

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# The Color Purple (1985)

Steven Spielberg

## OVERVIEW

*Auteur* Stephen Spielberg's work spans many genres. While he is most famous for blockbuster films such as *Jaws* (1975), *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), and *Jurassic Park* (1993), which each have a firm foothold in horror and science fiction, his filmography also reveals a deep commitment to asking questions about history and humanity. Spielberg's diverse collection of work has been widely recognized as pioneering, frequently engaging with unexplored themes and techniques that have earned Spielberg a reputation as an innovator and a master artist. He has been awarded three Academy Awards, the AFI Life Achievement Award, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. His films have likewise collectively placed him at the top of the list of the most profitable film directors in history.

*Film* *The Color Purple* (1985) steps aside from Spielberg's typical engagement with action and science fiction to explore the tenacity of the human spirit in a historical era. Based on Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of the same name (1982), *The Color Purple* explores the lives and experiences of Black southern women in the early twentieth century. Employing rich sets and focusing on the intertwined stories of a large cast of characters, the film seeks to immerse its audience in the lives of three Black women: Celie Harris, Sophia Johnson, and Shug Avery. While the film alludes to the complicated racial politics of the early twentieth century, it declines to focus on the legal and political oppression that women of this era would have faced and instead focuses on the home lives and vivid inner worlds of its primary characters.

*Background* *The Color Purple* is frequently celebrated for its unflinching and accurate portrayal of the lives of Black women in the post-reconstruction American South, a historical moment at which Black women were an extremely oppressed demographic. Alice Walker, who was initially hesitant about seeing her novel being made into a film, eventually consented to the production after her contract assured that she would have final approval of the script and that at least half of the production team would be women and persons of color. Many of the persons cast for the main roles of the film – including Whoopi Goldberg and Oprah Winfrey – were then relative unknowns in the field of cinema; however, the film was a critical success and the cast's performance was recognized with Academy Award nominations for Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress. While reviews nearly thirty years after the film's release note that a director who was more personally connected to the film's message and themes may have resulted in positive changes, *The Color Purple* is still recognized as a powerful film and a strong adaptation of Walker's source material.

## CHARACTERS

<i>Celie Harris</i>	A shy and reserved girl.
<i>Nettie Harris</i>	Celie's bold sister.
<i>Albert Johnson</i>	Celie's husband, a farmer and widower.
<i>Harpo Johnson</i>	Albert's son by his first wife.
<i>Sophia Johnson</i>	Harpo's hot-tempered wife.
<i>Shug Avery</i>	A beautiful singer and Albert's long-term girlfriend.

## SYNOPSIS

Opening in rural Georgia in 1910, *The Color Purple* follows Celie Harris as she explores her identity as a girl and a woman facing systemic racism, domestic abuse, poverty, marriage, and motherhood. The story's three main arcs follow Celie's significant friendships with three women: Nettie, her sister; Sophia, her daughter-in-law; and Shug, her husband's lover, as well as her own. These friendships allow Celie's to truly come to understand herself, and her relationship with god, as she enters the final decades of her life.

Celie's story with Nettie begins when the sisters are just girls, playing together in a field. The story soon turns dark when the film reveals that Celie is pregnant by her father. After the birth of this child, which is her second, Celie's father gives her in marriage to Albert, an abusive man who was originally interested romantically in Nettie. Celie and Nettie remain close, even when Albert forces the two to separate and cuts off their communication for decades.

When Celie and Sophia meet, they are not fast friends as Celie does not know how to handle Sophia's frank independence and unwillingness to listen to her husband. Sophia marries and then leaves Celie's stepson, Harpo, before Celie and Sophia become close. However, Celie and Sophia reunite later in life when Sophia suffers physically and mentally under the weight of forced servitude and incarceration.

The final connection within the film is that between Celie and Shug Avery. While ill, Shug comes to live with Albert. Celie and Shug become close while Celie nurses Shug back to health. When Shug is better, she performs at a local club and sings a song that she writes about Celie, which cements their friendship. When Shug encourages Celie to understand her worth and beauty, the two become lovers as well as friends.

The story ends with Celie finding her own identity, inspired in part by each of the women who are important throughout her life. The film ends with a reunion, wherein Celie welcomes Nettie and her two biological children to her home, where Shug and Sophia are waiting to meet them.

