

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

The Color Purple: (b) Presentation of abuse

- ❖ **Lesson focus:** To explore the theme of abuse and to consider Walker's messages about the treatment of black women.
 - ❖ **Opening exercise:** List/brainstorm all the different types of abuse and violence referred to in the novel (for example, emotional, sexual and physical abuse, incest, forced labour, rape, female genital mutilation, racist abuse, police abuse, national/colonial abuse etc.).
 - Extension: add a quotation or an example (or multiple examples) for each type of abuse
 - ✕ *The Color Purple* > Themes > Violence and suffering
 - Discuss initial responses about presenting so many different types of abuse in one story? Does it:
 - Dilute the effect?
 - Emotionally exhaust the reader?
 - Present just how exploited and downtrodden black women's lives were?
 - ❖ **Textual examination:** Using **b)i Presentation of abuse student handout**, re-read the first letter and teacher models analysing the abuse it presents – i.e.:
 - The types of abuse being presented
 - The language used to describe it
 - The impact on the reader (see student handouts).
 - Allocate further letters to pairs/groups of students to analyse, as on the handout.
 - Pairs feedback so that all can complete the table.
 - Which episode(s) do we find most disturbing and why?
 - ✕ *The Color Purple* > Themes > Men, women and gender roles; Violence and suffering; Colonialism in *The Color Purple*
- ✕ *The Color Purple* > Synopses and commentaries
- ❖ **Discussion ideas:** Create an opinion continuum line, with 1 being 'strongly disagree' and 10 being 'strongly agree' (either just draw one on the board and students hold up their fingers, or stick numbers across the classroom and ask students to move the relevant point of the room). Read out the statements below, and ask students to show where they are on the opinion continuum, and then pick on individuals to justify their positions:
 - 'Rape is normalised in the novel.'
 - 'In the world of the novel, no one suffers more than the young, black, woman.'
 - Suggested follow-up question: Is there any suggestion that older women suffer less – e.g. Celie's mother died, Harpo's mother was shot, Sofia was beaten and imprisoned for twelve years?
 - 'Walker offers hope that women can escape the cycle of abuse, through defying their gender roles and becoming independent.'
 - Suggested follow-up questions: How does this fit with the idea of 'womanism'? Is Walker really advocating that women need to act more like men?
 - 'Walker focuses exclusively on black-on-black abuse, highlighting that fifty years after emancipation from slavery, black women are no freer from abuse.'
 - Suggested follow-up questions: Are there any examples of white-on-black abuse? Is Celie's life any better than that of a slave?

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- 'Walker links the suffering of black women in Africa and America, showing them to be comparable.'
 - Suggested follow-up questions:
Which group of women get more time and attention in the novel? How is their suffering linked but different?
- 'Walker's highlighting of the violence and abuse of black women reveals her political agenda – Walker's message and goal is no less political than Dr Martin Luther King, for example.'
- ❖ What is Walker's message about abuse? In pairs, create a manifesto or mission statement poster that encapsulates this.
 - ✕ [The Color Purple > Themes > Men, women and gender roles; Violence and suffering; Colonialism in *The Color Purple*](#)
- ❖ **Recreative task:** Write out one of the episodes of abuse which are not described in the novel, for example:
 - What happens between Alphonso and Nettie after Celie leaves home to get married
 - What happens to Sofia after her arrest
 - What happens between Albert and Nettie as she runs away.
- Why does Walker not include these scenes in the novel?
- What is the impact of leaving sections to the reader's imagination?
- ❖ **Critical task:** '*The Color Purple* is both a compelling, personal story about the love between women, and a bold, angry statement about the exploitation and abuse of black women.' Discuss the extent to which you think the novel achieves these dual aims.
- ❖ **Extension task:** To what extent is Harpo a victim of abuse (e.g. at the hands of his father and first wife, Sofia)?
 - See **Letters 16 to 21**, and consider how Walker hints at, rather than describes, the difficulties Harpo faces
 - Consider the reasons why Walker focuses almost exclusively on the abuse of females.