

✕ Refers to links on www.crossref-it.info

The Color Purple: (a) Celie's narrative voice

- ❖ **Lesson focus:** To explore the significance of Celie's narrative voice, including dialect, and the epistolary style of the novel.
- ❖ **Opening exercise:** Write/display the following two quotations on the board:
 - 'My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me.'
 - 'I look at it often as if, somehow, reflected from its immensities, I will one day find myself gazing into your eyes. Your dear, large, clean and beautiful eyes.'
- Discuss:
 - Who narrated each of these?
 - At what point in the story?
 - What clues give it away?
- As a class, pick out the language features and style of these two extracts.
- Using this as a starting point, begin to make a list of features of the two characters' 'voices' (which can be added to during the main textual examination part of the lesson).
 - ✕ *The Color Purple* > Language, style and register
- ❖ **Textual examination:** Teacher leads close analysis of **Letter 2** (photocopied, ideally with a large margin around it on which to make notes). Identify the following features:
 - Non-standard verbs
 - Phonetic, non-standard spelling
 - Short, simple sentences
 - Short paragraphs
 - Use of direct speech, without standard punctuation
 - Vivid language
 - Use of idiom
 - Repetition
- Next, give out photocopies of **Letter 79** (or another later letter written by Celie) and ask students to work in groups to pick out the language features, and to compare it with Letter 2.
 - Which features of Celie's 'voice' remain unchanged?
 - In what ways has her written style matured with the passing of time?
- Then look at photocopies of **Letter 80** and identify features such as:
 - Multisyllabic, Latinate words
 - Long, complex sentences
 - Ordered, logical, chronological structure
 - Standard punctuation
 - Standard spelling
- Consider:
 - Why did Walker choose to give the two narrators such different written styles?
 - What does this bring to the experience of reading the novel?
- ✕ *The Color Purple* > Characterisation > Celie; Nettie
- ✕ *The Color Purple* > Language, style and register
- ❖ **Discussion ideas:** Mind map ideas around the significance of narrative voice, perhaps using the following questions as prompts:
 - How is Celie's written style a reflection of her upbringing and experience?
 - How does Celie's voice help the reader to understand and sympathise with her character?
 - What examples can we recall of how this works?
 - To what extent does Celie's voice make the events narrated more vivid and powerful?
 - What examples can we recall of how this works?

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- Why is it important that a ground-breaking black novelist should write in Black English dialect?
- Why is it significant that a poor black woman should find an outlet for her story only in private letters?
- What is your response to criticisms that the epistolary style of the novel is contrived and unbelievable?
- What does the letter format add to the narration?
 - ✕ *The Color Purple* > Language, style and register

- ❖ **Recreative task:** Using the list of stylistic features identified with Celie's style (generated in earlier activities) as a checklist, students try writing an additional short letter, using her 'voice'.
 - Swap with a partner and discuss how challenging the exercise was and how convincing the letters are.
 - ✕ *The Color Purple* > Characterisation > Celie
 - ✕ *The Color Purple* > Language, style and register

- ❖ **Critical task:** 'Celie's narrative voice is more than just the vehicle for her story; it is a fundamental part of her story.' Discuss the importance of Celie's voice in *The Color Purple*.
 - ✕ *The Color Purple* > Characterisation > Celie
 - ✕ *The Color Purple* > Language, style and register

- ❖ **Extension task:** Research the history of the epistolary novel.
 - What makes this narrative style such a powerful vehicle for the female voice in particular?