## SCENES

**The End of Childhood** Celie and her sister play in a bright and sunny field, laughing, singing, and playing hand-slap games. As Celie and Nettie emerge from the field, it is revealed that Celie, still in her girlhood, is pregnant. Celie's father comes across the field to tell Celie and Nettie to come home for dinner. He then informs Celie that she has "the ugliest smile known to creation." Celie, who thus far has not stopped smiling in the film, covers her mouth with her hand, suddenly ashamed.



**Celie Gives Birth** Although the film has not yet made it clear who is the father of Celie's child, the next scene shows her suffering in the throes of childbirth. Nettie attends to Celie, helping her through the terrible pain. Celie's father appears at the door and asks, coldly, "ain't you done yet?" Celie gives birth to a baby girl but her father quickly takes the child away, even though Celie cries "I want it." Celie's father warns her that she had better not tell anyone about this event. Then he takes the child out of the house and disappears into the cold.



**Celie Turns Fourteen** A voiceover in Celie's voice prays to god, revealing that she is now fourteen years old and understands herself to be a good girl. Celie's prayer tells the viewer that she is at her mother's funeral and that her father is the father of the child born in the previous scene. She also notes that this was her second child and that her father likewise took the first – a boy named Adam – away from her. Celie worries that her father has begun to look at her little sister differently; she is anxious that her sister will be sexually abused as she was. Celie's father takes a new bride almost immediately after the funeral – a young woman very close to Celie's age.



**Celie is Married** At their father's wedding, Celie notices that Nettie is constantly being watched by a much older admirer. This admirer, Albert, comes to Celie's home to ask for Nettie's hand in marriage, insisting that he needs someone to come to his house to care for his messy children. However, Celie's father refuses to let Albert marry Nettie and insists that Albert take Celie instead. Albert agrees and takes Celie home to be his wife and mother to his three children, who immediately reject her and refuse to listen to her.



**Married Life** Celie returns with Albert to his home. There, Celie is greeted by Albert's rude children who throw rocks at her. Albert forces himself on Celie sexually and the children bully and abuse her. Celie is at best a servant in the house, spending her days cleaning up after the horrible mess her new family makes and ensuring that the children are neat and clean. If Celie pushes back at all, Albert beats her viciously. Celie stays in this terrible situation for several years, suffering and wondering about her biological children, who have been adopted by wealthier families. Celie sees a baby in the street who she is convinced is her biological daughter, whom she calls Olivia.



**Nettie Comes to Visit** Nettie appears at Celie's new home, telling Celie that their father has indeed tried to force himself upon her. Celie asks Albert if Nettie can stay and he agrees, leering at the younger girl. Nettie encourages Celie to fight against the way that her husband and her children treat her, but Celie replies that all she knows how to do is survive. Celie warns Nettie that she should leave before Albert makes a sexual advance towards her; Nettie agrees but insists that she wants to stay with Celie as long as she can. Nettie teaches Celie to read so that she will be able to understand the letters she intends to write when she is gone.



**Nettie Rebuffs Albert** Displeased that Nettie and Celie are so happy and that he was denied marriage to Nettie in the first place, Albert rides his horse after Nettie one afternoon and traps her, pretending to be playful and friendly. While Nettie begs to be allowed to go to school, Albert drags her into the woods. Nettie screams and hurts Albert, making him scream in pain. Nettie then runs away, dropping her schoolbooks. In revenge, Albert follows Nettie home and violently throws her off his property while Celie clings to her sister and begs Albert to let Nettie stay. Crying, Nettie promises to write as she leaves, saying "Nothing but death could keep me from it."



**Time Passes in Misery** Still mourning the loss of Nettie, Celie shaves Albert's face and neck. Albert is very happy and distracted, anticipating a letter from his lover, Shug Avery. Before Celie can begin shaving, Albert grasps her hand and says "Cut me and I'll kill you." While Celie shaves, she is distracted by the arrival of the postman and accidentally cuts Albert's neck. He is distracted from his rage, however, by the arrival of his letter. Telling Celie not to check the mailbox, Albert leaves to visit Shug. To comfort herself, Celie reads one of the books Nettie left behind. A time jump occurs, aging Celie about six years. While Celie previously struggled to read Nettie's book, she now reads fluently.



