

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Cecelia V. Carey for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in English, English, and Women Studies presented on November 29, 2001. Title: Bildungsroman in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction.

Abstract approved: _____ **Redacted for privacy** _____

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Bildungsroman in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction is a study of Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye and Alice Walker's The Color Purple. Both of these writers implement a newer version of the genre of Bildungsroman to reveal the complexities involved in coming of age for a young woman of color. Both novels have protagonists that struggle with racism, sexism, and classism as barriers to their identity formation. This study aims to reveal the ways in which multiple layers of oppression inhibit the progress of contemporary African-American female heroines in modern Bildungsroman.

Bildungsroman in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction

by
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A THESIS

Submitted to

Oregon State University

**in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of**

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

**Presented November 29, 2001
Commencement June 2002**

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies thesis of Cecelia V. Carey presented on
November 29, 2001.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I cannot possibly express the extent of my gratitude to Dr. Robinson and his willingness to come aboard at the final moment with this thesis project. This project has had to battle all the interruptions of life and parenthood but with the gentle direction and encouragement of Dr. Robinson I was finally able to finish. I also want to thank Dr. Ede for her years of inspiration and motivation to complete my degree.

I would like to thank my friends for their endless support, emotional and financial, in helping me to complete my thesis. Finally, I would like to thank Scott MacDonald for the endless hours of childcare and moral support he provided so that I could have the freedom to work and write.

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BILDUNGSROMAN IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK WOMEN'S FICTION

INTRODUCTION

This study explores how two prominent contemporary black women novelists construct the modern "Bildungsroman." The revival of the genre of Bildungsroman among a community of black women writers speaks to the importance of giving voice to a historically ignored protagonist's psychological development. While each of the authors I will consider contribute their own unique voices to the process of giving life to narrative, they also collectively highlight what has been textually and politically suppressed - the voice of a young, black girl coming of age in America.

The interweaving of black feminist thought with the narrative genre of Bildungsroman is a crucial element to understanding the identity formation of the young black protagonist in countless black-authored texts. Feminist critic and scholar Barbara Christian suggests that "Bildungsroman by a woman of color offers even more insights of experience in its delineation of problematic reconstitution of racial and personal identity and those conscious negotiations of her multiple personalities" (14). Black feminists have known that their experiences of development and maturation while existing on the margin of gender, race, and class has shaped a different experience for them than that of their white counterparts. A coming of age story for an African-American girl must necessarily cross borders into areas that no typical protagonist is called to traverse in order to claim an individual identity. Black

women writers have traditionally placed their heroines from those objectified by a racist and sexist society, into those characters who are the subject of the text. Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins points out that it is the “convergence of race, class, and gender oppression characteristic of U. S. slavery that has shaped all subsequent relationships that women of African decent had within black families and communities with employers, and among one another. It has also created the political context of black women’s intellectual work” (Collins 4). The difference in experiences for black women and white men can be witnessed in the choices given to a protagonist within the genre of Bildungsroman.

The stereotypical protagonist in male-authored texts is called upon to make choices that focus on his education, marriage, and material future, whereas the young black female protagonist is faced with choosing how she is going to survive the colonization of her body, mind, and soul.

Investigating the use of the genre Bildungsroman by black women writers will illustrate the historical and contemporary assault suffered by those who grow up black and female in America. The first step in understanding how authors, such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, use Bildungsroman is to examine how the genre has been used in the past, and in what ways it has influenced contemporary women writers.

The first use of the term Bildungsroman was by Karl Morgenstern in 1817 to describe didactic novels that served as a “moral handbook” on how to grow into manhood (Gohlman, 12). The Bildungsroman was not seen just as a novel of development (Entwicklungsroman) but was a novel in which “the hero actively shapes

himself both from within and without, thus achieving personal harmony or balance between himself and the world” (13). The Bildungsroman surfaced in German literature as a secular ideal with the publication of Goethe’s novel Wilhelm Meister. The male protagonist looks not at achieving self-identity as a rulebook for moral behavior but rather seeks to discover “the self-conscious human ego which knows itself directly and not be any process of logical reasoning” (22). It is society, not Satan, that tries to defeat and contain the unmanageable ego.

Unlike their white male counterparts, black female protagonists within Bildungsroman novels search for an identity in which they can become whole beings. The “quest” for an adolescent girl of color is not about finding wealth, fame, or the answer to Greek philosophy; but about piecing together the fragments of her girlhood left over from a childhood dominated by racist and sexist ideologies. The institutional oppression faced by African-American girls and women is not dissolved through the narrative, but is rather replaced with the protagonist’s newly found self-confidence and ability to successfully grapple with the aforementioned oppression.

Pin Chia Feng in her groundbreaking study of Toni Morrison’s use of the Bildungsroman argues that the “Bildungsroman is closely connected with traditional heroic narrative” (Feng, 2). The plot of the Bildungsroman is derived from the quest motif in which the hero moves teleologically, and the completion of the novel ends with completion or failure of the “heroic task” (2). The form of the more contemporary Bildungsroman, or the “coming of age” novel, has focused on a general plot in which the narrative has tended to “invoke a purposeful youth advancing toward

some clarity and stability of being” (Fraiman, x). The novels traditionally termed “Bildungsroman” in the past now answer to the interchangeable terms, “novel of development,” “apprenticeship novel,” and “novel of formation” (Feng, 2).

If one looks at the traditional linear progression of a protagonist within the Bildungsroman, one examines a “normal” course of development in the life of an individual. Each stage of development has its own intrinsic value and is the stepping-stone for a higher stage. It is the “dissonances and conflicts of life that appear as the necessary transit points of the individual on his way to maturity and harmony” (Feng, 136). Feng defines those elements that constitute a Bildungsroman by ethnic women as “any writing by an ethnic woman about the identity formation of an ethnic woman, whether fictional or autobiographical in form, chronologically or retrospectively in plot as a Bildungsroman” (15). In contrast, the traditional Bildungsroman uses the underlying assumption that after the protagonist’s “confrontation with the real world” that “success or failure is measured in terms of status, career satisfaction and economic security” (Gohlman, 239). Furthermore, the Bildungsroman by black women writers does not approach addressing issues of “career satisfaction” as their protagonists are too busy negotiating how they can reconstitute their personal and racial identities in order to simply survive within society.

Perhaps the most consistently noticeable trait found in Bildungsroman written by contemporary black women is to be found in the emphasis on the authority of experience. Feng has noted that in the works of ethnic women the axiom “personal is powerful” is never more true than in these novels of Bildung. She suggests that the

“experience of the protagonists serve as an index to the larger cultural, socio-historical condition. The personal Bildung of these protagonists is inseparable from the political agenda of their ethnic group” (42).

This study explores the ways in which two black contemporary women writers/novelists construct the modern Bildungsroman. By simply recognizing the additional components of race, gender, and class in the lives of black women, readers and critics can assume their identity formations will be profoundly different than those experiences we have read in white male-authored Bildungsroman. One must rethink the traditional Bildungsroman novel in order for new voices to be heard and their experiences authenticated. Instead of accepting the Everyman version found in most coming of age novels (e.g. linear event-oriented plots starring young white boys) black feminist writers challenge readers to see their narratives as transformative texts. Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (1970), for example, is inherently political in that it directly attacks western notions of beauty.

Morrison’s portrayal of how the “beauty myth” operates on the psyche of young black women is a theme one would most certainly not find within frequently taught texts such as The Red Badge of Courage. Morrison takes the politically powerful image of Shirley Temple and compares her narrow features, silky blonde hair, and light coloring to the African features of her protagonists. Morrison assumes that her white readers will either share or recognize the cultural veneration of Shirley Temple and question their own complicity in maintaining Northern European standards of beauty. Novels written by black feminists such as Morrison and Walker

open up a new space for not only writers like themselves but also readers. bell hooks suggests that these authenticated spaces (such as Bildungsroman written by black women) of black female experience are fundamental to disrupting previously the Eurocentric renderings of black women within literature. She suggests that “spaces can be real or imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice (hooks, Yearning, race, gender, and cultural politics, 147). Morrison takes the Bildungsroman of a young person in *The Bluest Eye* and makes it powerfully political by attacking the concept of beauty and how it has functioned to oppress young and old black women alike. Walker disrupts the notion of family within *The Color Purple* by introducing the taboo subject of incest and domestic violence. She takes her main character through the process of being a defenseless victim to a survivor with support from friends and family.

The fundamental role that integrated systems of oppression play in the plot narratives of black women writers must be recognized. Patriarchy, racism, and economic hardship are obstacles the protagonist must confront in order to arrive at self-acceptance. Furthermore, what make the Bildungsroman written by black women so very interesting are the narratives that must necessarily place the protagonist in a matrix of struggle. Bonnie Hoover Braendlin suggests that the various negotiations a protagonist must face are “often times repressed memories (of girlhood) that serve as a counter-memory to the established historical discourse” (Braendlin, 24). In addition, she suggests that it is the “ethnic writer’s interrogations of public memory that serve

as a reminder that all memories-individual, family, ethnic, or racial-are socially constructed and allow for their reconstruction in narratives in quest of change and new meanings” (19).

Through analysis of various black-authored texts one can recognize consistent themes demonstrating identity formation culturally specific to being female and black in America. The contemporary narratives of development written by black women present a multivocal restructuring of identity, voice, and cultural values inherent in lived experience.

A need for contemporary black women writers to reconfigure the genre of Bildungsroman into a highly personal, and hence, political journey exists. When one is forced to live her life under the scope of racism, sexism, and classism, all that is personal becomes profoundly political. The need to express one’s experience does not remain within the domain of novelists. Black women writers have been discussing the need to lift their voices and “tell it like it is” for decades. However, it has only been in the last thirty years in the that writers such as bell hooks, June Jordan, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison (to name only a few) have ventured forth in their writing to incorporate themes that have been culturally taboo in the past: rape, incest, lesbianism, and the disruption of the black family by its own community. The discomfort that black women writers confront in naming their experiences within the black family is that their art will be seen as betraying their race. Both Morrison and Walker have been condemned in the media for their unflattering portrayals of black men. The root of this

condemnation lies in the fact that for centuries black women have remained silent about the dysfunction within black families as a way of uplifting their race.

Contemporary writers concern themselves with the workings of the black family because its dysfunction is directly related to systems of oppression within society. Coming of age novels must necessarily address the family in which the child is reared. The impact of family on the individual psyche is apparent in both of the novels I examine. Gregory Marshall suggests one's childhood experiences are the foundation of narrative. That is to say that while "millions survive without love or home, almost none in silence; the opposite of silence leads quickly to narrative, and the sounds of the story is the dominant sound of our lives" (Marshall, 33). The protagonists at the heart of all Bildungsroman yearn to tell their stories of how they came of age despite obstacles placed in their path.

