes that she has a big surprise, which turns out to be a new husband, Grady. Grady rubs Celie the wrong way, as he makes a flamboyant display of spending Shug’s money. Celie and Mr. ______ feel left out, as the love of their lives has returned home with another man. During Christmas, Grady and Mr. ______ drink while Shug and Celie spend time together. Shug’s singing career has grown rapidly, and she knows many famous musicians. Shug asks whether sex is going any better between Celie and Mr. ______, and Celie says it has not improved much, so she thinks she is still a virgin. Shug sleeps in Celie’s bed, where the two return to sisterly conversations about sex. Celie finally tells Shug her entire life story. It is the first time Celie tells about the rape by her stepfather, her silence, her pregnancies, and Nettie’s disappearance. When Celie finishes her story, tears flow, and Shug says that she loves Celie. Their conversation, kisses, and intimacy turn highly sexual.
One night in bed Shug asks Celie to tell her more about Nettie because—aside from Shug—Nettie is the only person Celie has every really loved. Celie says she fears Nettie is dead because she has not received any letters from her. Shug mentions that she often sees Mr. ______ taking mysterious letters from the mailbox and hiding them in his coat pocket. A week later, Shug recovers the most recent of these letters, which has stamps from Africa on it. The letter is from Nettie. Nettie says she is alive and well and that she has been sending letters all along. Knowing Mr. ______, she assumes Celie has received none of them.

Celia realizes that Mr. ______ must be keeping all Nettie’s letters in his locked trunk. Shug gets the key, and the two women open the trunk one night when they are home alone. Inside, they find dozens of letters from Nettie, some opened, some still sealed. Shug and Celie steam open the sealed letters and replace the empty envelopes in the trunk. Shug helps Celie put the letters in chronological order. Crying and struggling over unfamiliar words, Celie reads only the first seven letters before Grady and Mr. ______ return.

Celia reads that when Nettie first left Mr. ______’s house years ago, he followed her and tried to rape her. When Nettie fought back, Mr. ______ cursed her, saying that she would never again hear from Celie. It turns out that the woman whom Celie saw in the fabric store years ago, whose daughter looked just like Celie’s daughter, is named Corrine. Nettie became friends with Corrine and her husband, Samuel, who were members of a Christian ministry planning to travel to Africa for missionary work. Nettie developed a huge appetite for learning, and after reading all of Samuel and Corrine’s books about African history, decided to accompany them to Africa to help them start their missionary school. Nettie also learned that Samuel and Corrine’s children, Olivia and Adam, are, in fact, Celie’s lost children. Nettie traveled to New York and marveled at black society in Harlem, where liberated blacks own wealthy-looking houses. Nettie then crossed the Atlantic by boat, stopping first in Senegal, then Liberia, and finally a small village where she is doing missionary work. Nettie writes that she is amazed by the richness of African culture and the darkness of the native Africans’ skin.

Celia is nearly blinded with rage when it sinks in that Mr. ______ has been hiding Nettie’s letters from her. She feels sick and numb and has an overwhelming desire to kill Mr. ______. Trying to keep the peace, Shug tells Celie lengthy stories about her past with Mr. ______, who had once been a fun, sexy young man who made Shug very happy. But Celie remains in her own world, unafraid of Mr. ______ and even numb to Shug.

Analysis

By listening to Celie’s story, Shug enables Celie to open up emotionally. When Celie finally articulates the hardships she has endured, she no longer reacts like “wood,” instead crying tears when she realizes the sadness of her own narrative. However, though Celie’s newfound life story is a sad one, it is also a hopeful one because of her growing sexual and emotional relationship with Shug. Celie’s sense of self has developed as a result of watching and learning from Shug. Shug serves as a model for Celie, a woman who embodies everything Celie lacks. At the same time, Shug is also a kind of double. In Shug’s sad eyes, Celie sees the image of her own suffering. Gradually, Celie’s and Shug’s impact on each other becomes reciprocal. They have
even begun to take on each other’s attributes. Celie’s love and care have softened Shug’s heart and made her more gentle and nurturing, while Celie has become more sexually vibrant and assertive.

This relationship between Celie and Shug is centered around the idea of storytelling. Numerous times, Celie mentions how much she and Shug talk to each other. Their constant communication is a giant step away from Celie’s earlier silence. Nettie’s letters also symbolize a narrative that has been suppressed by silence. In finding and reading the letters, Celie in effect resurrects Nettie’s buried voice and begins to feel independent. However, only with Shug’s help can Celie discover Nettie’s story, put it in order, and decipher the parts of it she cannot understand herself. Learning that Nettie is alive gives Celie the strength necessary for self-reliance, and she ceases to fear Mr. _____ or rely as heavily on Shug.