**Celie is Alone** Celie is still shy and cowed, as she was when she was younger, but she runs the house smoothly now. Albert has likewise aged and his eldest son, Harpo, is now a young man of marrying age. Albert eagerly leaves the house to see Shug. Celie helps Albert dress for his evening with Shug and it is clear that he cannot manage without her. Albert leaves and Celie is then left alone, lonely and missing her sister. Celie mourns that Nettie has never written to her and worries that she is dead.



**Harpo Marries Sophia** Harpo brings home his girlfriend, Sophia, to meet his father and declares that they're going to be married. Albert notes that Sophia is "in trouble," implying that she is pregnant, but while Sophia confirms that she is pregnant with Harpo's child she says that it's not trouble. Albert clearly dislikes Sophia, especially since she seems to have her own mind and stands up to him. Harpo and Sophia are married after their child is born. The wedding makes it clear that Sophia's family is filled with spirited women who are openly dismissive of Albert.



**Sophia Makes a Home** Sophia and Harpo move into a home together. As they are just starting out, the house is in disrepair and they both work hard to fix it up. Sophia clearly and easily bosses Harpo around – even making him care for their child - which Albert dislikes and which Celie finds fascinating. Albert advises Harpo to beat Sophia to keep her in line. When Sophia continues to defy Harpo’s attempts to control her, he asks Celie what to do. Celie tells Harpo to beat Sophia because she knows no other way, even though she feels guilty saying it.



**A Confrontation** Sophia appears with a black eye, confronting Celie and demanding an explanation for why Celie told Harpo to beat her. Harpo has an identical wound, though his eye is swollen fully shut, suggesting that Sophia won the fight. Sophia, wounded by Celie’s betrayal, explains to Celie that she’s had to fight her whole life to stay safe from men but she never thought that she’d have to fight in her own home. Sophia explains that she loves Harpo but that she’ll kill him before she lets him beat her. Sophia suggests tacitly that Celie should do the same.



**A Peculiar Day** Sophia, deciding that she can no longer endure Harpo’s abuse, takes their three children and leaves him. A storm comes to the farm on which Celie lives and, disturbed, Celie says she “knows something’s coming.” A wagon arrives in the rain, carrying the drunk Shug Avery, who Albert eagerly brings into the house. Celie dashes away, eager to make herself presentable for Shug, who – when she sees Celie – laughs and says, “You sure is ugly.” Albert frantically tries to make Shug a meal but he is inept; Celie privately laughs at him. Celie cares for Shug, cooking her a hearty meal and helping to nurse her back to health.



**Music** As Celie continues to care for Shug, they grow closer. Shug begins by being cruel to Celie; however, when she sees how sweet Celie’s nature is, Shug eventually relents. Shug reveals herself to have hidden depths and her own trials, crying when she reveals that her father doesn’t love her. Shug and Celie bond over music, beginning to sing to each other, though Celie’s humming is no true match for Shug’s beautiful voice. Celie becomes very defensive of Shug, immediately disliking anyone who critiques Shug even though Shug herself is still frequently cruel to Celie, telling her that she is ugly and allowing Celie to clean up after her and prepare all of her meals.



**The Juke Joint** Celie watches in fascination as Harpo, eager to build a name for himself, converts his house into a Juke Joint called Harpo’s. The result is a ramshackle shack that serves as a kind of rural nightclub in which Shug performs as the headliner. Shug sings at the Harpo’s and reveals herself to be an incredible musician and performer, drawing a large crowd. Albert and Celie go to watch Shug perform and both are enraptured with her. The crowd at the Juke Joint is very rowdy and openly sexual, which shocks and fascinates Celie.



**Miss Celie’s Blues** Shug sings a song called “Miss Celie’s Blues” that she wrote about how kind Celie has been to her. The performance upsets Albert and pleases Celie. The song is a sultry love song in which Shug says that she thinks Celie is “something,” and hopes that Celie thinks “she’s something too.” Sophia enters the Juke Joint at the end of the song, bringing her date, Buster. Harpo, jealous, tries to make them leave though Sophia refuses. Sophia and Harpo dance, and Harpo’s new girlfriend (Squeak) picks a fight with Sophia, who punches her and knocks her into a pond. A fight breaks out; Celie is surprised to find that she enjoys watching it.