The novels examined in this thesis, *The Bluest Eye* and *The Color Purple*, both explore taboo subjects in the lives of their central characters; these novels make the reader uncomfortable, to say the least. However, they are useful to the reader because, as Marshall further explains, "all kinds of narratives possess an immense power to educate" (Marshall, 40) Both Morrison and Walker are able to "blend personal autobiography, social commentary, and critical theory into an inseparable amalgam" and in doing so create spaces for learning (39). These spaces for learning attend to the reader as well as the writer. Collins suggests within her seminal work, Black Feminist Thought, that by placing black women's experience at the center of analysis one is able to recognize a connection between the "experience and consciousness that shapes

the every day lives of individual African-American women pervades the work of both activists and scholars” (24). Recognizing and validating the core theme of struggle among black protagonists the reader is able to join the protagonist in seeking solutions that might benefit the real lives of black women in the world today.

bell hooks, activist and writer, suggests that the unearthing of taboo subjects within black literature is integral to getting the story right. In addition, by raising the authentic voice of protest, both readers and writers alike will find models for change. The motive for many black women writers is not simply to create beautiful art but to transform themselves while doing so. hooks suggests, “There are some folks for whom openness is not about the luxury of ‘will I choose to share this or tell that’ but rather, ‘will I survive-will I make it through-will I stay alive’. . . openness is about how to be well and telling the truth is about how to put the broken bits and pieces of the heart back together again. It’s about being whole” (hooks, 17). She suggests that the actual telling or relating of experience by the writer through narrative is healing in itself.

The value of writing a black female Bildungsroman, is twofold. The woman writing about her girlhood is able to use her creativity and repressed memories as the glue to piece together the shards of her broken experience. The reader is able to recognize the pieces of her own life laying broken and buried. While reading experiences not unlike her own she can unearth her own painful past and make sense of it. Joanne Gabin states that “contemporary black women writers, like many of their heroines, have gone deeply into themselves to discover who they are, to urge forth a

voice too long silenced by a male-centered literary tradition, and heal wounds inflicted by racism oppression, and indifference” (Gabin, 246).

Multicultural literature celebrates the narratives that are about the reality of living under a multiplicity of oppression. While I am not a black woman, I have been invited into the conversation by the words of Patricia Hill Collins who wrote, “ White race traitors, feminist men, and other individuals critical of their own privilege can also move into outsider-within spaces” (Fighting Words, 234). I am aware of my white privilege and may not bear the same authority of experience as the women who wrote the novels I examine. However, I am not asserting that I have shared the same oppression nor do I have to in order to appreciate the importance of novels written by black women. I do not feel the need to defend my choice of study, as I’m certain that modern male scholars are not asked to defend why they have chosen to write about Chaucer or Shakespeare. Black women writers must be read and their experiences validated in order for us to engage in transformative politics. Through reading Bildungsroman by ethnic writers we all will awaken to the critical and painful struggles young black women have in our society.

CHAPTER ONE: THE BLUEST EYE

Toni Morrison writes from life. The themes within her novels take on, and subsequently challenge, the notions of race, gender, and class. She has consistently set her novels in the contemporary past, tugging at the repressive memories of her characters as well as of her readers. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is set in Lorain, Ohio in the fall of 1940 and takes the reader throughout the year and into the fall of 1941. The sometimes narrator, Claudia MacTeer, is looking back as an adult and remembering the events that took place during a year of her girlhood. Morrison frames what will be the process of maturation for both the narrator and the protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, during a natural year cycle. Each of the four segments of the novel is entitled, "Autumn," "Winter," "Spring," and "Summer." The use of seasonal cycles underlies an integral element to the novel, namely that the way things are *supposed* to happen in nature are unnatural when one is young, black, and female growing up in white America.

Nature and fecundity have long been associated with black women. Morrison takes the stereotype of the immoral black slave woman and contrasts that with the character of Pecola. There is nothing natural, Morrison suggests, about a little girl being pregnant with her father's baby. When Pecola has the baby it is stillborn—a further indication that black girls are not unnaturally fertile as the popular stereotype would suggest. The only natural changes that the reader sees within the novel are those changes indicative of puberty, for example, when Pecola starts menstruating.

Sexual maturation has long signaled a rite of passage indicative of female vulnerability to male power. The female friendship and bonding between Claudia, her sister Frieda, and Pecola is the construct Morrison provides to build a fragile bridge of community to carry the girls over the dangerous waters of girlhood and into womanhood. Barbara Christian, analyzing the work from a feminist perspective, suggests that:

The black woman as girl and grown woman, is the turning character, and the friendship between two women or girls serves as the yardstick by which the overwhelming contradictions in life are measured. Double-faced, her focal characters look outward and search inward, trying to find some continuity between the season, the earth, other people, and the cycle of life, and their own particular lives. Often they find that there is conflict between their own nature and that of society that man has made, to the extent that one seems to be an inversion of the other (Gates and Appiah, 59).

A principal thread within the novel is that of Pecola having the simple wish to have blue eyes. The fact that both Pecola and Claudia are black makes this wish very problematic; for what do blue eyes indicate if not white skin, blonde hair, and the favorable reaction Western society has for females with those physical traits? The dominance of white enculturation and the destruction it wreaks in the lives of Morrison's characters is one of many distinctions between a typical Bildungsroman and Morrison's narrative. She clearly sets out the binary oppositions of what it means to be a white girl growing up in America, and what it means to be a black girl on the margin of society. Morrison begins each chapter with what is tantamount to a racist lie—the assumption that all families are white. She uses the Dick and Jane Primer to

title each chapter and then shows the converse of what that really means to black families; black versions of Dick and Jane. The white version is that of the blonde little girl and boy playing with their puppy on a huge front lawn. The lawn is overshadowed by a large, white frame house, complete with pretty, green shutters. Dick and Jane's parents are the prototype for Ward and June Cleaver. What one never saw in mid-twentieth century popular culture was the riptide of emotions right beneath its surface. The "normal" family was white, upper to middle class, dad wears a suit to work, and mom wears a frilly apron over her day wear to bake cookies. In the background is Mammy who wears a starched white uniform to mop the Cleaver's kitchen floor. The first page of the novel begins with the prose from the Dick and Jane reading primer used in public education:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green and white house. They are very happy (1).

The impact these words have on the education of children is powerful indeed. The implication for children reading these books is that this is the standard by which they are to measure their own success and that of their families. The pictures that accompany these powerful words with the primers are of clean, well-dressed, white children: Jane has blonde hair, blue eyes, and sports a white even-toothed smile. She is girlhood's perfection. Her father wears a nice suit and drives a shiny car. Mother wears a fancy dress with a clean frilly apron tied at her waist. They are both smiling. Throughout the novel Morrison plays out the ways in which the characters either resist

or succumb to the primer's indoctrination of what is good, beautiful, and "normal." As the novel progresses, the primer's prose begins to change and reflect the "abnormality" of what follows in each chapter. The primer begins to break down by losing punctuation and running words together, essentially losing its power in the face of the real story. Claudia, a nine-year-old girl who becomes the voice of her community, often narrates the real story. The use of her first-person voice adds credibility to her process of identity formation, and that of Pecola. Claudia's search for meaning in the dominant white culture juxtaposes Pecola's failure to do so. Claudia is the example of a successful Bildungsroman, and Pecola is the anti-Bildungsroman; Morrison knows in this world of opposing binaries the reader needs both. She allows this dual development because she wants to teach the reader what went wrong with Pecola, why she became stunted and why Claudia was able to mature. As readers, we need to hear Claudia's voice as she takes on the beauty myth and to see the ways in which girls of color struggle to resist. Morrison also gives readers Claudia's voice to reveal the strength of the black family as community, as opposed to the failure of the Breedloves to provide for Pecola. Christian suggests that the three elements of the "Dick and Jane primer backdrop, the modulated voice of Claudia, and the constant continuum between the mean, precious seasons and the growth of young black girls" reveal Morrison's intent for her book (Gates and Appiah, 63).

Both Claudia and Pecola are given opportunities for personal growth throughout the novel in the form of several confrontations with racist ideology. They both must face images of themselves in opposition to the image of the white beauty

myth. They do not have any positive images of blackness presented to them other than their own mothers in which to assess their worth. Instead, they must see themselves “reflected in the mirror held up by mainstream society, and constantly under the gaze of the bluest eye” (Feng, 51). Each time Pecola or Claudia is faced with a conflict between self-loving or self-loathing, their response determines how far they are on their paths toward growth and self-understanding, towards the completion of their journey toward a balanced selfhood.

Pecola is the passive center of the novel. Her growth process is one that ends in madness and tragedy. The prototypical plot of the Bildungsroman is that the protagonist goes on a quest that results in education/experience that leads to self-acceptance and enlightenment. Pecola’s tragedy is her “unconditional acceptance of the ‘master narrative’-the dominant discourse represented by the Dick and Jane primer at the beginning of the novel,” ultimately causes her downfall into madness (Feng, 53). Claudia serves as the voice of resistance to the hegemonic racism indicative of privileging whiteness as that which is good and beautiful. She is the one who recognizes the systems of oppression as outside of herself, and sees the external forces of colonization in the veneration of white baby dolls, Shirley Temple, light-skinned black girls, and all that represents the white culture. Claudia is immediately identified as a character who questions cultural assumptions, never adopting the belief that pink is more powerful than brown. Pecola is unable to see through the falsity of racial assumptions and allows herself to accept that if she were to look white, she would be

transformed into the little blonde girl in her reader who has a stay at home mother and an employed executive father.

Chapter one begins with Claudia narrating Pecola's story and in doing so introducing herself and her own story. The first line of the prologue to the novel begins with, "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941" (6). This first line immediately signals the reader that things were not the way they should have been in the fall of 1941. Quiet indicates that something was not spoken, and that this secret had "to be kept quiet." Instead, Claudia indicates something unnatural occurred simply by suggesting the oddity of no one's marigolds growing. In the next line Claudia's childlike voice concludes the reason the flowers did not sprout was due to Pecola having her father's baby. Morrison introduces the childlike wisdom of Claudia as way to signal the reader to her protagonist's somewhat jaded innocence.

Claudia and Frieda are entering adolescence (nine and ten respectively) and the fact that their peer is going to have a baby has placed them on the periphery of womanhood. As girl-women they are concerned that Pecola's baby should be born "healthy" and "safely" (6). And yet they are still innocent enough to believe that they should "think of nothing but our own magic: if we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be alright" (6).

Claudia's initiation into womanhood begins after the prologue, in a reversal; she tells the story as an upending of her own repression. In retrospect, the grown Claudia recognizes after Pecola loses her baby that perhaps she had planted the marigold seeds too deeply. She thinks that she and her sister had planted their "seeds

in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair" (7). Before the novel begins, Pecola has gone mad and her father is dead. However, what Claudia tells the reader is that she must unearth her memory of her coming of age: she must recall how she remained alive and sane and why Pecola did not. Claudia feels guilty for not saving Pecola and is seeking her own redemption through memory. Morrison suggests that "female violation revealed from the vantage point of the victims or would-be victims of rape--the persons no one inquired of--the girls themselves"-- is what propels the reader to continue reading *The Bluest Eye*, even knowing the end will be tragic (Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," 22). That is to say, the true story lies in the telling. Claudia's speculation as to why the marigolds did not come up after being planted properly serves as an impetus for the reader to share in her childlike speculation. Morrison uses the analogy of the "disruption of nature as being a social disruption with tragic individual consequences in which the reader, as part of the population of text, is implicated" (22). The reader continues because to understand one's own place in society, to take ownership for or seek vindication of one's own racist attitudes and actions, is integral to entering into the text as a reader. If anyone believes that they themselves have not experienced bigotry in one form or another they are living in false consciousness. Through educating the reader's consciousness by artfully engaging her in the text of *The Bluest Eye* she will also try to reconcile Claudia's double vision of black and white America. To support Morrison's dichotomy of double consciousness in American society, she

introduces Claudia as her girl-self in opposition to a little white girl, Rosemary Villanucci. Rosemary sits in a new car eating bread and butter, and gloats at Claudia and Frieda, telling them they can not “come in.”