Nettie’s letters also place Celie’s story within a much larger context. Until now, the plot of *The Color Purple* has been confined to a small set of people in a small town in rural Georgia. This insulation and isolation contrasts sharply with Nettie’s experience, which has brought her to a village in Africa. Celie remarks that Nettie’s letters are covered with stamps that have the picture of the Queen of England on them, signaling that blacks in Africa are also oppressed and dominated. The images in Nettie’s letters not only open Celie’s eyes to the outside world, but also link the personal oppression Celie has felt with the broader themes of domination and exploitation on the continent of Africa.

Another important element of Nettie’s experience is her exposure to free blacks who are prospering in the North, namely in the Harlem neighborhood of New York. The idea of economically successful and independent blacks is largely foreign to Southern black women like Nettie and Celie, who are accustomed only to denigration, denial, and subservience at the hands of both whites and black men. We see that Nettie’s encounter with independent blacks has broadened her idea of opportunity considerably. Even though Celie may not yet realize it, Nettie’s descriptions of Harlem empower Celie and they may be a factor in the economic independence Celie achieves later in the novel. The concept of black prosperity and independence is yet another submerged or suppressed narrative that is now emerging into the foreground of Celie’s consciousness.

**Letters 61–69**

**Summary**

It must have been a pathetic exchange. Our chief never learned English beyond an occasional odd phrase he picked up from Joseph, who pronounces “English” “Yanglush.”

(See *Important Quotations Explained*)

Celie’s spirits rise now that she knows Nettie is alive. Celie decides that she will leave Mr. _____ as soon as Nettie returns to Georgia, and she wonders what her children look like. She continues to read Nettie’s letters in the order in which they were sent.
In her letters, Nettie tells the following story. She, Corrine, Samuel, the children, and their guide, Joseph, travel for four days through the jungle until they reach an Olinka village, their final destination. The Olinka villagers crowd around them because they are unaccustomed to the sight of African-American missionaries. One woman contends that Olivia and Adam must be Nettie’s children and asks if both Nettie and Corrine are wives of Samuel’s. Together, the group is ushered into a hut with no walls, and the Olinka serve them dinner and palm wine.

Nettie befriends a woman named Catherine, whose daughter Tashi quickly develops a friendship with Olivia. Corrine, meanwhile, grows increasingly uncomfortable with Nettie’s nebulous role in the family and is frustrated that the natives think Nettie is Samuel’s other wife. Corrine requests that Nettie not allow the children to call her “Mama Nettie.” Eventually, Corrine also requests that Nettie no longer invite Samuel into her hut alone and that she and Corrine no longer wear each other’s clothes.

Because, as girls, Tashi and Olivia are not allowed to enter the local school, they join Nettie in her private hut to talk, tell stories, and share secrets. Tashi is the only one of the Olinka villagers who wants to hear about African-American slavery, and it angers Nettie that the Africans fail to acknowledge even partial responsibility for the slave trade. Consequently, Nettie begins to feel that Africans are just as self-centered as white Americans.

The village soon experiences a turn for the worse when road builders working for an English rubber company plow through the middle of the village with orders to shoot anyone who opposes them. They destroy village homes and crops and force the Olinka to start paying rent on their own land since the company claims the Olinka no longer own it.

Corrine continues to fear that Nettie is encroaching upon her family and threatening her identity as a wife and mother. Corrine becomes ill with a fever and, wondering if Nettie might really be Olivia and Adam’s biological mother, demands that both Nettie and Samuel swear on the Bible that they had never met before Nettie came to their home for help.

Nettie, believing that Olivia and Adam are in fact Celie’s children, finally requests in private that Samuel explain how he adopted them. Nettie learns that Celie and Nettie’s father had been a farmer who decided to open a dry goods store. The store was very successful and always teeming with customers. Competing white storeowners were furious at Nettie’s father for taking all the black business away from them, so they burned his shop and lynched him. At the time, Nettie’s mother had already had Celie. Soon after her husband’s death, Nettie’s mother went into labor and gave birth to Nettie. Though she never fully recovered from the mental anguish of her husband’s death, she remarried, to a man named Alphonso, and continued having children until she died.