**Celie's Smile** At home, Shug dresses Celie up in some of her flashy clothes. Though Celie is shy, she enjoys herself. Shug asks why Celie always covers her mouth when she smiles and then works to convince Celie that her smile is beautiful. Shug then announces that she intends to leave, wanting to see more of the world, and Celie confides that she wishes Shug would stay because Albert beats her when Shug isn't around. Shug asks why he does that, and Celie says "he beat me for not being you."



**Shug Leaves** Shug sits Celie down and they have a long talk about love and sex. Realizing that Albert has been cruel to Celie, Shug tells Celie that she loves her and kisses her. The camera pans away while Shug and Celie continue to kiss. Shug decides to go to Memphis and Celie decides to go with her. However, Albert discovers Celie as she frantically packs. When Shug leaves, Celie is unable to say a true goodbye to Shug because Albert is watching. After Shug leaves, Celie collapses in misery.



**Sophia Says No** Sophia, at a gas station with her boyfriend and her children, has a confrontation with the mayor and his wife, who are white. When the wife condescendingly asks Sophia if she'd like to come and be her maid, Sophia says, "Hell no." The mayor and his wife, Millie, give her a few chances to take her words back, but Sophia repeats it several times. The last time, Sophia says it, the mayor slaps her. Sophia punches him back, knocking him down in the street. Sophia screams for her boyfriend to take her children away. Sophia is beaten and arrested.



**Growing Older** The film employs another time jump, showing Sophia finally getting out of jail after about eight years. Sophia has aged dramatically and has grey hair. She is beaten in spirit and body and becomes the Millie's maid. Sophia struggles to do the shopping and Celie secretly helps her. Millie drives Sophia home for Christmas day, allowing Sophia to see her children. When she arrives at the house, Celie has decorated and prepared Sophia's children for her visit. Sophia sees her children for the first time in eight years. The rest of her family, including Harpo, comes out of the house to welcome her home.



**Christmas Day** Millie struggles to drive her car away from Sophia's home, driving in circles and nearly crashing. When male members of Sophia's family attempt to help Millie, she mistakenly assumes that they are trying to attack her. Millie is very angry and scared and yells at Sophia's family, screaming, "I've always been good to you people" and warning them to stay away from her. Sophia convinces Millie that she is not going to be attacked, but must sacrifice her day with her family so that the mayor's wife doesn't have to ride home alone with a black man.



**Shug's Return** Celie and Albert are both excited when they hear a car's horn outside their house, knowing that it can only be Shug. However, when they run outside, they see that Shug has returned with a new husband. Grady greets Albert and Celie warmly, saying he's heard so much about them that they feel like old friends. While Albert and Shug's new husband are able to bond, Shug is disappointed when her father – a pastor – does not speak to her, even though she is now married. Angry, Shug collects Albert's mail on the way into the house and, seeing a strange letter, takes Celie upstairs with her.



**Mail from Nettie** When they have some privacy upstairs, Shug hands Celie a letter from her sister Nettie, which is postmarked from Africa. Both women cry as Celie reads her letter and smells a dried flower that Nettie included in the note. The letter reveals that though Nettie has been writing for years, Albert has been keeping the letters from her. It also informs Celie that her children, Olivia and Adam, were adopted by a pastor and his wife with whom Nettie is now working on a mission in Africa. Nettie assures Celie that her children are loved and well cared for, which makes Celie smile and press the letter to her chest.



**Nettie in Africa** Shug and Celie find the rest of Nettie's letters beneath a floorboard in Albert's closet, along with a great deal of money. Nettie writes of her life in Africa, which fascinates Celie and makes her angry at Albert for keeping her sister's history from her. Celie reads Nettie's letters as she wanders through her everyday life and the cinematography blends Nettie's words with Celie's so that the viewer sometimes does not know if they are watching a scene set in Africa or Georgia. The letters tell of Nettie's efforts to teach the children of Africa and of the amazing experiences she has had there. When Celie finishes Nettie's final letter, Albert punches her in the face, punishing her for being distracted when he says she should be preparing to shave him.



**Shaving Albert** Celie slowly sharpens Albert's shaving razor while Albert leans his head back in his chair. However, Celie's deliberate movements and unblinking eyes imply that she's angry. Though Albert yells at her to hurry, Celie takes her time. As Celie considers whether or not to kill Albert, the film cuts to scenes in Africa in which Celie's son Adam receives a ritual facial scarring from his adoptive African tribe. Acting on a hunch, Shug runs back to the house and stops Celie before she can cut Albert's throat. When Albert realizes what happened, he mumbles "damn women" and storms away.



