

## Gender in *The Color Purple* Lesson Plan

**Guiding Questions:** In what ways do socially-constructed ideas of gender roles impact characters' choices and relationships in *The Color Purple*? To what extent do socially constructed ideas of gender roles continue to function in our society today? How are all humans impacted by rigid ideas of gender?

### **Objectives:**

- o Students will be able to analyze the ways gender roles impact the main characters in *The Color Purple* by answering guiding questions and by creating and presenting a visual representation on the whiteboard.
- o Students will be able extrapolate Alice Walker's message about the nature and function of gender through their exploration of the main characters' experiences.
- o Students will be able make connections between gender in *The Color Purple* and their own experiences by analyzing connections between quotations from *TCP* and modern video clips.

### **Intro: Conceptualizing gender in non-binary ways**

1. In pairs, list roles, occupations, demeanors, and other attributes that society values for female-identified and male-identified humans. Record on a master list on the board.
2. Discuss as whole-class: What sticks out to you? (Draw attention to opposites - what does binary mean?)
3. Introduce the genderbread person as an alternate way of conceptualizing gender that includes lots of space and grey area rather than two rigid categories.
4. Discuss: Based on this concept, what is gender?

### **Analyze: how does gender in *TCP* impact the main characters:**

5. Students choose to focus on 1 main character from *TCP*.
6. Independently analyze the impact of gender roles on their character using the following:
  - In what ways does this person conform to society's expectations of gender roles? In what ways does this person defy/break societal expectations? Be specific and reference details from the text.
  - How does this person's ideas about gender impact their relationships?
  - How do others' ideas about gender impact this person?
  - How might this character choose to act, express themselves, and interact with others if freed of society's gendered expectations and judgements?
  - What do you think Alice Walker's is trying to say about gender roles? Do you agree with her?
7. Using the framework outlined in the genderbread person model, students will share their ideas about their character's gender expression in *TCP* by placing their character on the spectrums below. Each student will use differently colored whiteboard markers and create a key to represent their character.

Current gender expression In *TCP*:

-----> *feminine*

-----> *masculine*

Gender expression your character might choose without the pressure of rigid concepts of gender in society:

-----> *feminine*

-----> *masculine*

8. Share out:

- o Each student will explain their analysis of their character’s gender expression using evidence from the text to justify their opinion.
  - o Then, students will explain how they think their character may choose express their gender without the presence of rigid gender roles and without the presence of societal judgments. Again, students will defend their opinions using textual evidence.
  - o Lastly, students will explain how gender roles have impacted their characters’ relationships with others and with the larger community.
9. Discuss and make connections: What commonalities can you find?
- o (If students do not notice organically, point out that every single character in the book is negatively impacted by gender roles)
10. Point out that every student was able to identify both femininity and masculinity in their character, showing that binary categories aren’t accurate reflections of their character’s experience.
11. Discuss: Realizing that all characters, whether they generally align with typical gender expectations or not, are negatively impacted by rigid gender roles, what might Alice Walker be trying to say about gender roles?

**Write: How is power related to gender roles?**

12. Students will independently answer the following:
- o How is power defined in *The Color Purple*? Who has power? How does this person (or do these people) use this power? Who lacks power? What is the experience of this person (or these people) like?
  - o Who commands respect? How? How is respect shown in this context?
  - o How is power and respect related to gender expression?
13. Pair-share answers; discuss as whole class

**Analyze: generational replication of gender norms in *TCP*:**

14. Students will read the following excerpts silently to themselves:

In *TCP*, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s father passes judgement on his choice of partner, and then Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ does the same thing to Harpo.

- Shug remembers the role Albert's (Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s) father played in their relationship, explaining that she and Albert "had the kind of love couldn't be improve. That's what I thought. But, he weak, she say. His daddy told him I'm trash, my mama trash before me. Albert try to stand up for us, git knock down. One reason they give him for not marrying me is cause I have children. But they *his*, I told old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. How us know? He ast." (Walker, letter 50).
- Shug remarks about the changes in Albert to Celie, noting, "I don't know the Albert that don't dance, can't hardly laugh, never talk bout nothing, beat you and hid your sister Nettie's letters. Who he?" (Walker, letter 50).
- Albert behaves in much the same way as his father. When Harpo first brings Sofia to meet his family, Albert condemns Sofia, stating, "Look like you done got yourself in trouble" (Walker, letter 17). When Sofia clarifies that Harpo is the father of her child, Albert is skeptical, asking "How he know that?" (Walker, letter 17). He continues on to insult Sofia, insisting that "Young womens no good these days, he say. Got they legs open to every Tom, Dick, and Harry" (Walker, 17).
- Harpo defies his father's wishes by marrying Sofia anyway. He and Sofia are happy for a number of years, and he proves a tender father. When Sofia needs help with her first child, Harpo "take the baby, give it a kiss, chuck it under the chin. Grin, look up on the porch at his daddy" (Walker, 41). Albert apparently disapproves of his son's tenderness, and warns that Sofia "going to switch the traces on [Harpo]" (Walker, 18).
- When Harpo confides to his father that Sofia backtalks, "he sound a little proud" initially (Walker, 19). When his father advises that "Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating," Harpo speaks "low, embarrass" that he has neglected to make his wife mind (Walker, letter 19).

15. With a partner, students will answer the following:

- How do these passages relate to gender roles?
- How are gender expectations replicated and passed down through the generations?
- How might Albert and Harpo's lives and relationships have been different without these expectations?

**Watch: Video connection// How are these norms constructed and passed down, replicated, and taught?**

16. Show video about masculinity in our society: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hc45-ptHMxo>

17. Show video clip from "The Breakfast Club": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-ZyYtoKuUs>

18. Discuss the following using pair-share:

- How do these clips connect to the previous passages from *The Color Purple*? How is Andrew Clark's in experience in *The Breakfast Club* similar to Harpo's in *The Color Purple*?
- Are constructions of/ norms relating to gender still passed down in the way Alice Walker describes?
- Is it changing? If not, how is our situation today similar? If so, how? Why?
- In what ways are male-identified humans constrained by gender in our society today?

- o What are the penalties for nonconformity to masculine gender roles as a male-identified person?

**Read: “Forcing Kids to Stick to Gender Roles Can Actually Be Harmful to Their Health”**

19. Students will independently read the article and complete the following active reading tasks:
  - o Find the most important sentence and write it down.
  - o Find the most important word and write it down.
20. Students will discuss the article in small groups: What stuck out to you? What did you identify as important? Why?
21. Students will answer the following with a partner:
  - o What is gender policing?
  - o How do gendered expectations impact people?
  - o What changes when there’s less policing of gender?
22. Share responses.

**Ending: Write your experience**

23. Students will quick write about the following ending questions one at a time:
  - o Have you ever witnessed (or experienced) bullying, exclusion, and ostracism based on these kinds of gendered expectations in previous schools?
  - o Does it happen at September School? If yes, what have you witnessed? If no, why do you think your experience in our community different?
  - o How can we interact with people within and outside of September School in a way that that honors and affirms all gender identities and expressions?
24. Pair-Share responses.

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