

Narrative voice

Exploring accent, dialect, idiolect and foregrounding.

‘The Color Purple’ by Alice Walker

‘The Colour Purple’ is novel written about the black community, from the perspective of someone within that community. It is narrated by the protagonist, Celie, who relates events in the form of letters to God and later in the book to her sister.

At the start of the narrative she is 14 but she matures and ages as the novel progresses. At first, Celie is a passive victim of the brutality of men, but grows in strength as the novel progresses.

'The Color Purple' opening:

You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy.

Dear God,

I am fourteen years old. - I am - I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.

Last spring after little Lucious come I heard them fussing. He was pulling on her arm. She say It too soon, Fonso, I ain't well. Finally he leave her alone. A week go by, he pulling on her arm again. She say Naw, I ain't gonna. Can't you see I'm already half dead, an all these children. She went to visit her sister doctor over Macon. Left me to see after the others. He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't.

Defining terms:

Accent - the way someone from a specific place sounds. In literature it is often written phonetically.

Dialect - the way someone from a specific place speaks. E.g. phrases from specific places.

Idiolect - an individual's way of speaking.

Foregrounding - making a concept/word/phrase to most prominent/important feature in a text.

Task 1: after reading the opening of 'The Color Purple', identify examples of accent, dialect, idiolect and foregrounding.

Task 2: what do the use of accent, dialect, idiolect and foregrounding tell us about the characters/story? Would this be different if the text were written in Standard English?

Task 3: complete the table below:

Extract	Standard English	What does use of accent, dialect, idiolect and foregrounding add to the plot and characterisation?
Charles Dickens, <i>Great Expectations</i> . 'When I was over yonder, t'other side of the world, I was always looking to this side; and it come flat to be there, for all that I was growing rich.'		
Mark Twain, <i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> . 'Tom's most well now and got his bullet around his neck on watch-guard for a watch, and is always seeing what time it is, and so there ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it.'		
Alice Walker, <i>The Color Purple</i> . 'Harpo girl daddy say Harpo not good enough for her. Harpo been courting the girl a while. He say he sit in the parlour with her, the daddy sit right there in the corner till everybody feel terrible. Then he go sit in the porch in the front open door where he can hear everything. Nine o'clock come, he bring Harpo his hat.'		

Task 4: start to consider your own regional dialect.
What do people in your area talk like? Complete the table below.

Standard English	Your regional dialect
We were going to go to the shop.	E.g. We was going to the shop.
I was standing at the bus stop.	
It was he who did it.	
We weren't doing anything.	
You've been badly treated.	
What do you think of it?	
I saw him do it.	
They've just left.	
We're going out, are we?	

Task 5: writing in your own accent dialogue

1. Choose an area of the UK and research the regional dialect, accent and idiolect. Also research what the area is known for include some foregrounding. You could choose to do Gloucester/West country and stick to what you know: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahznvtDunEw>
2. Find an image of the chosen area you've been researching.
3. From a first person perspective, and adopting the regional, dialect, accent and idiolect, describe the image in detail. Extra challenge: include examples of foregrounding in your description.