**Family Dinner** Sophia, Celie, and Shug attend a holiday dinner with their extended family. When asked, Sophia expresses herself confused about being home. Shug lets Albert know that she is going to leave again, but that she's going to take Celie with her to Memphis. When Albert says, "Over my dead body," Shug replies, "Is that what you want?" Albert, angry, confronts Celie and asks what's wrong with her. Celie says, "You a low-down dirty dog, that's what's wrong. And it's time for me to get away from you." After Celie calls Albert "horse shit," Sophia laughs for the first time and starts to mentally come back to herself. Sophia thanks Celie for reminding her who she is and says that through Celie she knows that god exists.



**Celie Leaves** Albert laughs at Celie, insulting her and trying to shame her into staying, but Celie holds a knife to his throat. Sophia and Shug convince Celie that Albert's murder isn't worth it and Shug escorts her from the house. Albert chases after Celie and raises a hand to hit her, but Celie holds up a hand and stops him in his tracks, saying, "Everything you done to me, already done to you." Celie climbs into the back of Shug's car and drives away with Shug and her husband.



**Albert Alone** – Albert's farm and household suffer without Celie there to tend it. Albert falls into a depression, drinking perpetually and not caring what happens to his property. While Albert's father suggests that the clear solution to this problem is for Albert to take a new wife – a young one – Albert dismisses this idea. Looking for a distraction, Albert goes down to the juke joint and is the last to leave, dancing alone. Sophia and Harpo watch Albert stumble drunk around the juke joint while Sophia tends bar. It is clear that they pity Albert, but they do nothing to help him.



**Return for a Funeral** – Celie returns for her father’s funeral. However, Nettie writes with important news: while Celie always assumed that the man who raised and abused her was her biological father, her mother married him two years after she was born. As such, Celie’s children are not the product of incest, as she always supposed, but are the result of sexual abuse from Celie’s stepfather. Celie is surprised to inherit her biological father’s house, which her stepfather was living in illegally for decades because it was technically Celie’s after her mother died. Celie shrieks with joy when she finally sees her home.



**Celie’s New Life** – Celie opens a store in town where she makes fashionable, one-size-fits-all pants for both men and women. Sophia and Harpo come to buy pants, suggesting that they are again together and have found peace in their relationship. Albert appears at the store, waving to Celie from outside the window, but Celie ignores him until he goes away. Shug comes to visit Celie and they walk through a field of flowers, which reflects the opening scene of the movie. Shug suggests that god loves admiration, and that “it pisses god off if you walk by the color purple in a field and don’t notice it.” They agree that everything in the world – even the trees and the flowers - is just trying to be loved.



**Return to Church** – Celie and Shug return to the Juke Joint, where Shug sings a reprise of Miss Celie’s Blues while Celie sits with Sophia, a bouquet of purple flowers between the three of them. The singing from the juke joint interrupts a mass at the nearby church. However, Shug hears the music of the church and changes her tune to sing along with the gospel music, leading the crowd from the juke joint into the church. Shug reunites with her father, the preacher, from whom she has long been estranged.



**Reunion** – Albert, in a final turn towards good, receives a letter in Celie’s name from the Immigration Office. He takes the stash of money that was hidden away with Celie’s letters from Nettie and travels to the Immigration Office, convincing them to process the paperwork that allows Nettie, her missionary husband, and Celie’s two children to travel back from Africa. Shortly after, a cab pulls up to Celie’s home, and Nettie and her family climb out. Celie struggles to believe what she sees, but is thrilled to reunite with her family, screaming her sister’s name aloud and running through the field towards her. At long last, Celie meets her son, Adam, and his new wife, as well as her daughter, Olivia.



**Conclusion** - Albert watches the reunion from afar but is not invited to join. He and Shug see each other and smile. The film ends as it began, with Celie and Nettie standing in a field and playing the hand-clapping games that brought them joy when they were children. While the film opens on a bright and sunny day, it ends with the sisters backlit by the setting sun.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**CELIE** – Celie’s story is one of growth and resilience, even though she suffers from two abusive relationships: first with her father and then with her husband. While Celie begins the story believing herself to be ugly, worthless, and incapable of defending herself physically and spiritually, the story ends with Celie as a self-actualized woman who leaves her abusive husband and begins to live life according to her desires.