We stare at her, wanting her bread, but more than that wanting to poke the arrogance out of her eyes and smash the pride of ownership that curls her chewing mouth. When she comes out of the car we will beat her up, make red marks on her white skin, and she will cry and ask us do we want her to pull her pants down. We will say no. We don't know what we should feel or do, but whenever she asks us, we know she is offering us something precious and that our own pride must be asserted by refusing to accept (9).

The racial and class difference between Claudia and Rosemary is glaring. Claudia is hungry, but will not dignify her physical needs. Her recognition that Rosemary is entitled because she has light eyes and white skin enrages her. Claudia's reaction is to smash and destroy that which privileges Rosemary as a “have” and Claudia as a “have not.” It is Rosemary's family's white privilege that allows her father to own a café, new car, and bread and butter snacks. It is Rosemary's whiteness that Claudia wants to punish with “red marks,” hurting her by giving her whiteness color. In contrast to Rosemary, Claudia notes the difference between belonging to the white or black community of Lorain, Ohio. The narrator, Claudia, suggests that due to minority status in terms of both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment” (17). What it means for Claudia as a child was that she had to collect coal that fell off of trains onto the railroad tracks, stuff rags in her windows, and live in an old house infested with vermin:

Our house is old, cold, and green. . .the others are braces in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice. Adults do not talk to us-they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information. When we trip and fall down they glance at us; if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us are we crazy. When we catch colds, they shake their heads in disgust at our lack of consideration...Our illness is treated with contempt (10)

Morrison clearly wants to show the contrast early in the novel of the Dick and Jane primer, and what the reality was for children of color. Having children complicates the struggle for survival that the MacTeers face. Claudia recalls becoming sick in the fall of 1940, remembering her mother's rough hands rubbing on Vicks salve she recalls, "My mother's anger humiliates me: her words chafe my cheeks, and I am crying. I do not know that she is not angry at me, but at my illness"(12). In the cold house where the only heat source comes from scrounged coal, a child's sickness is something to be taken seriously. Underlying Claudia's mother's disapproval of her illness is fear. As an adult remembering this moment from her childhood, Claudia states that the love from her parents was one that was:

A productive and fructifying pain. Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it-taste it-sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base-everywhere in that house. . .It coated my chest, along with the salve, and when the flannel came undone in my sleep, the clear, sharp curves of air outlined its presence on my throat. And in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repinned the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead (11).

It is during the autumn that Pecola is placed in the MacTeer home by the county. The fact that Claudia's family is chosen as a proper placement for a "county case," indicates that the community approves of the MacTeers, that "love thick and

dark” is good love. Pecola stays with the MacTeers because her father burned down the family’s house, her brother ran away, and her mother is staying with the family whom she works for. Pecola Breedlove is to stay with the MacTeers until her family is reunited –when Cholly Breedlove gets of jail. Pecola is introduced as a character that is lacking any external or physical support. Her character is the inverted version of Claudia’s: she is without family or community. In contrast to childhood bravado she seems painfully gullible. When Pecola arrives she comes with nothing, “no little paper bag with the other dress, or a nightgown, or two pair of whitish cotton bloomers” (18). Claudia and Frieda decide they would befriend their guest when it was clear she “didn’t want to dominate” them (19). It is the failure of Pecola’s family to love her that initially isolates her from her peers. However, as the novel progresses it becomes apparent that it is Pecola’s ultimate belief in her own lack of self-worth (in the guise of “ugliness”) that will account for her total alienation.

Pecola is unable to define herself within a matrix of oppressions. Without the ability to come to an identity apart from racist assumptions like beauty, she is unable to become empowered and resist those same assumptions. Collins has suggested that in order for black women to survive the “everyday disrespect and outright assaults that accompany controlling images is to turn it out. This is the moment when silence becomes speech, when stillness becomes action” (Black Feminist Thought, 96). Pecola is unable to think in her own defense, let alone speak. Independent thinking is an important characteristic of the black female protagonist within the genre of Bildungsroman: “ Independent black heroines populate many of

these black female fictional characters by expressing varying dimensions of the emergent woman thesis” (94). To emerge is to confront racist stereotypes and come away with a confidence that one’s worth is in fact, independent from cultural assumptions.

Pecola’s desire for whiteness as an escape from her own blackness (what she thinks of as the source of her abject rejection) takes the form of her wanting blue eyes. Her quest for blue eyes begins while living with the MacTeers. Pecola is drawn to the whiteness of the MacTeer’s milk and manages to drink three quarts of milk in one sitting. The reader discovers that it isn’t the milk that she craves, but the act of drinking it from Claudia’s Shirley Temple cup. While Frieda agrees with Pecola that Shirley Temple is “cute” she does not drink milk. Both Claudia and Frieda hate milk and refuse to drink it. This is yet another contrast Morrison uses to show how the MacTeer girls resist whiteness, and Pecola ingests it—not only does she drink the milk in the cup, but she drinks three quarts in one sitting. Claudia detests Shirley Temple and the veneration of her plump white cheeks and golden curls. In retrospect, she explains that her loathing of Shirley Temple is because she was “younger than both Frieda and Pecola, I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her.” In fact, Claudia even hates the white baby dolls (resembling Shirley Temple) that she was given for Christmas. She would try to “love” them at her parent’s urging, but found their “hard unyielding limbs resisted my flesh. . .The starched gauze or lace on the cotton dress irritated any embrace” (20). Claudia had only one desire when it came to the pretty white baby doll:

To dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. (6)

The simple reality of what dominant white culture venerates, through the critical eye of Claudia, signals the skillful beginning to Morrison's deconstruction of mainstream ideology. Claudia questions what it is that makes whiteness so loveable, and blackness so awful. In ripping apart the dolls she explains that she was on a quest to "discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, 'Awww,' but not for me?" (22). Claudia's fundamental rejection of the veneration of white girls is testimony to her own sense of self-worth. The fact that she questions and admits, "I don't get it," is her first step toward self-realization. Claudia recognizes white privilege and rejects it as unquestionably unjust. Her subsequent outrage at white dominant culture is what one would expect as a healthy response toward rejection and injustice. Through rejecting the figurative dolls and by pinching white girls until their eyes would "fold in pain, and their cry would not sound like the icebox door," (23) Claudia defends her blackness the only way a nine-year-old knows how: striking back. As she progresses toward a deeper understanding of racial privilege she is moved further along on her path toward self-acceptance. As she begins to grow emotionally, Claudia begins to see that harming white girls is "repulsive" because the process of inflicting pain is a kind of "disinterested" harm. Instead, she chooses to take refuge in the kind of false and expected love of whiteness that prompts her parents to buy her Shirley Temple dolls

for Christmas. Claudia notes that “the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love...was a small step to Shirley Temple” (23). While Claudia seems to understand that acquiescence to whiteness is expected of her, she still resists on the level that she understands that kind of “love” is false. Morrison suggests that because Claudia’s parents venerate Shirley Temple, they continue to suffer from internalized oppression. Despite Claudia’s socialization to buy into the beauty myth, she is able to identify real love from that which is false.

Midway through the novel Morrison introduces the character of Maureen Peal. Maureen falls on the whiter side of the black continuum of girlhood. She joins Pecola and Claudia’s class in the winter. Claudia describes her as the ‘disrupter of seasons. . . a high-yellow dream child ... as rich as the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care” (62). Claudia states, “Frieda and I were bemused, irritated, and fascinated with her.” When Claudia finds out that she and Maureen will be locker friends, she sees the friendship as one that is dangerous. She notes that when she looks at the “Kelly-green knee socks, and felt the pull and slack of my own brown stockings, I wanted to kick her” (63). It isn’t simply Maureen’s wealth and high-yellow status, but the “unearned haughtiness in her eyes” that prompts Claudia to slam the locker on Maureen’s hand (63). Claudia knows that Maureen’s attitude is privileged on the basis of her light skin and green eyes—to Claudia, this is an unearned privilege. One afternoon following school Maureen asks to walk home with Frieda and Claudia. On their way home they see Pecola circled by a group of black boys who are taunting her, “Ya daddy sleeps

nekked!” Frieda leaps to Pecola’s defense “with set lips and Mama’s eyes”(66). In an effort to what appears to be joining ranks with Claudia and Frieda, Maureen befriends Pecola, even buying her ice cream. After her show of acceptance and generosity toward Pecola (setting her up) she proceeds to ask Pecola if indeed she has ever seen a naked man. Pecola becomes agitated and answers” Who wants to see a naked man? Nobody’s father would be naked in front of his own daughter. Not unless he was dirty too” (71). This time it is Claudia who jumps to Pecola’s defense by telling Maureen to shut-up.

What follows is a fight in which ends with Maureen calling all three girls “ugly” and “black” and defends her own “cuteness” by being non-black. She screams across the street at the girls, “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos” (73). For Claudia and Frieda who have resisted colonization, these insults from another black girl “stunned” them, and it took “a second or two before Frieda and I collected ourselves enough to shout” their volley of insults. They are stunned that a member of their own community, someone who moments before had claimed sisterhood, would condemn them for their color. In stark contrast to Claudia and Frieda’s outrage at Maureen’s white ideology, is Pecola: “She seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing. Her pain antagonized me. I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets. But she held it in where it could lap at her eyes” (74).

Frieda and Claudia leave Pecola on the street and head toward home in silence. It is during their silence that Claudia experiences an epiphany that catapults her further along in her identity formation. She realizes the detested Shirley Temple has come to life wearing sweater sets and eating ice cream. Claudia recognizes that while Maureen Peal is a cruel person, her words are accurate. It was not Maureen Peal that deserved their fury, but the enemy was “the thing that made her beautiful, and not us” (74). If

the world worked in opposite binaries, and Maureen's whiteness made her cute, then Claudia's blackness made her something else:

We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what? Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend our unworthiness (74).

Morrison asks the questions that every reader who encounters this text will try to answer by the close of the novel. Why are little girls treated differently from boys? Why does color matter? Who ascribes worth within our society according to race, gender, and class? And finally, how do we as "parents and aunts" perpetuate the very myths that undermine the wellbeing of those who fall outside of the accepted norm? June Jordan suggests that the formation of identity among young black girls and women is influenced by the fact that "As poor, woman, and black, the Afro-American woman had to generate her own definition in order to survive, for she found that she was forced to deny essential aspects of herself to fit the definition of others" (Jordan, 60). Claudia's superficial acceptance of whiteness (resisting the urge to punish white girls) is a conscious choice that she makes. However, the way in which Pecola views whiteness is the flip side of Claudia's subtle sadism. Rather than looking at white girls with an eye for vengeance, Pecola engages a self-directed masochistic gaze. She measures her darkness against all that is white and finds herself lacking. Pecola incorporates the cruel words of Maureen Peal into her experiences of rejection and

takes her at her word. Pecola never experiences the urge to pinch or to fight in her own defense. She wishes only for a pair of twinkling blue eyes that would see the world as Shirley Temple might. Pecola belongs to a family that has rejected their own self-worth and projects their self-hatred onto all exterior features of Afro-American life. It is their own rejection of that which is inherently beautiful that causes Morrison to characterize the entire Breedlove family as ugly:

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction. Their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said; "You are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, and every glance. "Yes," they had said. "You are right." And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw a mantle over them, and went about the world with it ... And Pecola. She hid behind hers. Concealed, veiled, eclipsed-peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask (39).

