

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

The Color Purple: (d) Defying gender roles

- ❖ **Lesson focus:** To explore the presentation of traditional gender roles and how Walker challenges gender stereotypes in the presentation of her characters.
- ❖ **Opening exercise:** See **d)i Defying gender roles student handout** with gender concept words. Cut out the words and sort them into their traditional gender identities – male, female, or not sure/both.
 - Ask if any of these ideas are challenged in the story. For students to move a card, they should justify with an example/quotation from the novel
 - For example, whilst needles and sewing are traditional female occupations, and Celie bases her business on this, Albert learns to sew, so the 'needle' card should move from the 'female' pile to the 'both' pile.
 - The context of the novel and the society represented within it exemplify deeply held ideas of gender roles – but to what extent are these challenged in the story?
 - ✕ [The Color Purple > Themes > Men, women and gender roles](#)
 - ✕ [The Color Purple > Structure > Historical and social structures](#)
- ❖ **Textual examination:** Re-read **Letters 20** and **21**. Find examples of how the characters' behaviour conforms to - and challenges - gender norms, perhaps presenting ideas in a simple table:

Conforms to gender stereotype	Challenges gender stereotypes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celie cannot fight back • Women enjoy talking together and consoling each other • Sofia says she learnt that girls need to support each other • Females fear danger from male relatives • Celie tries to follow the Bible and not be angry • Women quilt together 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celie describes Harpo and Sofia like two men • Sofia engages in violence • Celie describes Sofia as brave • Sofia suggests Celie should attack Albert

- Discuss how, in this episode, Sofia's out-of-gender behaviour (the fighting) is made all the more shocking against the backdrop of the strongly-gendered and normative behaviour of gossiping and quilting.
- Allocate the following characters to (pairs of?) students:
 - Sofia
 - Harpo
 - Shug
 - Mary Agnes
 - Celie.

Students should find examples (with close textual references and/or quotations with page numbers) of how the characters challenge their gender roles.
- Feedback to create a class mind-map about challenging gender roles. (Note how the behaviour often stands out all the more because of the contrast e.g. when the meek and mild Celie goes to hurt Albert, as well as developing a lesbian relationship, or when the quiet 'Squeak' stands up for Sofia and embarks on a musical career.)

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- Which characters are boldest in their depiction? Could we rank them from most traditional to most defiant?
 - ✕ [The Color Purple > Themes > Men, women and gender roles](#)
 - ✕ [The Color Purple > Structure > Historical and social structures](#)
 - ✕ [The Color Purple > Characterisation > Sofia; Harpo; Mary Agnes; Shug; Celie](#)
- ❖ **Discussion ideas:** Read and discuss a definition of Walker's 'womanist' beliefs
 - ✕ [The Color Purple > Themes > Men, women and gender roles > Feminism/womanism](#)
 - Annotate with links to/examples from the novel
 - To what extent are Walker's views on womanism demonstrated in her presentation of the characters?
 - To what extent is the plot a vehicle for Walker's ideas on womanism?
- ❖ **Recreative task:** Is there any evidence that ideas about gender roles change between the generations in the story (e.g. an acceptance of Sofia and her sisters acting as pallbearers)?
 - Students write an imaginary letter from Olivia, who represents the younger generation, to Tashi, expressing what Olivia expects her role as a young African-American woman to be, now she has returned to America.
- ❖ **Critical task:** 'Walker champions the idea of women defying their gender stereotypes and becoming more independent and 'masculine'.' Discuss the extent to which Walker presents the more 'masculinised' female characters as positive role models.
 - ✕ [The Color Purple > Themes > Men, women and gender roles](#)
 - ✕ [The Color Purple > Structure > Historical and social structures](#)
 - ✕ [The Color Purple > Characterisation > Sofia; Shug](#)
- ❖ **Extension task:** Research/read some of Walker's other stories, which further demonstrate her ideas about womanism. For example, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, and *By the Light of My Father's Smile*.