*Kind* – Even while she is physically and verbally abused, Celie’s kindness persists. Celie seeks to take care of everyone around her, even those who are cruel to her. It is her continued kindness to both Shug and Sophia, who originally disliked her, that persuades them both to trust and love her.



*Shy* – Perhaps because she was raised in a system of abuse and constantly told that she is ugly and worthless, Celie seeks to hide in plain sight, always covering her smile and hunching her shoulders to appear diminutive. However, Celie’s beautiful spirit reveals itself despite her shyness and she demonstrates that she is a loyal friend who loves to laugh and bond with friends.

*Developing* – Celie’s character develops most throughout the film. While she begins by accepting abuse and servitude, her relationships with other women in the film eventually allow her to stand up for herself and assert her voice. We see this most completely in the dinner scene, when Celie finally tells Albert what she truly thinks of him and then permanently leaves her home to go and live with Shug. Celie is loudest at the moment when she becomes fully autonomous: she lets out a shriek of joy when she sees the house that belongs only to her.

**SOPHIA** – After having grown up in a family of strong women, Sophia shows herself to be strong-willed and passionate. Sophia frequently lets her temper get the better of her, standing up to her husband and to the mayor. While these protests result in Sophia’s physical harm, she lives by the rules which she herself sets. Celie’s kindness helps Sophia come back to herself; likewise, Sophia’s frank determination to live by her own rules inspires Celie’s eventual independence from Albert.

*Determined* – Sophia does not accept disrespect or abuse from those around her. When Harpo tries to beat her, she hits right back. This unwillingness to bend to anyone else’s will continues throughout the film with Sophia standing up to Celie as well as the mayor. Sophia suffers for her protests, but her happiness at the end of the film suggests that her determination paid off in the long term. Further, Sophia’s strong-willed mindset allows Celie to rethink how she has bowed to those in her life who seek to control her.

*Temperamental* – Always following her emotional impulses, Sophia frequently finds herself in tricky situations because she cannot control her anger. For example, when the mayor’s wife admires how clean Sophia’s children are and offers her a job as a maid, Sophia is unable to swallow her angry words. Sophia would have been spared a great deal of pain if she had politely declined the job offer. However, the film suggests that Sophia’s anger is justified. While the mayor’s wife is not obliged to apologize for her insult, Sophia is mobbed and arrested when she likewise refuses to apologize. This is an important contrast to the “angry Black woman” trope frequently portrayed in American media, which suggests that Black women are irrationally or constantly angry.

**SHUG** – Shug is a beautiful singer and a musician. While she is Albert’s long-time girlfriend, her constant travel from state to state to attend different musical gigs makes her an inconsistent lover. Shug becomes an important figure in Celie’s life and journey, convincing Celie that she is worthy of love. While Celie transforms during the film, Shug is a more static character: she is married by the end of the story, but still seeks gratification from her many lovers, Celie and Albert included. Celie’s love for Shug is complicated by the fact that Shug is constantly seeking new horizons and new lovers, though Celie’s love is constant.

*Wounded* – Shug’s first appearance in the film is as an invalid in need of care. While her illness is physical, it is indicative of Shug’s spirit, which constantly longs for approval from her father and her lovers. Her wounded condition is also shown in her constant attempts to make her father love her despite her wild lifestyle. The film demonstrates this most clearly after Shug is married, when she calls to her passing father to let him know that she has a husband now. When her father ignores her, Shug is deeply frustrated and hurt.

*Artistic* – At heart, Shug is a musician and an artist. She is unwilling or unable to settle in a single home, instead constantly seeking new places to sing and express herself. She communicates most freely through her singing, as seen when she sings “Miss Celie’s Blues.” Her artistic self is also illustrated when Shug and Celie play dress up with all of Shug’s fancy clothes. In allowing Celie to see that she, too, is beautiful, Shug allows Celie to understand that artistic self-presentation can be a way of inculcating self-confidence.

**ALBERT** – Celie’s husband and Shug’s lover, Albert is determined to establish himself as the authority in his home and his life. Perhaps because his own father withheld love and approval, Albert is desperate to keep a firm grasp on authority and is willing to sink to low levels to achieve it. Albert ends the film with an attempt at redemption, though he still lacks the authority, power, and love that he spent his life seeking.