Alphonso and Samuel know each other from Samuel’s wild days, before Samuel became religious. One day, Alphonso showed up at Samuel’s door, saying that his wife was too ill to care for their two youngest children. When Alphonso offered the two children to Samuel, Samuel could not refuse because he and Corrine had been unable to have children of their own. Samuel never revealed the identity of the children to Corrine, so when Nettie showed up, both Samuel and Corrine had assumed, from the resemblance, that Olivia and Adam were Nettie’s children.
Dazed after learning that Alphonso is not her real father, Celie stops writing to God and begins writing to Nettie instead. Shug decides to move back to Tennessee and asks Celie to move with her. Before they leave, however, Celie wants to go see Alphonso. She and Shug find a new house with a beautifully landscaped yard built on Alphonso’s old property. Alphonso has a new wife, Daisy, who is only fifteen years old. Alphonso confirms that Celie’s real father was lynched and that he is really only her stepfather. Celie and Shug stop by the local cemetery, but they are unable to locate Celie’s mother and father’s gravesite because it is unmarked. Comforting Celie, Shug tells her, “Us each other’s peoples now,” and kisses her.

Analysis

Throughout *The Color Purple*, Walker makes it clear that storytelling and communication are crucial to self-understanding. By this point in the novel, we have seen problems due to failed communication between Celie and Alphonso; between Celie and Mr. ______; among Nettie, Samuel, and Corrine; and between Celie and Nettie. As the novel progresses, some of these ruptures in communication are repaired through narratives of one kind or another. Celie finds Nettie’s letters, Samuel tells the story of his children to Nettie, and Celie confirms this story with Alphonso, learning the truth of her own family history. However, aside from communication failures in these specific relationships, Walker highlights many broader, more general communication problems in the world that remain unresolved. She points to failed communication between men and women; between American blacks and American whites, between American blacks and Africans, and between Africans and European imperialists.

Celie’s discovery of her true family history brings about a major change in her pattern of communication, as she develops surrogates for God and her parents, in the form of other women. After learning of her tragic background, Celie feels that she has lost some of her faith in God, and closes what she intends to be her final letter to God by chiding, “You must be sleep.” Instead, Celie begins to write letters to Nettie. Likewise, though Celie is unable to locate her parents’ graves, to which she looks for closure, Shug tells Celie, “Us each other’s peoples now.” These strong, surrogate ties that Celie makes with other women allow her to create a new family in the face of the tragedies she has endured. Celie ceases to wait for the kingdom of heaven and begins to search for peace and happiness in her own life.

Nettie’s voice, likewise, has burst forth after being obscured for so long. We see that Nettie has become highly intellectually curious and sophisticated, and is now a missionary, a job that is centered around articulating a narrative. Nettie is very vocal in her attitudes toward the native Africans, especially the self-centeredness she perceives in them, and their clear sexism.

Additionally, by highlighting the self-centeredness Nettie perceives in the Olinka community, as well as its clear subordination of women, Walker complicates her depiction of race and identity. Though the Olinka are oppressed by a colonial force, the rubber company, there is still significant oppression within the Olinka community itself. This internal oppression, coupled with what Walker portrays as the self-centeredness of the Olinka people and their indifference toward African-American slavery, complicates the seemingly straightforward categories of oppressor and oppressed.
Letters 70–82

Summary

Well, us talk and talk about God, but I’m still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of
my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of
corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?). Not the little wildflowers.
Nothing.

(See Important Quotations Explained)

Nettie confesses to Samuel and Corrine that she is their children’s aunt. By this point, Corrine is
very ill and has grown bitter and unfeeling toward the children. Still certain the children are
Nettie’s, Corrine refuses to believe Nettie’s story and is stubborn in her belief that Nettie and
Samuel are lying to her. Nettie tries to make Corrine recall the time when Celie saw her with her
children in the fabric store in Georgia. Corrine fails to remember it until Nettie finds the quilt
made from the fabric Corrine bought that day. Corrine finally remembers seeing Celie, but dies
of her illness that night. According to Samuel, Corrine forgave Nettie and overcame her fear just
before she died.

Ciele confesses to both Shug and Nettie that she has stopped writing to God. Shug tries to get
Ciele to reimagine God, not as the archetypal old bearded white man, but as an “it” who exists in
and delights in all creation. In the meantime, after eleven and a half years, the mayor and Miss
Millie end Sofia’s period of servitude and release her. Though free, Sofia feels lost, as her older
children are married and scattered, and her younger ones do not even remember her. Harpo and
Squeak now have a daughter of their own, named Suzie Q.

Back at Mr. ______’s house, with all the old crew seated at dinner, Shug announces that she,
Ciele, and Grady are moving to Memphis. In front of everyone, Ciele finally speaks her mind,
cursing Mr. ______ and later telling him that everything he touches will crumble until he makes
amends for the years of abuse and mistreatment he has brought her. The others are shocked at
Ciele’s defiance. Squeak, perhaps hearing a bit of her own story in Ciele’s defiance, announces
that she will join them and move to Tennessee as well.