Mrs. MacTeer characterizes Pecola's parents as failures, saying "That old trifling Cholly been out of jail two whole days and ain't been here yet to see if his own child was alive or dead. She could be dead for all he know. That mama neither"(25). It becomes Mrs. MacTeer's duty to mother Pecola while she remains with them. On the first day Pecola arrives, so does her first period. Instead of ignoring Pecola as she's

accustomed to by her own mother, Mrs. MacTeer hugs the girls “their heads against her stomach. Her eyes were sorry” (31). Mrs. MacTeer then takes Pecola into the bathroom, runs her a bath, and from outside the door Claudia can hear the two of them in the bathroom and “the music of my mother’s laughter” (32).

Following the bath when all three girls are in bed falling asleep, Pecola asks:

“Is it true I can have a baby now?”

“Sure,” said Frieda drowsily. “Sure you can.”

“But. . . how?” Her voice was hollow with wonder.

“Oh,” said Frieda, “somebody has to love you.”

Then Pecola asked a question that had never entered my mind.

“How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?” (32).

Clearly, the distinction between Claudia and Pecola is nowhere clearer than in the above passage. It has never occurred to Claudia to have to earn someone’s love. While her mother may fume about this or that, the deep “fructifying love” remains. Pecola knows nothing of what it means to be loved. Pecola thinks of love as she does in terms of something she must “get,” not as a given. She has seen that love is given to little white girls, and understands that if she can fit into that limited criterion of whiteness, e.g. blue eyes, she can “get” love. The theme of self-loathing and the visions of dominant white culture are encapsulated in Pecola’s wish for blue eyes. After all, with her eyes she first sees her mother reflected back to her, a mother who upon first seeing her newborn dismissed her: “I knowed she was ugly. Head full of

pretty hair, but Lord was she ugly” (126). She thinks that if “those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. . .If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they’d say, “Why look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes”(46). Now that she has verbally asked how she can get someone to love her, Pecola begins actively to search out that love. In a home where she is required to refer to her mother as “Mrs. Breedlove” and avoid looking at her father because of his drunken nakedness, she has a huge undertaking at hand. Leaving her family on her own volition is not an option for Pecola. She believes that “as long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people” (45). Pecola’s belief in culturally imposed ways of seeing beauty have rendered her helpless. Her self-esteem is firmly rooted in the northern beauty myth, and without those light eyes she feels she is nothing. Naturally, in view of the racism inherent within socially prescribed notions of beauty the issue of self-esteem is a central theme within literature written by black women. The way in which Pecola perceives and addresses the beauty myth will necessarily foretell her future sense of self-worth, or in her case, the lack thereof.

Pecola’s experience away from home and within the community is no less traumatic. In school it was her “ugliness that made her despised ...by teachers and students alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk” (45). Within the white community she is similarly dismissed. In one instance Pecola goes to the local candy store in search of penny candy. She wants the chewy candy,

“Mary Jane” with its little white girl on the package. When the white storeowner asks what Pecola wants, she sees in his eyes the “total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness...she has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So, This distaste must be for her, her blackness” (49). Initially, Pecola lets herself become angry at the treatment the storeowner has given her, his racist distaste so openly hostile. She recognizes that “anger is better. . .an awareness of worth.” And yet, the anger does not hold, the “puppy is too easily surfeited” and the “shame wells up again, the muddy rivulets seeping into her eyes”(50). To stave off her tears, Pecola remembers the candy. She looks at the wrapper and sees the “Smiling white face, blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort.” Pecola eats the candy to stave off self-loathing. Eating the candy becomes a religious experience for her, because in devouring the Mary Janes she is “somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (50).

Rather than try to reconcile her status as outsider to white culture by resisting domination, she continues to deny self-acceptance by yearning to assimilate into the mainstream. What makes her susceptibility to internalized oppression especially tragic is that both her parents have fallen victim to it as well. Morrison introduces the childhood and subsequent transition to adulthood of Cholly and Pauline Breedlove in an attempt to reveal the insidiousness of generational oppression.

Pauline Breedlove was one of many children. When she was a young girl she stepped on a nail that resulted in deforming her foot and causing her to limp. She was

unable to work outdoors with the other children and was given household tasks. When she ran out of things to do she would pass the time by organizing and ordering things-sticks, rocks, buttons. Eventually her parents moved the family into the city and Pauline took over all of the household duties. In fact, "she was not only good at housekeeping, she enjoyed it. . .The stillness and isolation both clamed and energized her. She could arrange and clean without interruption" (112). As she grew into womanhood she began to fantasize about "someone" who would romance her, who would "lead her away to the sea, to the city, to the woods., forever"(113). Cholly came along with his "light eyes" and after a short romance they were married. After Cholly and Pauline were married they moved to a bigger city. It was here that she began to experience loneliness, and also when she discovered the movies:

Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another-physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. . .she was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign in some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen (122).

After Pauline has been indoctrinated by the white notions of beauty, class, and wealth she feels somehow less of a person. Pauline states, "Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard. . . There I was five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone. Everything went then" (123). Pauline gives up trying to be white, trying to attain the

life on the silver screen and instead becomes the ideal servant. When she is working as a domestic in a wealthy white home she is allowed to live vicariously, almost as if she were on the silver screen and in her own mansion. Consequently, she gives up on her own family and lives vicariously through her white employers. Pauline compares their white fluffy towels to the old gray ones at home, the yellow hair with its “roll and slip” to Pecola’s “tangled black puffs of rough wool,” and once again finds her life lacking (127). Eventually, Pauline neglects her home and sees it only as “the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely” (127). She relegates her husband to the “model of sin and failure” and “bore him as a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross” (127). Into her son, Sammy, she has “beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (128). Pauline has psychologically removed herself from her husband, her children, and her home. The ugliness she finds in an abandoned storefront that is her home defies her value of whiteness. Therefore, all who reside in that “home” are a constant reminder that she is living a fantasy when with the Fishers; that her real life is with the thick tufts of dark hair and gray towels.

The turning point for Pauline occurs when she rejects her own child for the little white Fisher girl. Pecola arrives with Claudia and Frieda to deliver laundry to the Fisher home. The incongruity of Pecola being in the Fisher home is an incongruity that Pauline cannot bear. While Pauline is out of the kitchen and Pecola has an accident:

It may have been nervousness, awkwardness, but the pan tilted under Pecola's fingers and fell to the floor, splattering blackish blueberries everywhere. Most of the juice splashed on Pecola's legs, and the burn must have been painful, for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered in with a tightly packed laundry bag. In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor.. . Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thick with anger abused Pecola directly...The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Polly will change it." As Pecola put the laundry bag in the wagon, we could hear Mrs. Breedlove hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl (109).

Pecola is burned and in pain, and yet Pauline beats her for spilling the cobbler on her clean floor. Pauline is outraged at Pecola's clumsiness and turns her kindness on the uninjured little white girl-the one who gets to call her "Polly." Claudia watches the scene, and her only thought is that she wants to "scratch the yellow-pink girl" for calling Mrs. Breedlove "Polly" when Pecola has to call her own mother, "Mrs. Breedlove." Again, Claudia recognizes the inherent racist relationship between the Fisher girl and Pauline and reacts with anger. Pecola, on the other hand, simply submits to her punishment as if her clumsiness is another aspect of her blackness, and therefore punishable. It is clear that Pauline is incapable of accepting and loving her own blackness, and by extension no one else's. Pecola understands only that she is drawn into the matrix of racism by her desire to be loved. Pauline's own complicity with what she witnesses on the silver screen stunts her progression toward accepting her own unique qualities or those of anyone else.

Cholly Breedlove is equally unable to love Pecola because of his own experience of coming of age in a racist society. At four days old Cholly's mother

abandoned him on a woodpile. Cholly's aged aunt rescues him and raises him until her death when he was twelve years old. Morrison has Cholly's puberty coincide with his aunt's imminent death. Cholly's initiation is similar to Pecola's in that he has an "event" that triggers his sexuality. Whereas Pecola has her first period when she is orphaned from her parents, Cholly has his first wet dream after his aunt dies. He dreams that "his penis changed into a long hickory stick" (139). The first step toward both his and Pecola's maturation is signaled by a physical event that signifies the ability to give life. At the same time that Cholly and Pecola become "adults" their childhood ends with the loss of a parent.

It isn't long after Cholly loses his aunt that he loses his innocence. Cholly and his girl cousin leave his aunt's house to look for grapes in the fields. Darlene and Cholly feed one another grapes and play in what is almost an Edenic scene: "Cholly lay on his back panting. His mouth full of the taste of muscadine, listening to the pine needles rustling loudly in their anticipation of rain. The smell of promised rain, pine, and muscadine made him giddy" (144). Cholly and Darlene's playfulness turns into the natural curiosity of two teenagers experiencing sexual feelings for the first time. As they lay on a bed of pine needles they begin to make love, only to be intruded upon by two white hunters with a flashlight and guns. With the threat of violence and no where to go Cholly follows the white man's directions to "Get on with it nigger, an' make it good." Cholly proceeds to rape Darlene, who lays passive with her hands covering her face. After the men leave, Cholly gets dressed in silence. He looks at

Darlene and “wanted to strangle her.” (149). During the following days Cholly changes:

Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, and helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal. . . he hated the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. The one whom he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flashlight. The hee-hee-hee’s (148).

Cholly chooses to run away rather than ever have to face Darlene and what she represents. He convinces himself she may be pregnant and flees, repeating the same action of his own father. Cholly tells himself that if he can find his father, he can somehow redeem his manhood. Instead, what he finds is an unrepentant gambler who does not recognize Cholly and rejects him as a debt-collector. Cholly eventually decides that because he had been “abandoned in junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him” (160). Cholly has realized that any sense of self-worth he had grounded in his upbringing by his aunt disappears when she dies. He believes that when rejected by the white hunters as less than human, and certainly less than a man, he will find a human connection with his father. Cholly is hoping that his own worth as a son and as a human-being will be validated by his father accepting him. In the face of rejection from his only living relative Cholly decides he will school himself on how to be human. As a boy without resources and

stripped of any former sense of self, he becomes what he reviles. He covers his shame and loneliness with an appetite for physical pleasure and a need for distraction.

Cholly marries Pauline because she is a distraction for him. He never anticipates the arrival of children in such a marriage and is rendered 'totally dysfunctional.' Because he has been raised by an old woman, he has "no idea how to raise children. . .he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be" (160). Pecola arrives as her brother Sammy had, in a total parental abyss. What her mother knows of whiteness she desires above all else, and what Cholly knows of whiteness he reviles. Morrison seems to suggest that in a home full of so much self-loathing there isn't any space for parenting or loving. Pecola is left on her own to find a way to get the love every child deserves.