*Selfish* – Albert chooses Celie as his wife not because he loves her but because he wants a woman to care for him while he does as he pleases. Throughout the text, Albert is willing to make others suffer while he seeks his pleasure. This selfishness is most obvious with his abuse of Celie, but it also presents itself with his children, whom he neglects. While Albert is always dressed fashionably and well cared for, his daughters' hair grows so tangled that they scream when it is brushed. Albert shows no remorse until he is humiliated and abandoned. It is only when Celie leaves and his life falls to ruin that Albert begins to consider that perhaps he should have been kind to her. Albert acts on this realization when he helps Nettie re-enter the country, his first act of kindness within the film.

*Jealous* – In line with his selfishness and desperate desire for authority, Albert cannot stand when the people in his life have connections beyond him. The relationship between Celie and Shug, for example, develops largely in secret when they are alone in rooms together, keeping it away from Albert. Likewise, when Nettie reveals herself attached to Celie and unwilling to have sex with him, Albert forcibly separates the sisters. Ironically, Albert's jealousy results in his total abandonment. Although he sought to isolate Celie so that he could control her, by the end of the film he is the one who is left all alone.

**NETTIE** – Perhaps because Celie took their father's abuse for both of them, Nettie grows up with a determination and a spirit that Celie lacks. The two sisters are very attached, but when Albert forces Nettie to leave, she places herself in situations that allow her to truly experience life. Nettie travels to Africa, works as a missionary, and helps children. She allows Celie to live vicariously through her and to share those experiences.

*Brave* – Nettie is unwilling to stay in abusive situations, running away from her father's house when he begins to make sexual advances on her. While she wishes to stay with Celie, when Albert forces Nettie to leave she courageously starts an ambitious new life as a missionary who travels to Africa. Nettie thrives and seeks a life full of action despite her upbringing in a home that sought to abuse and crush her spirit.

*Educated* – Constantly seeking systems of education, formal and informal, Nettie learns a great deal about the world during her life. Admirably, Nettie seeks to share these experiences with those around her and with her sister. A consummate teacher, Nettie teaches Celie to read, shares her experiences in Africa with her, and spends a great deal of time in Africa educating children.

*Loyal* – Though many would be frustrated with the fact that their sister never replies to letters, and likely isn't receiving them, Nettie persists in writing Celie at least two letters a year. She never forgets her sister, who was her first friend and taught her the nature of love. The film ends with the ultimate display of Nettie's loyalty: she returns home to Celie after decades apart and brings her sister's biological children home to her.

## THEMES

**Coming of Age** This film begins with the main character as an innocent child, playing with her sister in a field of flowers. The story continues to tell the story of Celie's growth and maturation into an adult. While the story begins with an idyllic celebration of childhood and games, it quickly shifts when Celie is revealed to be pregnant. This abrupt revelation suggests that the childhoods of women like Celie are not as innocent as they should be and that some young women live in a world that tragically requires them to grow up far too soon. While the film demonstrates that with maturity comes a great deal of disillusionment – the realization that life is not all games, laughter, and joy – the four women around whom the film centers do discover that adulthood and womanhood hold their pleasures as well. For Celie, there is a great deal of joy that comes from the bonds she forms with other women and the exploration of her sexuality. These experiences suggest that the maturation from childhood to adulthood is not the complete loss that Celie may have once thought it was. After all, it is only after a great deal of pain that Celie can discover and become comfortable with her identity.

**Marriage** *The Color Purple* does not flinch from portraying the dark realities of many marriages. Instead, the film focuses on how marriage trapped some women in oppressive and abusive homes in the early twentieth century. The two main marriages in the film – that between Celie and Albert, and that between Sophia and Harpo – are unhappy unions. Even though Sophia and Harpo marry for love, they are unable to overcome Harpo's misogynistic understanding of himself as the man of the house and Sophia as the

obedient wife. While Celie more easily falls into the role of Albert's subservient spouse, it does not bring them any greater joy. The film suggests that marriage for many women in this era was not a source of love and happiness, but instead a tradition that marked them as second-class citizens who were subject to their husband's whims and systems of control. It is only when Celie leaves her married life behind that she can live happily.

