

The Color Purple

Part 1: Movie Analysis and Discussion

A CAUTIONARY NOTE: One of the criticisms of *The Color Purple* is that it depicts the men in the story as primarily abusive. Also, this movie is rated PG-13, mostly because of the violence and strong language. We recommend the movie for older adolescent girls with the guidance of adults who can help the participants get beneath the surface and recognize the theme of “voice,” its loss, and its recovery.

Synopsis: *The Color Purple*, based on the book by Alice Walker, is a powerful story of conversion with a strong theme of voices. It is the story of Celie, daughter of a sharecropper in rural Georgia during the Depression. The movie opens with a very young Celie giving birth to a child. Celie’s father, who has sexually molested Celie, immediately takes her baby from her. She has a close relationship with her younger sister, Nettie, who runs away rather than be abused by her father or raped by Albert, a widower with small children. As the oldest daughter, Celie is given in marriage to Albert, whom she refers to as Mistah. In her new home, Celie is physically and verbally abused by both Mistah and his children from a previous marriage. As Celie grieves for her lost sister, she rarely smiles or speaks. She has little or no voice.

When the lovely Shug, an old flame of Albert’s, comes to stay, Celie finds someone whom she admires and comes to love. Shug encourages Celie, reaffirming her as a person and a woman. When Shug leaves, Celie tries to join her but is too frightened to make the move. Later in the movie, Celie has another chance to leave with Shug, and this time she finds her voice, in a powerful scene that reveals much about the culture of the times in terms of women and men.

The story contains multiple sub-plots of women’s relationships:

- Celie’s relationship with her adult stepson, Harpo, and his wife, Sophia. Sophia is a strong woman who loses her voice when she is jailed for being an uppity “colored.”
- Shug’s relationship with her preacher father, who rejects her because of her flamboyant lifestyle.
- Nettie’s relationship to Celie, told through letters Nettie sends from Africa, where she has gone with a missionary family. (The family had adopted Celie’s two infant children, both sired by her father.) In the scenes from Africa, note the reference to girls, who are not allowed to be educated there, and a scene in which the children undergo a tribal rite of passage.

Introduction

Introduce the focusing activity by asking how many girls have seen the movie. You may want to ask the following questions:

- How did you like it?
- What was your favorite scene?
- Were there parts of the movie that upset you or that made you feel particularly good about the characters?

Summarize the plot for them as a review or introduction to the context of the two clips you are about to show. Tell them that you will show them two clips from the movie and that you want them to watch and listen carefully for details.

First clip. Fast-forward the film to about 1 hour and 21 minutes into the movie. This is the scene where Celie is packing to go with Shug. It is a very short clip. End it when Celie collapses in the road as Shug drives off—about 2 minutes in length.

Second clip. Fast-forward to about 2 hours and 2 minutes. This is the dinner table scene, when Celie speaks out and tells Albert (Mistah) and the family that she is leaving with Shug. This 8-minute clip contains some crude language and threatened violence. It ends when Celie drives off with Shug in her car, declaring her newfound freedom.

Discussion questions. After both clips, proceed to the following discussion questions. Use as many as time allows.

1. Why do you think Celie finds her voice? How do you feel about what she says to Albert when she first speaks up at the dinner table?
2. How did you feel when Celie held the knife at Albert's throat? What, do you think, would have happened to Celie if she had used violence against Albert? Is violence against oppressors ever justified?
3. Albert has been keeping letters from Celie's sister Nettie hidden from her for years. Why, do you think, has Albert wanted to block the relationship between Nettie and her sister? Do you think that sisters often have a special bond of friendship?
4. Sofia has just been released from years in jail. She got in trouble for speaking up for herself to the mayor's wife, who was white, and then knocking down the mayor himself. Why does Celie blame Harpo for Sofia's trouble?
5. What part does money play in Celie's situation and decision to leave? What role does economics play in abused women's lives?

6. What is Sofia trying to tell Celie? How has Sofia's strong voice caused her trouble and pain? How does prison or jail affect the spirit of those who are imprisoned?
7. How was Celie a reflection of God for Sofia? How influential do you think friendships with other girls or women are? What are some typical ways that girls help others to feel better or more confident? In what ways are girl-girl relationships sometimes harmful or hurtful?
8. What is so important about Mary Agnes's statement about her name? Why is a person's name important? How is Mary Agnes empowered by the other women in this scene? How do mothers and older women influence girls' development of self-esteem?
9. What does Albert's father's message to Albert imply about the role of men in the family? How do gender roles in society often keep men from being the kind of persons God created them to be?
10. We see several fathers throughout the movie: Celie's father, Albert, Albert's father, and Shug's father. Where are the mothers of Celie, Shug, Sofia, and Albert? How does the absence of mothers affect the families in the movie?
11. How does Albert acknowledge the power of a woman's voice when he compares Celie to Shug? How does hearing verbal abuse make you feel as a bystander? How do you think it affects the children who are at the table in the movie? Is verbal abuse as harmful as physical abuse?
12. Albert lists what he perceives as Celie's shortcomings. What are they? How do race, gender, appearance, and economics affect a person's situation in life? Is Celie's situation still common in our society? the world? What are some other factors that keep people marginalized or oppressed?
13. How did you feel when Celie was leaving with Shug? Compare that departure with the one in the first clip. What are some ways that girls and women lose or fail to use their voices today?