Shug’s house in Memphis is spacious, luxurious, and beautifully decorated. Ciele passes the time
designing and sewing individually tailored pants. Shug urges Ciele to start her own business, so
Ciele launches an enterprise called Folkspants, Unlimited. Ciele returns to Georgia for Sofia’s
mother’s funeral, and many of her old friends remark on how beautiful she looks. Ciele finds that
Mr. ______ is a completely transformed man who works hard on his land and cleans his own
house. Ciele learns that Mr. ______ grew weak and afraid and that Harpo nursed him back to
health. Harpo’s devotion moved Sofia to return to her marriage with Harpo. Ciele also learns that
Alphonso has died, which means that her parents’ land and home are hers. She moves into her
own home.

In the meantime, Nettie and Samuel have married. They have become disillusioned with their
missionary quest in Africa and plan to return to America. Before they leave, however, Adam falls
in love with Tashi, who has recently undergone the painful rituals of female circumcision and facial scarring, a move to uphold the traditions of her ancestors. In solidarity, Adam undergoes a similar facial scarring procedure.

Analysis

In this section, Walker presents personal religious belief as an important component of a strong sense of self. Celie has always imagined God as a distant figure who likely does not listen to her concerns. She sees God as a white man who behaves like the other men she knows and who does not listen to “poor colored women.” This image of God held by Celie—and, ironically, by Nettie, Corrine, and Samuel in their missionary work—is limiting. In thinking of God as an old, bearded white man who does not listen to her, Celie implicitly accepts white and masculine dominance and makes the assumption that her voice can never be heard.

Shug’s concept of God, on the other hand, is much more personalized and empowering. Unlike Celie, Shug does not ascribe a race or gender to God. Instead, Shug believes that each individual manifests God in his or her own way. Celie’s recognition that she has control over her concept of God and does not have to blindly accept the religious viewpoints that are handed to her is an important step in her quest for autonomy and self-respect.

Celia’s assertion of herself comes forcefully in this section. Her defining moment, the speech she gives to Mr. ______, contrasts sharply with her former silence. Celie’s assault on Mr. ______ releases years of pent-up emotion and hurt that had been silenced. Mr. ______ tries to counter by stripping Celie of her sense of self, as he has throughout the novel. He tells her that as a poor, black, and ugly woman, she is “nothing at all.” But Celie’s sense of self is strong enough that she is no longer a helpless object, so she resists Mr. ______’s proclamation, reinterpreting his words in a defiant context: “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook. . . . But I’m here.” The fact that Celie’s speech inspires Mr. ______ to reassess and rebuild his life shows that Celie’s attainment of self-respect has truly broken a cycle, not only liberating Celie, but others as well.

An equally important component of Celie’s empowerment is her newfound economic independence. Celie’s clothing design is a form of creative self-expression, but it is also a form of entrepreneurship and a means to self-sufficiency. Celie has taken sewing, traditionally a domestic chore, and turned it into an instrument of independence. Walker implies that such economic independence is crucial for women to free themselves from oppressive situations. When she inherits her family’s old property, Celie completes her independence, becoming a fully autonomous woman, with her own money, business, story, and circle of friends.

Letters 83–90

Summary

Shug act more manly than most men. . . . Sofia and Shug not like men, he say, but they not like women either.
Celie learns that Shug wants the freedom to have a fling with Germaine, a young man who is a third her age. Though Celie is less dependent than she used to be upon Shug, Shug’s revelation is painful for Celie nevertheless. Mr. ______ is the only person who understands Celie’s pain, as he has also felt the sting of Shug’s sometimes short-lived infidelity. Celie realizes that she no longer hates Mr. ______, even after all the wrongs he has committed. Mr. ______ loves Shug, and Shug loved him, so Celie cannot hate him. Celie and Mr. ______ begin to enjoy each other’s conversation, talking about old times, their friends and family, and their new discoveries about life.

Nettie writes that her and Samuel’s years in Africa have changed their idea of God. They no longer conceptualize God as looking like someone or something. Olivia and Adam have grown independent and outspoken like Africans, and Nettie worries they will get into trouble when they return to America.

The mayor’s daughter, Eleanor Jane, brings her baby son to Sofia’s house. Eleanor Jane fishes for compliments about her son, trying to get Sofia to say that she loves him. Finally, Sofia tells Eleanor Jane that she feels nothing for the boy, and Eleanor Jane begins to cry. Sofia says that she does feel some kindness for Eleanor Jane because Eleanor Jane had showed her kindness, but otherwise, the pain and racism that Sofia endured prevents Sofia from loving anyone else in the mayor’s family. Though Eleanor Jane vows to raise her son right, Sofia tells her that white society will probably make him into a racist nonetheless.