**Violence** Unlike many of Spielberg's other films, which focus on the violence of war and nature, *The Color Purple* turns its attention to domestic violence and emotional abuse. We see this in the very first moments of the film when Celie's father informs Celie that she is ugly. There is no rationale for him to say this to a young girl; instead, he simply seeks to undermine her self-confidence. This kind of emotional abuse continues in the film, with many characters seeking to convince those persons over whom they wish to assert control that they are lesser, unworthy, or weak. While *The Color Purple* is careful to mark characters who use these methods of emotional violence, such as Albert and Harpo, as themselves victims of generational abuse, it does not absolve them of responsibility for their cruelty. The film portrays physical violence as a horrible part of many of its female characters' everyday lives. Celie and Sophia, in particular, are beaten throughout the film with very little ability to turn to any outside institutions, such as police or social workers, for help. The film suggests that women in the early twentieth century had little recourse to correct the violent wrongs done to them.

**Sexuality** In introducing Celie in the first scene of the movie as a fourteen-year-old girl who is unwillingly pregnant by the man she understands to be her father, *The Color Purple* immediately engages with questions of sexuality. This film suggests that its female characters are immediately sexualized by the society in which they live and by the people in their lives. From a very early age, Celie is taken advantage of sexually without anyone asking for her consent. The result of this sexual abuse is that Celie is intensely uncomfortable with sex and sexuality. It is only when Shug suggests to Celie that sex can be pleasurable and consensual that Celie begins to reconsider her own sexuality. Celie's exploration of her sexuality through kissing Shug is one of the breakthroughs she has on her path to self-actualization. As Celie and Shug are only portrayed as kissing once, the film provides a tame but positive portrayal of Celie's experiences with homosexuality. The homosexual romance between Shug and Celie is sweet and invigorating – the opposite of Celie's heterosexual sexual experiences.

**Race** This film focuses on Black American communities in the early twenty-first century; however, there is a clear hierarchy of racial status and influence in the story. White characters in the film, such as the mayor and his wife, are the ones who wield the most privilege; however, the film is careful to note that Black women like Celie, Nettie, and Sophia are likewise held under the thumbs of their Black fathers and husbands. While Black men were recognized as voters in the 1870s after the ratification of the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment, Black women were not recognized as full citizens with voting privileges until 1919, though some would argue that Black women did not obtain suffrage until the 1965 Civil Rights Act was passed. In exploring the everyday experiences of the film's female characters, *The Color Purple* explores the how personal experiences intertwined with political disenfranchisement. The film further suggests that Black southern women found ways to fight against the systems that sought to oppress them at this moment in American history.

**Gender** Although they struggle for autonomy, the women in *The Color Purple* are frequently thwarted in these efforts by systems of abuse that make such strivings for independence nearly impossible. *The Color Purple* demonstrates that women in this historical era faced a unique set of obstacles in the pursuit of equal rights, especially if they were determined to live their lives according to their desires. The introduction of characters like Sophia and Shug underlines this point: neither of these women agrees to bow to the rules that their fathers and husbands set out for them, and each suffers for this choice. Paradoxically, Celie – who complies with everything the men in her life ask of her – is likewise abused. In demonstrating that there is no clear route to happiness for any of these women, *The Color Purple* aptly illustrates the complexity of women's lives in the first decades of the twentieth century. While the film certainly concentrates on women, it is likewise interested in the effects of a patriarchal system on men's lives as well. As neither Albert nor Harpo comes to any sort of true happiness until they recognize the humanity of their wives, the film suggests that misogynistic cultures do not truly work for anyone who participates in them.

**Friendship** Friendships between women are an enduring source of love, joy, and happiness for the characters in this film. While the women within this story face a great deal of abuse and oppression, their friendships with each other allow them to survive. The first of these connections is between Celie and Nettie, who continue to play children's games in two homes where men see them as sexual objects and servants. The next friendship that Celie makes is with Sophia, who demonstrates to Celie that standing up to a man is better than living in disrespect, even if that protest results in physical suffering. Celie and Sophia disagree at first, but they eventually form an enduring relationship that culminates in Celie's aid of Sophia after she has grown prematurely old and infirm. The final example is the friendship that forms between Celie and Shug, who makes clear to Celie that she is worthy of romantic and sexual love that does not seek to harm her. Celie openly admires Shug's free spirit, but Shug demonstrates to Celie that she is just as capable of embracing her sexual and personal autonomy.