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Part 2: Prayer Service

Materials and Preparation:

- African motif fabric (preferably with a purple color scheme) large enough to cut 3-by-45-inch strips to use as stoles for all participants
- individual purple flowers for each participant
- additional fabric for draping prayer space table or large boxes
- flowers and plants (African violets are particularly appropriate), sculptures, candles (don't forget matches), pictures, appropriate books, and religious objects—cross, crucifix, statue—for enhancing prayer space
- a CD or tape player
- a copy of the book *The Color Purple*
- a CD or tape of the soundtrack from *The Color Purple* or other music selections
- a Bible

Prepare a prayer space with tables, boxes, or available structures to gather the group of participants. Decorate the space with the materials suggested above. If the girls will be receiving individual flowers, place them in vases as part of the prayer space.

Opening Prayer

About three-fourths of the way into the book, Celie's second letter to her sister Nettie is a powerful exploration of the existence of God and images of God. Find this letter and use appropriate parts as the opening prayer reading.

Response to Opening Prayer

Choose one of the following options, using the appropriate song from *The Color Purple* soundtrack or other music selections.

Option 1: Play disc 1, track 5 ("Nettie Teaches Celie"), an instrumental piece that is about four minutes long. During this time, invite the participants to "sing, dance, make faces" as they give one another the purple flower bouquets from the prayer space.

Option 2: Use music for quiet reflection. Disc 1, track 2 on the CD ("Main Title") is a 2-minute version of the theme music. Invite the girls to think about the message that Celie is trying to convey in her prayer. Adults can hand out flowers to each girl.

Reading: Acts 16:13-15, 40

Invite the participants to listen to the Word of God—a story about a woman of the early church who sold purple cloth. It is best to read it directly from the Bible during the session. It is provided here for your reflection, followed by background information if you want to say a few words about the passage.

On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home."

. . . After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.

(Acts 16:13-15, 40)

Background Information for a Reflection on the Reading

People who study the Bible closely say that Lydia was an influential and successful businesswoman in a city called Philippi. Because there is no mention of male relatives, she was probably the head of her household. Perhaps she often dressed in purple as she walked through the streets of Philippi. There, by the banks of the Gangites River, she met with a circle of Jewish women to worship God, although she probably was not Jewish herself but a Gentile, a worshiper of God. When she attended a Sabbath service, she heard Paul speak about Jesus, and she came to believe in him as messiah. She was the first Christian convert in Europe, and she actually started the faith community in her own city when she invited other believers to gather in her home for the Eucharist. Her home became a safe place for persecuted Christians, like Paul. Paul was imprisoned for freeing a female slave from demons. After his release from prison, Paul came to Lydia's house. Later, in his letter to the people of Philippi, Paul shows his deep affection when he writes, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the Gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:3-5).

Lydia was a leader—a partner with Paul in spreading the Gospel. Her house became a church, a center of missionary activity including families, relatives, converts, former slaves, and clients who bought her purple cloth. They were a new people, women and men as equals, working side by side.

Lydia is our biblical sister, a convert energized by the Spirit, who used her spiritual power and authority as a servant leader who gathered the people of God together to break bread. She was well respected by both men and women alike, including Saint Paul. (Adapted from *Praying with Women of the Bible*, by Bridget Mary Meehan [Liguori/Triumph, 1998], pages 125-127)

Sharing

Perhaps women like Celie and Shug or young girls like you would have belonged to the church that gathered at Lydia's home. We would share our thoughts and feelings about God with one another as Lydia did with the Jewish women, and as Celie and Shug did in *The Color Purple*. In fact, as we gather today, we are the People of God. We are using our voices to spread the Gospel, the Good News about Jesus.

What good news do you have to share with one another? What do you want to tell God about being a girl today?

Vesting with Stoles

Play in the background disc 2, track 13 ("Reunion/Finale") from *The Color Purple* soundtrack. Read the following paragraph:

In most cultures and faith traditions, when young people enter adolescence, they are fully welcomed in some way into the community by the adults. The Catholic church celebrates this full initiation in the sacrament of Confirmation. In other cultures, the women of the community may perform a ceremony for the girls, whereas the men initiate the boys into the male world. Today, we celebrate you as girls who are becoming women by vesting you with the color purple, a remembrance of our time together—a reminder to use your voice to strengthen your relationship with God, with yourself, with others, and with all of God's creation.

Invite each girl to come up to the table to receive a remembrance of the day. As adult leaders place a stole around each girl's neck, they can speak a blessing such as the following:

[Name] remember that you are created in God's image, a wonder to behold!

Closing Song

After each girl has received her stole, close the prayer service with an appropriate song. Some suggestions for the closing song are "Heaven Belongs to You," disc 2, track 6 on *The Color Purple* soundtrack, a familiar selection from *Lead Me, Guide Me* hymnal (GIA Publications, 800-GIA-1358), or an appropriate secular song that would be familiar to the girls, like "Count on Me" by Whitney Houston from the soundtrack for *Waiting to Exhale*.

This activity was created by Janet Claussen of Atlanta, Georgia, and Gloria Leigh of Dayton, Ohio, for the Voices Project, an initiative of Saint Mary's Press to nurture and support the spirituality of adolescent girls.