In contrast to Pecola's parents, Claudia's family is one that loves their own. Mrs. MacTeer is loving and generous toward Pecola. She accepts Pecola's "womanhood" as something that can be talked about and eased into much as she eases Pecola into a bath. She sings the blues, works hard, and when she talks with her black women friends it is conversation "punctuated with warm-pulsed laughter-like the throb of a heart made of jelly" (15). Mr. MacTeer is rarely present in the novel, but when Claudia mentions him she likens him to "wolf killer turned hawk fighter." She describes him as "A Vulcan guarding the flames, he gives us instructions about which doors to keep closed or opened for proper distribution of heat, lays kindling by, discusses qualities of coal, and teaches us to rake, feed, and bank the fire" (61). If fire represents the heart of familial love then one need only look at the fire within the

Breedlove home to see its dysfunction: "The only living thing.. .was the coal stove, which lived independently of everyone and everything, its fire being 'out,' 'banked,' or 'up' at its own discretion" (37). Morrison uses the example of the fire to represent love and how it functions in each respective home. Claudia's father teaches her about heat/comfort/love and he guards the girls as he does the flames. When the boarder at the MacTeer house molests Frieda, she tells Claudia of her father's reaction: "Daddy saw him come up on the porch, he threw our old tricycle at his head and knocked him off the porch" (100). Mr. MacTeer is the father who protects; Cholly Breedlove is the father that violates.

Spring arrives in Lorain, Ohio. And with spring is nature's renewing of itself in the way of fertile land, blossoming flowers, and the giving of new life. Claudia states at the beginning of the chapter that she and Frieda knew nothing of spring except that it "meant only a change in whipping style. They beat us differently in the spring." Morrison uses this section in the novel to present background information about Cholly and Pauline Breedlove. The miserable coming of age stories of each of the Breedloves serves as the backdrop to Pecola's rape. In effect, Morrison has forewarned that reader that nothing good can come out of the lives of such broken individuals, including their child.

Pecola stands at the sink in the kitchen doing dishes when her father comes staggering home drunk. When he first sees Pecola he becomes aware that he feels "uncomfortable," and what follows are a series of emotions: "The sequence of his

emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence" (161). He is faced with his own helplessness as a black man who does not know how to love, not even himself. He looks at the "hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter" and can't think of anything to say. He sees in her his own failure to father: his failure to return her love. There is a turning point in which Cholly could have walked away from his emotions, been reigned in by a sense of decency. However, Pecola shifts her weight onto one foot and suddenly in his drunken state Cholly sees Pauline: "The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him. . .surrounding all of this lust was a border of politeness. He wanted to fuck her-tenderly" (163). Pecola faints from the pain of rape and is abandoned by her father who once again feels "hatred mixed with tenderness" toward her. When she wakes up she feels the pain between her legs and the "face of her mother looming over her." Because Morrison places this scene after introducing us to Darlene and the rape scene with the white hunters, she deliberately wants the reader to see the extent of Pauline's internalized racism. Cholly is also a victim of his own internalized racism in that he has once again transferred his lust and hate for Darlene (again, fuelled by a sense of helplessness) onto Pecola; and likewise, Pauline becomes the white hunter with the voyeuristic gaze. Morrison suggests that victimization and systems of oppression occur from one generation to the next; Darlene, Pauline, and Pecola.

Pecola's rape reiterates what she already knows: she is unloved, unworthy, and unsafe. She is unable to rescue herself and recreate herself in an image that celebrates

what she wishes to be true: that she is inherently loveable simply by being. Claudia has her mother, father, and sister to tell her she is loved-if not in words then in deed. Pecola clings to her belief that if she were to have blue eyes she could miraculously become "beautiful." Each painful event in Pecola's life causes her to regress, rather than progress toward self-acceptance. The reversal of the Bildungsroman pattern is essential to the plot in that it shows how devastating internalized oppression can be for young African-American females. Pecola's regression is set in opposition to Claudia's progression toward self-definition. Morrison is showing the reader the ways in which the colonization of the mind will devastate the spirit. She is also showing the reader a way in which she can reject cultural assumptions of personal worth and forge ahead with her own identity.

Pecola's regression begins when she attempts to ingest Shirley Temple's attributes by drinking milk from the "Shirley Temple cup." The onset of her menstruation signifies Pecola's vulnerability toward men and the possible exploitation of her sexuality. Rather than moving toward womanhood and accepting her sexuality, Pecola is obsessed with transforming herself into a little white girl. Her menstruation appears to trigger the intensity of her desire to regress to the status of child; a golden child with blue eyes and the perfect family. Pecola further betrays herself by choosing to eat the Mary Jane candy rather than throwing it back in the face of the porcine storeowner. Should Pecola have taken her business elsewhere, should she have resisted eating the candy with the white girl on the package, she could have taken a step away from oppression. Instead, Pecola opts out of anger and into self-oppression.

Finally, when Pecola accepts Maureen Peal's friendship (she accepts the proffered white ice cream cone) in exchange for complicity in Maureen's objectification of black culture, she again chooses to accept rather than resist domination. She drinks the milk, eats the candy, and accepts Maureen's manipulation all without guilt. Pecola believes that her deliverance will be in the form of blue eyes and get them she must. Following her loss of innocence and subsequent impregnation, Pecola goes to Soaphead Church for her final deliverance. By now Pecola's wounding has become so great that nothing short of a miracle will put her back together again—only this time when she is recreated it will be with blue eyes.

Morrison introduces the character of Soaphead Church as "an old man who loved things, for the slightest contact with people produced in him a faint but persistent nausea" (164). He lives in a self-created world of abstinence; for all things threaten his notion of cleanliness (synonym for whiteness), especially sexually mature women. He holds a certain patronage of little girls, justifying his pedophilia in his mind as something innocent and clean (because the girls were innocent and clean-not him). Pecola comes to him when she was several months pregnant and held out his card to him. The card advertised, "If you are overcome with trouble and conditions that are not natural, I can remove them" (173). Pecola tells Soaphead she can't go to school anymore and needs his help, "My eyes," she states, "I want them blue." Soaphead looks at Pecola and sees someone worthy of a miracle, a "little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (174). After tricking Pecola into poisoning his landlady's dog, he tells her that her

wish is granted. Soaphead proudly states, "No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will. And she will live happily ever after" (182). After witnessing the poisoned dog writhe in pain and foam at the mouth she is even more invested in her miracle. After enduring this final act of cruelty by the community in which she lives Pecola's survival depends upon her believing she has blue eyes. Madness delivers Pecola from her psychic pain. With her madness comes the first real friend Pecola has known. This secret friend spends hours convincing Pecola that she indeed does have blue eyes. Pecola's investment in her delusion is all that sustains her.

Claudia describes Pecola's madness in terms of damage. "The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendrils, sap green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly" (204). Pecola is stuck in her progression. She is like the baby bird that has fallen out of the nest; damaged and broken but still trying to survive. It is up to Claudia to fly, and Morrison must give her the wings to do so.

In contrast to Pecola, Claudia's process of development begins when she rejected whiteness as a standard of beauty and worth. She destroyed the external beauty of white dolls in an attempt to get at their intrinsic worth. She wanted to understand whatever the magic was that set her apart from them. In the face of each racist assumption, assault, or confrontation Claudia showed herself a formidable opponent. While she was not sexually mature at the same time as Pecola and Frieda, she was still able to learn from their vulnerability.

Claudia listens to the community around her and begins to see Pecola's story as one with didactic worth. When the sisters hear of Pecola's rape "little by little we began to piece a story together, a secret, terrible, awful story" (188). As they hear the story unwind and learn of Pecola's demise (anti-Bildung) they began to be pulled forward on their own. They experience a sense of "defensive shame; we were embarrassed for Pecola, hurt for her, and finally we just felt sorry for her. Our sorrow drove out all thoughts of a new bicycle" (189). The community openly wishes that Pecola's unborn baby die—the tandem evidence of a black family gone wrong and death as payment for the Breedloves transgressing a taboo.

Claudia wishes for the life of Pecola's baby. She sees an inherent worth in a black baby, seeing the value of "living, breathing silk of black skin" in juxtaposition to "synthetic yellow bangs hanging over marble-blue eyes.. .pinched nose and bowline mouth." Claudia recognizes that more than her fondness for Pecola is her desire for "the black baby to live-just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals" (190). Claudia's progression is apparent in her wish for social change. She believes that if blackness can be reaffirmed in the living breathing body of a black baby, all black children will be vindicated. Claudia does not scorn Pecola or her baby, but stays true to her racial identity-everything black is inherently worthy of life and love.

Claudia's progression toward self-acceptance becomes almost complete when she plants flowers that she had once hoped held magical powers. Just as the flowers failed to thrive, so too did Pecola's baby. The failure of Claudia's childish wish causes

a deep sense of guilt and failure for both Claudia and Frieda. Their response is to join the community of black women who shunned her, sealing their fate. Claudia's progression halts in the same place as the other black women had, until she is able to bring to the surface her repressed memory and guilt.

Claudia's true maturation, the completion of journey toward self-knowledge, is told to us in retrospect. Claudia identifies Pecola as community scapegoat: "between Coke bottles and milkweed, among all the waste and beauty of the world-which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and she absorbed...all of us who knew her felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves of her" (205).

She is now able to see from the perspective of an adult that she "did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it is the fault of the earth, the land, our town," and that "This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers" (205). Claudia as social commentator is able to see that it is the white land that refuses to nurture little brown flowers. Claudia disassociates from Pecola as a way to limit the damage already done to her psyche by constantly confronting racism. It is after she recognizes her own innocence that she is able to place the blame where it belongs-not on herself, certainly not on the victim, but on the hegemonic dismissal of black beauty. Claudia's quest becomes complete when she is able to recognize the failure of her community to protect Pecola, and the difficulty of protecting anything on the margin: "when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce" (206). However, by simply telling her story Claudia is not acquiescing. She has gone deep within herself to discover how she became a woman based on her experiences as a girl. Claudia is not the mad mute picking through garbage; she is the voice of the hero, the one who got away. Pecola's experience

serves as a cautionary tale for black girls who deem themselves “ugly” and “unworthy.” Morrison presents the lives of two girls and their response to being objectified and marginalized by the white notion of beauty. Pecola’s simple wish for blue eyes uncovers the fundamental rejection of her black identity and total acquiescence to white racism. Claudia’s rejection of colonization and white physical supremacy translates into an acceptance of self that protects her from victimization. Ultimately, Claudia is unlike the prototypical hero of the Bildungsroman; instead of embracing societal norms in her quest for enlightenment, she rejects them and in this way becomes whole.

The emphasis of individual choice as that which determines inner transformation, is an integral element to the Bildungsroman. While Claudia could see that she had some slippages in her quest (wanting to beat up white girls), she consistently made the choices that led her toward self-acceptance. Pecola is a victim to circumstance who is unable to fight the bad luck of being born to the Breedloves. Eventually, the image created by her oppressors replaces Pecola’s actual self, until she becomes insane trying to unravel it all. Within her article, “Redemption through redemption of self” Emma Dawson analyses the way African-American female protagonists are ultimately able to rescue themselves *if* they are strong enough to withstand societal pressure. Dawson concludes, “The black female protagonist’s principal source of strength appears to be the knowledge, gained through experience, that suffering seems the maternal legacy of the African-American woman, and that survival is effective revenge for the pain” (Howard, 69).