Celie overcomes her heartbreak over Shug, remembering the good times she and Shug had in the past. Celie hires Sofia to work in her clothing store. Eleanor Jane finally learns the full story of why Sofia had come to work for her parents and begins to appreciate Sofia’s distance from her. Trying to undo the wrongs of her family history, Eleanor Jane helps to look after Henrietta, Sofia’s daughter, and cooks for her. Shug’s love affair with Germaine fizzles, and she returns home to Georgia. Shug becomes jealous when she learns about Celie’s newly cordial relationship with Mr. ______, but Celie assures Shug that she and Mr. ______ just talk about how much they both love Shug.

Nettie finally returns to America, and she, Samuel, Olivia, Adam, and Tashi arrive unannounced at Celie’s house. The homecoming is incredibly emotional for both sisters, who are speechless and weak with amazement. The family gathers on the Fourth of July, and many people remark on Tashi’s beauty and how well matched she and Adam are. Though Celie feels old because her children are fully grown, at the same time she thinks, “[T]his the youngest us ever felt.”

Analysis

Celie’s final letter shows the extent to which her character has developed through the course of the novel. Celie’s first letters simply related events without really attempting to understand or
interpret them. Gradually, Celie began to make astute observations of others and to articulate and analyze her own feelings. In her final letters, Celie not only analyzes her own feelings, but she has the confidence and insight to articulate the feelings and motives of others. The novel ends with one such articulation, Celie’s comment that though her generation is growing older, the family reunion has made them feel younger than ever before. In this way, at the end of the novel, Celie acts as a voice not only for herself, but also for all the characters her age.

By making the act of writing a key element in the process of Celie’s redemption, Walker underlines the importance of literacy and makes an implicit reference to African-American slaves, who, forbidden to learn to read or write, were oppressed by being kept illiterate. Celie and Nettie likewise use literacy to combat oppression, maintaining a remarkable commitment to writing over the course of many years because they know their letters are the only link they have to each other. Even though Celie is clearly less intellectual than her sister, she gains just as much, if not more, out of her writing. In this way, Walker asserts that writing is crucial and redeeming for everyone and should not be viewed as a barrier dividing the educated from the uneducated.

Celie’s final letter also shows that, like Shug, Celie has formed an interpretation of God that encompasses the entire everyday world. She writes, “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God,” revealing that she no longer sees God as a distant figure with which she feels she has little or no connection. Celie’s acceptance of Shug’s trivial fling with Germaine also emphasizes Celie’s growth. Celie still loves Shug deeply, but her confidence in herself is now strong enough to survive a lapse in Shug’s attentions. Moreover, Celie no longer sees love as a game of possession and control. Celie loves Shug but does not feel the need to tie her down, as she is confident that Shug will come back as she promised. Moreover, we get the sense that Celie is now strong enough that, even if Shug had not come back, Celie would not be lost.

Though Walker celebrates diversity and difference in the novel, the novel ends with the recognition that not all differences can be overcome. Along with the novel’s notable reconciliations, such as the one between Celie and Mr. ______, there are several unresolved differences at the novel’s end. Conflicts remain between the Olinksa villagers and the whites and between Nettie and the indigenous Africans. Likewise, Sofia holds out little hope that she and Eleanor Jane can ever be truly reconciled. Even Eleanor Jane’s eventual understanding of Sofia’s resentment is unlikely to change the hard facts of the oppression Sofia has endured.

Walker’s implication is that some differences are truly unbridgeable. Her novel shows mutual teaching and transformation as more successful than attempts to appreciate and understand difference. Throughout the novel, reconciliation occurs when characters transform and meld each other into sameness. There are no notable examples of reconciliation that come about due to characters who truly bridge differences with one another. Celie, for instance, reconciles with Mr. ______ not because she grows to understand his different ways, but because her influence transforms Mr. ______ into someone who shares her interests and values. Neither Celie nor Mr. ______ truly bridge any difference, as Mr. ______ has transformed himself so drastically that there is no longer any difference between them left to bridge. Though Walker’s view may seem somewhat pessimistic, it is important to remember that, above all, The Color Purple is a story of successful transformation. Though some differences and conflicts remain unresolved at
the novel’s conclusion, we have seen the remarkable transformation of an impoverished, abused woman of color into a successful, propertied entrepreneur who delights in her own sexuality and is enmeshed in a supportive, loving community.