

**N.B.** All references are taken from the 2004 Phoenix edition of the text.

Whether you are revising for an exam or reviewing your notes in preparation for a coursework essay, the following seven aspects will help you organise your knowledge. Deepen your understanding by adding textual examples, letter references (you could number them) or page references.

### 1. Structure

- Epistolary novel (letter form)
- Advantages:
  - personal, intimate, sense of character and honesty
  - having two letter writers adds variety to point of view
  - involves the reader, makes you work harder to understand.
- Disadvantages:
  - no authorial voice
  - can sound artificial when used to present narrative
  - first person accounts can be partial, biased, inaccurate.

### 2. Narrative

- spans generations
- spans continents
- involves different families
- revolves around different kinds of prejudice and oppression.

### 3. Themes

- A wide range, both disturbing and uplifting.
- Disturbing:
  - power/powerlessness
  - prejudice and oppression (racial, sexual, family, social, economic, imperialism)
  - violence, war and destruction
- Uplifting:
  - spirituality and religion
  - creativity and self-expression
  - education
  - independence and freedom
  - self-knowledge and self-fulfilment
  - love
  - progress
  - family, friendship and solidarity.

### 4. Setting

- moves in time – over forty years
- moves in space – three continents: America, Europe, Africa
- settings show contrasts in customs, treatment and qualities
- shows similarities too e.g. oppression in different cultures.

## 5. Characters

- women support each other in America, e.g. Celie, Sofia, Shug, Squeak, Nettie
- women can be divided and jealous in Africa, e.g. Corinne
- men tend to be divided and outsiders in America, e.g. Pa, Mr \_\_\_\_\_, Harpo, Buster (some improvement towards the end)
- men are presented as supportive and honest in Africa, e.g. Samuel and Adam
- female characters tend to be victims; male characters tend to exert power.

## 6. Images and symbolism

- names, e.g. Shug = sugar; Squeak reverts to Mary Ann to express self-respect
- religion and spirituality – letters to God, nature (pantheism), roofleaf in Africa
- creativity – quilt-making, pants, cooking, singing, sexuality, nature (e.g. stars in quilt)
- freedom and self-fulfilment – Folkspants Unlimited offers emancipation, economic, personal and sexual freedom
- nature – stars, flowers, trees and wood, animals, weather (pathetic fallacy)
- purple – bruises, royalty (e.g. Shug's clothes), religion, purple frog (reconciliation).

## 7. Language and style

- Black English gives authenticity to American deep south setting, characters and social class (begins with a naïve, poor and uneducated narrator)
- change in Celie's narration reflects her maturity and progress in life
- to reflect differences between characters, e.g. Celie and Nettie
- letter form uses direct address to involve the reader in the personal narratives
- a series of climaxes keeps the reader interested, e.g. not knowing if Nettie has died in the sinking ship
- exchange of letters allows for a gradual development of the narrative.

### Some key letters for revision

1. How does the opening warning explain the epistolary form? How does the first letter's language and content present Celie's situation in life? (p.3)
2. How does Celie's protection of Nettie introduce important themes? (pp.9-16)
3. How does Walker use Harpo and Sofia to present a different point of view of relationships? (pp.34-39)
4. What new themes are explored with the introduction of Shug? (pp.40-48)
5. Examine the shift in narrative viewpoint which is introduced by Walker through Nettie's letters (which have been hidden from Celie by Mr \_\_\_\_\_). (pp.107-121)
6. Examine how Walker has the women taking charge of events in this letter. (pp.179-184)
7. Explore the importance of Folkspants Unlimited to Celie's development. (pp.188-195)
8. Examine how Walker begins to resolve the different plot strands. (pp.220-227)
9. Examine how the final letter resolves this and gives a happy ending. (pp.259-261)