CHAPTER TWO: THE COLOR PURPLE

Alice Walker explains that her motivation for writing The Color Purple (1982) was her desire to write a novel that she would like to read. “There is no story more moving to me personally than one in which one woman saves the life of another, and saves herself, and slays whatever dragon has appeared” (Walker, 19). The dragon within *The Color Purple* appears as forces which bar the female protagonist, Celie, from developing an identity outside of the bounds prescribed for her race and class.

In *The Color Purple*, a young African-American girl begins her adolescence by being repeatedly raped by her father. Celie gives birth twice, and each time her stepfather sells the babies to parts unknown. The novel opens in epistolary form, with Celie’s words, “Dear God, I’m fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (3). She explains how she became a victim of incest and rape. She describes a home in which her mother is forced to have sex and bear children with such regularity that she became physically ill, up to the point of death. When her mother leaves town to see a doctor, Celie’s father tells her, “You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t” (3). When Celie cries out in pain as he rapes her, he chokes her and says, “You better shut up and git used to it.” The rapes continue to occur and Celie admits, “I don’t never git used to it” (3).

Celie writes to God because her father has warned her that if she were to tell anyone of the rapes, “It’d kill your mammy.” Eventually, Celie’s mother dies, anyway.

And when she dies, she does it “screaming and cussing” at Celie (4) believing Alphonso’s lies about the origin of Celie’s pregnancy rather than supporting Celie. Should she have believed Celie’s condition came from rape, it would have meant having to stand up to Alphonso. Celie reflects in her journal of letters to God that she isn’t mad at her mother; that indeed she felt sorry for her, because it was her mother’s “trying to believe his story kilt her” (7).

Celie’s progression through life does not follow the typical coming of age plot. The incest, rape, and domestic violence she suffers at the beginning of puberty have stunted her maturation and identity formation. The Bildungsroman theme within the novel is one which directly deals with oppression in the form of sexism, racism, homosexuality. The protagonist, Celie, seems to have been born without self-esteem. However, it doesn’t take long to understand that the verbal, physical, and sexual assaults she has had to survive through is at the root of her lack of self-care. Walker will share the prominent theme in black female Bildungsroman of the heroine searching for an identity that includes a sense of well-being and self-worth.

Walker wrote In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens. “As black women, we have been poorly prepared to cherish what should matter most to us. Our models in literature and in life have been, for the most part, devastating. Even when we wish it, we are not always able to save ourselves for future generations” (311). Celie is a model that is both devastating in her misery who later (through the process of Bildung) becomes triumphant in her ability to survive and inspire. Unlike Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, Celie does not hide in madness after being raped by her father but

chooses instead to disassociate from her physical and emotional being. She does not fight and instead writes, "What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive" (21). Marc Cristophe suggests that the "depersonalization we witness in Celie is standard clinical behavior of alienated people" when facing seemingly insurmountable problems (Christophe, 103). The normal process of growth is subverted as Celie's experiences halt her progression for what amounts to be years. However, Barbara White has noted the emergence of a new version of female Bildungsroman that expands beyond adolescence: "A Bildungsroman has expanded far beyond its usual definition to include much older heroines . . . the new Bildungsroman may include adolescent memories, but it focuses primarily upon the crisis that occasions a woman's awakening" (White, 194). Before I progress toward the series of events that build up to Celie's awakening and self-discovery, I will show how her character is first denied her independent self-hood. I find it helpful to analyze Celie's character in light of how sexual abuse and incest unfolds and then affects the identity formation of adolescent victims. Walker chooses to open her novel after Celie has been victimized, leaving it to the reader to compose the psychological impact the preceding years have enacted upon Celie.

We find out toward the end of the novel that Celie's "pa" isn't her biological father. Her father had been lynched by white men threatened by his success. Her mother was left alone with Celie and Nettie, and after seeing "her husband's mutilated and charred body married Alphonso, who proceeded to finish destroying her" (Fannin, 53). Celie's mother is almost dead when the novel opens, having been first described

as telling her husband, "Naw, I ain't gonna. Can't you see I'm already half dead, an all of these children" (3). What unfolds within their home is typical for families in which incest occurs. Recent sociological studies support the work of Linda Tschirhart, found the following in her study of father/daughter incest:

If, for whatever reasons, the mother is unable to fulfill her ordinary functions, it is apparently assumed that some other female must be found to do it. The eldest daughter is a frequent choice. The father does not assume the maternal role when she is incapacitated. He feels it is his right to continue to receive the service which his wife formerly provided, sometimes including sexual service (Tschirhart, 157).

Celie's mother is worn out from child bearing and trying to run her household from the sick bed. As the eldest daughter the mother's responsibilities fall to Celie. Rather than trying to care for the children, laundry, and food preparation, Alphonso enlists Celie to do it all. Celie describes a typical day while her mother is still living: "By the time I git back from the well, the water be warm. By the time I git the tray ready the food be cold. By time I git all the children ready for school it be dinnertime" (4). Because Celie's mother is psychologically passive and physically weak, there is no model within the home for Celie to see as an example of resistance. Tschirhart states that in families such as these, "if the victim has no models of strong, autonomous, self-directed women, she may take on her mother's lifestyle without even realizing it. She has no example of someone saying that very important word, NO, to the father" (174).

By the time Celie's mother does tell Alphonso "no" she is already on her deathbed. After the incest has begun Celie decides that if she can just stay alive, something her mother was unable to do, she will be successful. As an adolescent Celie has no resources within her home or her community. Should Celie want to tell someone of the incest, she cannot. Her father has already told her that if she tells anyone her family will be destroyed. Her family is all that she has; her younger sister Nettie relies upon Celie for protection from Alphonso's advances. Tschirhart explains that, "for the adolescent victim her developmental issues are different. The formula she may arrive at is survival equals sexual activity. She gives up her sexual privacy to live at home" (165). Even after Alphonso has remarried, he continues sexually to pursue his daughters. History repeats itself within Celie's family even after her father has remarried. Celie wants to protect Nettie and in one instance she intercedes by asking him to "take me instead of Nettie." Celie pleads with him; "I tell him I can fix myself up for him. I duck into my room and come out wearing horsehair, feathers, and a pair of our new mammy high heel shoes. He beat me for dressing trampy but he do it to me anyway" (Walker, 9). Celie has taken on the maternal role and stepped in as sex object to deflect attention from her sister. Unfortunately, her own mother wasn't willing to do the same for Celie. This instance of courage adds to Celie's heroic character. While having sex with your step-father to rescue your little sister may not appear heroic, it is important to recognize it as such. Celie's sense of sisterhood is part of a larger feminist struggle to join together and form resistance to oppression. This particular scene foreshadows others that follow that show how female characters

sacrifice their safety to rescue one another. Joanne Gabin says of *The Color Purple* “one of the most beautiful and familiar aspects of the novel is the essential and supportive bonds between black women” (235). It is this bond between black women that will eventually move Celie onward toward her own sense of self-worth and identity outside of her abuse by males.

However, as a victim of incest Celie is “unable to maintain rates of emotional growth and development while being subjected to an experience as disruptive and foreign as incest” (Tschirhart, 165). Celie’s sense of self is diminished as she accepts the stigma for incest and becomes engaged in rescuing her sister through self-sacrifice. The one aspect of Celie’s true self that remains engaged in life is her love for her sister, Nettie. Ultimately, the power to love and nurture her sister is what enables her to recover. Eventually she is able to transfer the love she has for Nettie to Shug, and then to all women. Nonetheless, incest remains a familial problem. Alphonso’s behavior toward his daughter is simply “an indication of family pathology and breakdown; it is symptomatic of emotional dysfunction in the family unit” (Geiser, 46).

One cannot address issues of familial breakdown without first examining the way the black family in the South was impacted by racism. The black family before freedom from slavery was subjected to the whim of the slaver. Female slaves often were not able to choose with whom they would have sex or whom they would marry. White men justified the enslavement and common practice of raping black women by claiming they were less than human, just property. Because black women were

devalued and given livestock status, they were “bred” with whomever the slaver intended. The male slave who acted independently of his master in selecting his wife would first ask the woman if she wanted to marry and then proceed to the master for his permission (Hine and Thompson, 72) Slave women often married when they were in their early to mid-teens. What the slave master wanted were “families” that would provide him with more slaves. Every slave knew that survival in slavery meant obedience to the slave master. Hence, should a female slave resist the advances of a male (regardless of race) she risked being raped or being sold.

It was a common practice for slave owners to sell or rent male slaves to nearby plantations, which would result in a high rate of absentee husbands and fathers (Hine and Thompson, 215). Sexism functioned early on in the lives of enslaved black women; not only were they expected to work all day for the “master” hoeing and planting for hours on end, they were also expected to return “home,” and perform all the work of feeding and raising a family. Gender divisions reflected the ways in which labor was divided. While female slaves would work doing both domestic and field work, the enslaved male would only work in the areas that were prescribed as “male.” Regardless of the work that both slave men and women were required to do, there was one primary difference that set them apart: rape. White slavers and overseers used rape and the threat of rape to terrorize all black women, regardless of age or marital status. What amounted to hundreds of years of pervasive rape throughout the lives of slave women continues to have lasting effects on the lives of contemporary black women.

It is fundamental to studying any text written by an African-American woman author to examine the way she presents black womanhood. It is no mistake that Walker has placed her protagonist at the turn of the century when slavery was still very much operating on the psyches of black men and women. Patriarchy as it functions in *The Color Purple* is reminiscent of the way it worked in slavery. Tazyline Allan states:

Patriarchy is seen as both a micro and macro force. The former is black and localized, a discretionary power that runs amok until its assault on black women is repelled by the aggressive assertion of female subjecthood... the latter-white, systemic, and implacable-communicates the terrible reality of institutionalized power. Its capacity to destroy racial, sexual, and cultural others is infinite (Fleischner, 90)

One can recognize the impetus within patriarchy to use race as yet another way in which to oppress women. Southern men were socialized to view black women as property. Within the institution of slavery the slave owners were known to be able to treat enslaved women any way that they choose. Darlene Clark Hine states that southern slave owners "could do anything they wanted, understand, with any of the people who were their property. No one would punish them or put them in jail. Most people probably wouldn't even refuse to invite them to their parties" (68). Black women were systematically raped as a way to control and maintain the female slave population, especially those that might be considered "uppity." Merely the threat of rape was enough to impose collective silence on the part of enslaved women. bell hooks describes this silence as the "silence of the oppressed-that profound silence

engendered by resignation and acceptance of one's lot" (hooks, 1). Celie's experience from childhood has instructed her that she is safer if she resigns herself to her lot in life. However, her prolonged resignation complicates her progression toward self-awareness. As Morrison showed in *The Bluest Eye*, the key toward gaining a sense of self-worth lays in actively resisting oppression. Many women like Celie survived under oppressive conditions because they were passive and believed that a better world lay beyond. When Nettie tells her she can't stand the thought of Celie being married to Albert, Celie quiets her by saying that as long as she has "G-O-D I got somebody along" (Walker, 18). For black slave women, "religious faith nourished hope for a release from their earthly oppression and degradation. The body could be tortured and abused while the soul remained pure and untouched" (Hine, 7). The survival strategy most often used under conditions of oppression is that of dissemblance, "the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielding the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors" (Hine, 37). The culture of rape and overall devaluation of black womanhood has continued to impact women's lives. Hine describes the way in which black women have survived through dissemblance:

Because of the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, gender role differentiation, and regional economic variations, black women as a rule developed a politics of silence, and a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of the inner aspect of their lives . . . Only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility could ordinary black women acquire the psychic space and gather the resources needed to hold their own in their often one-sided and mismatched struggle to resist oppression (Hine, 41).

As the pages of Celie's journal reveal, dissemblance is a skill she depended upon. One can see that Celie's mistreatment by men under patriarchy is something that she inherited from her ancestors. Walker makes it her task to implement the daily heroics of women like Celie within her novel as a means for showing that the struggle (if one can survive) is worth it.

We have seen how black women "survived" slavery and how they functioned under patriarchy. It may be helpful to examine the ways in which slavery impacted black men and how that resulted in their adoption of internalized oppression and patriarchy. While Walker based Celie's character on that of her grandmother, who was raped at the age of twelve by her slave owner, she also borrows from history in her creation of Alphonso. Alphonso comes from generations of enslaved black men who were not allowed to marry women without the permission of the slave owner; he was also unable to "protect" his wife from sexual assaults by that same owner. While slaveholders demanded that their female slaves adopt their ideals of "personal conduct, morality, marriage, and family," the husband who tried to support his wife in those ideals against the will of the master would likely be sold or killed. While white men could openly rape black wives and mothers with impunity, if a black man was thought to be looking at a white woman he would surely be lynched: black men under slavery were not able to portray the patriarchal role that they saw their slaveholder enacting within his own household. Hence, "masculinity" and "patriarchy" were viewed as that which embodied freedom for black men (Hine, 109).

It comes as no surprise that the example set by those in power would be what black men would want to emulate once free. The “socialization of African men to see themselves as ‘owners’ of all black women and to regard them as property they should protect occurred after the long years of slavery” (hooks, 34). Black women entered relationships with men as “damaged goods,” hooks argues. “Like all rape victims in a patriarchal society they were seen as having lost value and worth as a result of the humiliation they suffered” (53). The negative stereotype of black woman as available sex object didn’t end just because slavery did. hooks further asserts that:

All the negative stereotypes used to characterize black women were anti-woman. A sexist ideology has been accepted by black people, these negative myths and stereotypes have effectively transcended class and race boundaries and affected the way black women were perceived by members of their own race and the way they perceived themselves (70).

Unfortunately, both black men and women imitated their sexist and racist white predecessors and incorporated notions of patriarchy into their lives. Investing in patriarchy was seen as a powerful way to gain equality. Because the black enslaved male had been denied the full expression of “masculine” traits under slavery, he wanted full access to the gender role available to him under freedom. Hine states, “The free black community basically adopted the gender roles of their white middle class neighbors. It was a reaction to slavery, of course. If gender roles were broken down by slaveholders, then they would be, must be, upheld by free people” (Hine, 109). June Jordan believes that by imitating the way white men treated black women and children racism was perpetuated through internalized racism: “The worst results of

racism in this country have been to subvert the most basic of human relationships among black men, women, and children and to destroy their individual psyches” (Jordan, 26).

What we see in the characterization of Alphonso and the man who later becomes Celie’s husband, Albert, is an exaggeration of the effects of slavery on black men. As the novel progresses to incorporate more characters, the one-dimensional males are juxtaposed against more complex characters. Without directly discussing white society, Walker uses her characters as vehicles that speak of the ways white culture has corrupted the black community. While Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* specifically addresses the white colonization of the mind, Walker focuses on gender and patriarchy as the white ghost of racism that haunts her heroine. Maria Louret goes so far as to suggest that *The Color Purple* can be read as a twentieth century slave narrative in which “Walker replaces black/white exploitation with a gendered one in which black women are enslaved by black men” (Louret, 100). I see this as too simplistic a reading because it implies that black men suddenly develop independent of black/white relations, a desire to dominate black women. Walker takes the politically charged atmosphere of patriarchal plantation life and inverts it by using black men as representations of white slave holders; in essence she is pointing out the devastating effects of both institutions without directly addressing race. However, race relations are implied throughout the novel as relationships between black men and women are played out in historic proportion. Walker intends for us to read her novel

with critical consciousness in order that we may recognize the red flags of internalized oppression within each of her characters.

The patriarchal family structure in which Celie is raised is often indicative of domestic and/or sexual abuse. Alphonso is the patriarch and his first wife the “mother” of all but two of his children. She is passive simply because she is effectively worn out by childbearing. Fathers under patriarchy are known for “having far reaching, almost absolute power over their children, who were considered to be their property” (Mey and Neff, 1986). Children raised with the authoritarian father are socialized for obedience. Combine the factors of a father who feels his daughters are to be used how he wishes (as are all females in the home) with the early socialization of the mother’s acquiescence, and Celie is set up for abuse from the get-go. Florence Rush suggests that, “ Little girls like their mothers learn at an early age to endure being sexually used. A few experiences of disbelief, shock, shame and embarrassment of those closest to them provide good training in silence” (Rush, 1980). Celie has been sworn to silence by her father and told to tell no one but God of what he has done. Celie’s letters to God are the only way she has been allowed to “speak” about what she has had to endure.

When the novel opens Celie’s voice comes off of the pages in an uneducated southern black dialect. Walker was repeatedly asked after writing *The Color Purple* why she would have her young protagonist use fractured English and include brutal sexual details of her sexual abuse. Walker explained that “it is language more than anything else that reveals and validates one’s existence, and if the language we

actually speak is denied us then it is inevitable that the form we are permitted to assume historically will be one of caricature, reflecting someone else's literary or social fantasy" (Walker, 71). Celie's voice when she writes to God is authentic, the one avenue in which she has not been silenced. Denied school because she was pregnant and unable to study because of her responsibilities for her siblings, she does the best she can with what she has.

Walker also responded to criticism that Celie's language is blunt, especially when she describes the rapes by her father:

I remember actually trying to censor this passage in Celie's voice even as I wrote it. Even I found it almost impossible to let her say what had happened to her as she perceived it, without euphemizing it a little. And why? Because once you strip away a lie that rape is pleasant, that rapists have anything attractive about them, that children are not permanently damaged by sexual pain, that violence to them is washed away by fear, silence, and time, you are left with the positive horror of the lives of those thousands of children. .. who have been sexually abused and who have never been permitted their own language to tell about it. (Walker, 72)

The private pain, endurance, and struggle to survive that Celie experienced is a part of a larger story. Walker does not want the reader to abandon Celie because it is too painful a story to read. She wants to invoke the voices of survivors from the past and present to form a very real perspective and using a first person narrator is vital to this goal. Celie is much more complex than the language she uses might suggest. However, it is her use of language that reveals her maturation as the novel progresses. Her initially simple sentence structure belies very accurate descriptions and astute observations of the community in which she lives. Her self-imposed silence is the

mask she must wear to survive within this same community. Unlike Morrison's protagonist, Claudia, Celie is unable to fight back. She has no inner voice that tells her she is worthy of love and respect. Celie is orphaned by both biological parents and cut off from her community. Her parents' deaths can be seen as the result of both racist and sexist action. Celie's inheritance is to be a victim of both the racist society that devalues black girls and women, as well as the sexist society that supports treating women as property. However, Celie's position at the beginning of the novel is what gives her the greatest potential for self-growth. Celie's response to what occurs within the novel will serve as the beginning for her search for selfhood. Initially, it is all she can do to stay alive. However, her quest slowly evolves as those pieces of her life that were disintegrated by rape begin to reintegrate over the course of the novel.

Shortly after Celie's mother dies and her father remarries, she is introduced to the person who will become pivotal to her redemption and reclamation of self. At first, all she has is a photograph of Shug Avery that had fallen out of Mr. _____'s pocket. Mr. _____, also known as Albert, had come to ask for Nettie's hand in marriage. Celie looks at the photo and thinks, "Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty than my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier than me" (Walker, 8). Celie sees in Shug both her mother and herself. When she dreams she dreams of Shug. In those dreams Celie sees her first powerful and sexual woman, a woman who "be dress to kill, whirling and happy" (8). Walker allows the reader to have the image of what a "free" woman must look and act like in comparison to both Celie and her mother. In the following entry Walker

juxtaposes the image of the free-stepping Shug, “She grin with her foot up on somebody’s motor car” to Celie’s foot dragging obedience to Albert (8).

Albert returns to ask for Nettie’s hand in marriage. His wife is dead and he has a large plantation house, fields, and several children that need taking care of. Alphonso tells him he can’t marry Nettie, as she is too young and inexperienced, but that “I can let you have Celie.” He tries to sell her to Albert by saying:

She the oldest anyway. She ought to marry first. She ain’t fresh tho’, but I spects you know that. She spoiled. Twice. But you don’t need a fresh woman no how. I got a fresh one in there myself and she sick all the time. . . The children get on her nerve, she not much of a cook, And she big already (9).

Alphonso continues to objectify Celie by stating, “She ugly. But she ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want and she ain’t gonna make you feed and clothe it” (10). Just as if Celie was standing on an auction block, Alphonso continues to make a case for her sale to Albert. As if this isn’t reminiscent enough of the auction block, he continues by saying, “Fact is, I got to git rid of her. She too old to be living here at home. And she a bad influence on my other girls. She’d come with her own linen” (10). Clearly, Alphonso wants to be able to rape Nettie and finds Celie’s interception bothersome. Despite the fact that he has repeatedly raped Celie, sold their children, and driven her mother into death, he has no compunction in ticking off all of Celie’s perceived deficits. He tells Albert (unmindful that Celie can hear the entire conversation) that Celie is ugly and stupid but that she’ll “make the better wife,” because she can “work

like a man” (10). The last warning Alphonso gives Albert is that Celie “lies.” Were Celie to desire a level of intimacy with Albert that would include her sharing the trauma of her childhood, he is already forewarned that “she lies” (10). And so it is that Celie is passed like chattel from one property owner to the next. Celie is unable to garner a sense of independence as her future is dictated by the men in her life. She has no one at this point who is looking out for her interests or well-being. Unlike the MacTeers who created a safe place for their daughters to grow, Celie has no one and no place where she can be safe and grow into womanhood.

As a married woman Celie is brutalized by both Albert and his children. In keeping with her selflessness she comforts herself in thinking that if she is married she can provide a place for Nettie to escape from Alphonso. Shortly after Celie leaves, Nettie does run away from home and comes to stay with her sister and new husband. The sisters soon see that this situation will have to be temporary as Albert still has designs on Nettie. Celie describes Nettie as “steady try to teach me” (17). Like Claudia, Nettie tries to instill within Celie the urge to fight back and demand respect. Celie tells her, “But I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive” (17). Celie continues to be passive, even when Albert tells her that Nettie must go.

Before Nettie leaves she tells Celie she hates to leave her there with “these rotten children, not to mention Mr._____. It’s like seeing you dead and buried” (18). Celie responds as if she were reciting an old plantation spiritual, telling Nettie, “Never mine, never mine, long as I can spell G-O- D I got somebody along” (18). But then she tells Nettie, “Write.” To which Nettie responds, “Nothing but death would

keep me from it.” This is the first time in the novel that Celie asserts herself and asks for someone else to do something that will give her joy. Writing is a way for Celie to take comfort, and reading Nettie’s writing is a way for Celie to connect with the one person who loves her. Celie concludes this entry by writing, “ She never write” (18).

Ironically, it is during Celie’s marriage to Albert that she becomes less isolated and meets the first women who serve as models of resistance. Albert’s sister Kate comes to visit. She insists that Albert buy Celie some new clothes, to which Albert asks, “It need something?” (20). Kate recognizes Celie’s humanity and attempts to demand the respect Celie deserves; Celie tries to tell Kate how much it means to her to have a new dress, the first one she’s ever had, and admits “I git hot in the face and stutter.”

“It’s all right, Celie. You deserve more than this.”

“Maybe so. I think.”

Celie has her first glimpse of what it may mean to have self-worth. She has moved from complete acceptance of the opinions of others, to beginning to have an opinion of her own. This is the first important step that Celie takes toward the process of growth within the continuum of the Bildungsroman experience. When Kate demands that Harpo, Celie’s stepson, do some of the backbreaking work Celie has been doing, Harpo tattles to Albert and she is made to leave. Before she leaves Celie she tells her, “You got to fight them, Celie. I can’t do it for you. You got to fight them

for yourself” (21). Celie remains passive. Her experiences differ from Kate’s-she never had money, wasn’t allowed to “be an old maid” as Kate is described, and wouldn’t dare to give orders with “a sharp tongue” as her sister-in-law has (19). However, Celie differs from Pecola in that there is a part of her that thinks “maybe” life can hold more than what she has been given. What she does not know is how she is supposed to “fight” to repair what she has lost and regenerate into a different person.

Walker gives Celie the character of Sofia to tell her how:

Harpo bring her over to meet his daddy. Mr. _____ say he want to have a look at her. I see ’em coming way off up the road. They be marching, hand in hand, like going to war. She in front a little. . .hair notty but a lot of it, tied up on her head in a mass of plaits. She not quite as tall as Harpo but much bigger, and strong and ruddy looking, like her mama brought her up on pork (30).

Harpo has fallen in love with a sixteen year old woman who is powerful enough, even at eight months pregnant, to tell Harpo that unless he is willing to stop being weak and listening to his father, he can stay put. She has a married sister who has said she can live with them for the rest of her life; “What I need to marry Harpo for?” she asks (30).

Sofia is the antithesis of female vulnerability. She has done her best, and succeeded, in fighting for her independence. She tells Celie: “All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain’t safe in a family of men” (38). Again, Walker addresses the issues of safety for black women within their family and community. She uses

Sofia as an example of someone who recognizes the dysfunction within her family, but is also capable of fighting and resisting. Sofia serves as an adolescent protagonist who has been able to see the possibilities under oppression and been able to struggle to achieve her own autonomy. Celie remains stunted, even though she is several years older than Sofia is. Celie understands that Sofia pities her, and when she has the opportunity to covertly hurt Sofia she does so.

When Harpo asks Celie how to “make Sofia mind” she tells him to “Beat her,” (35). Celie’s betrayal of another woman and her complicity in patriarchy serve as the catalyst for her own change. She witnesses Sofia and Harpo “fighting like two mens” (36). She recognizes a husband and wife fighting as equals, with Sofia winning in the end. Celie is suddenly aware that there is an alternate rapport between men and women than what she had grown to believe was “normal.” Sofia describes a family in which sisterhood was a primary resource for survival: “All the girls big and strong like me. Boys big and strong, too, but all the girls stick together” (39). Walker allows Sofia to foreshadow the lesson Celie will have to learn to complete her “Bildung.” It is as natural for Sofia to strike back as it is for Celie to retreat. Sofia can’t understand how Celie can be passive and asks her what she does with her anger when she gets mad at someone. Celie tells her:

I used to git mad at my mammy cause she put a lot of work on me. Then I see how sick she is. Couldn’t stay mad at her. Couldn’t be mad at my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what. Then after while every time I got mad or start to feel mad, I got felt like throwing up. Terrible feeling. Then I start to feel nothing at all (39).

Clearly what Celie describes is her feeling of dissemblance. When she is first married to Albert and he beats her in front of the children, she tells herself, "Celie, you a tree" (22). She escapes the humiliation and pain at the hands of her husband by pretending she does not exist. She tells Sofia that sometimes Albert gets after her, but she thinks that soon she'll be in heaven and it will all be over. Sofia replies as you might imagine Claudia MacTeer would: "You ought to bash Mr. _____ head open, think bout heaven later" (39). This is the first bit of practical advice that Celie has received as a married woman aside from simply the command, "fight." Rather than responding as she has in the past with a passive nod, she laughs. Celie's next step away from her past and patriarchy is her ability to not succumb to fear. In addition, she and Sofia are able to laugh about the image much like Celie and Nettie used to make fun of Albert. Celie's bonding with Sofia creates an entryway toward discovering the power of sisterhood, what it means finally to have someone on her side. Sofia becomes a maternal figure for Celie, despite their age difference. Literary critic Joanne Braxton identifies Sofia's figure as that of the outraged mother figure, the one who steps in to defend her daughter. Braxton suggests that "The ancestral figure most common in the work of contemporary black women writers is an outraged mother. She speaks in and through the narrator of the text to 'bear witness' and to break down artificial boundaries. . . she lends a benevolent, instructive, and protective presence to the text" (Braxton, 300). Walker uses themes of sisterhood and motherhood as a necessary means of growth.

Walker uses inverted gender roles between Sofia and Harpo to teach Celie the importance of discovering one's own identity. Sofia rejects any role that will limit her in expressing herself; Harpo resists his impulse toward the feminine as believing he will become emasculated. Jennifer Fleischer suggests that: "Sofia pointedly enacts a self-enabling ethos deemed necessary to deform patriarchy. Her appropriation of masculine violence sets off the novel's offensive against male oppression" (Fleischer, 99). Harpo's insistence on "making Sofia mind" is an outcome of his need to feel "masculine." His role model is Albert, who sits on the front porch smoking his pipe all day and watching his wife and son toil in the fields. In order to be a patriarch like Albert (the caricature of a white slave owner) he must assert dominance over Sofia. Donna Haisty Winchell observes "Harpo cannot simply accept that he and Sofia are happy in their reversed roles-and that love is a far more important element in marriage than obedience-but would rather prove his manhood by beating" (Winchell, 95). Sofia does not seem to notice that Harpo enjoys the babies more than chopping wood. She is happy to have a helpmate and will do her part in caring for the children alongside of him. Perhaps it is her expectation that she be treated as an equal that sets her apart from Celie. If anyone should treat her unequally, she will meet them head on with a balled up fist.

Shug Avery arrives unannounced. Celie feels her heart "begin to beat like a fury" (Walker, 41). For a woman who has told herself she has no feelings, she is aghast that she finds herself with her "mind whirling" and realizes that what she is feeling she has never felt before: sexual excitement. When she lays her eyes on Shug

for the first time, she thinks “my heart gon fly out of my mouth when I see one of her foots come poking out” (41). When Shug sees Celie for the first time she exclaims, “You sure *is* ugly” (42). Celie comes into the full realization that she is sexually attracted to Shug when she gives her a bath; “I thought I had turned into a man” (45). When she washes her she “feel like I’m praying.” Walker has constructed female desire to be different from that of male desire. What Celie feels in her desire for Shug is both physical and sacred. Celie has begun her awakening and is experiencing what most teenage girls have at sixteen; she has fallen in love. Walker signals the reader that Celie has picked up where she left off several years before. No longer disassociated from her body, Celie has to be mindful that she doesn’t “have hold of her hand and taste her fingers in my mouth” (46). Celie’s journey toward selfhood is now underway. Walker challenges stereotypes of homosexuality through presenting Celie’s passion as that which is innocent. This is the first time that Celie is allowing herself to feel something for another human being without fear of reprisal.

Intimacy between Shug and Celie begins with Celie taking on the parental role of caretaker as she had with her sister Nettie. Celie compares Shug’s beauty as well as her illness with her own mother. She instantly wants to protect and provide for Shug; again, Walker inverts the stereotypical gender roles by casting Celie as both mother and husband to Shug. She combs out her hair noticing that it is “the nottiest, shortest, kinkiest hair I ever saw, and I loves every strand of it” (48). However, as Shug regains her strength she begins to exhibit “masculine” traits and Celie begins to fall into the

role of “sister” rather than mother. Shug tries to sew but her stitches come out crooked, she smokes and she “say whatever come to mind, forgit about polite” (63).

Sofia eventually leaves Harpo as she can no longer stand his objectification of her. She tells Celie that the turning point is that when they make love, Harpo is there in body but not spirit; “Heartfeeling don’t even seem to enter into it. . .the fact that he can do it like that make me want to kill him” (59). Sofia is no longer present and as Celie is progressing and gaining selfhood she needs a teacher who can give her the same practical advice as Sofia. Shug becomes the guiding maternal figure for Celie, nourishing her spirit with friendship and love.

Shug’s initial relationship with Celie is somewhat like that between Morrison’s character of Mrs. MacTeer and Pecola. We see Mrs. MacTeer assume the role of mother for Pecola when she gets her first period. Pecola is an orphan at this point in the novel with neither of her parents coming forward to claim her after Cholly tried to burn down the house. Pecola has no idea that she has begun menstruating and appears to have no knowledge of her body and how it works. Mrs. MacTeer is the one who takes her into the bathroom and teaches her what it means to have become “a woman.” In this same vein, Shug is the one who introduces Celie to her body and the way it works. It is not simply a matter of explaining biology to Celie. She understands that part only too well. Shug wants Celie to claim her body as her own, to see that touch does not translate to trauma. Daniel Ross suggests that we view the body of black women as symbolic of what they have endured under slavery and patriarchy:

To confront the body is to confront not only an individual's abuse but the abuse of women's bodies throughout history; as the external symbol of women's enslavement, this abuse represents for a woman a reminder of her degradation and her consignment to an inferior status (Ross, 70).

Celie's body has never been her own to do with what she pleased. Her body has been raped, beaten, and given away to strangers. Celie is unmindful of the way she dresses her body or how she combs her hair; for her the body is a vehicle for work that must be done in order to avoid a beating or rape. It is not until Celie hears the sound of Shug's voice that she becomes aware of her body as something which belongs to her and how it may appear to Shug. It is also to Shug whom Celie first talks to about what has been done to her body and how it felt.

Celie is talking to Shug about sex with Albert and tells her, "Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep" (Walker, 68). Celie experiences marital rape and while she is not willing to stop him physically, she disassociates from her body to endure the abuse. Shug responds to Celie by telling her, "Why Miss Celie, you still a virgin" (69). Shug proceeds to tell her that sex is something to be enjoyed and then gives her a hand mirror to "go off and look" at herself.

What is pivotal about this scene is how important it is to Celie's progression toward selfhood. She asks Shug to accompany her and keep watch at the door while she looks at herself; "Like two prankish girls," they giggle and talk about Celie's discovery. When Shug asks her about it, she answers, "It mine." This is Celie's initial

reclamation of self. Shug moves from being the maternal guiding figure to a peer; someone who can “guard the door” from the boys seeing Celie with her “drawers down” (70). Celie is able to accept her body as that which is part of her whole self and integral to dismantling the self-hatred borne from years of physical and sexual abuse. Celie continues her psychological growth when she is able to recognize that the forces of oppression reside outside of herself and belong to the community at large. She is able to do this when the indomitable Sofia is punished for refusing to be passive when the white mayor of the town hits her. She is imprisoned for fighting back, and when Celie gets into the jail she sees the full brunt of racist and sexist oppression:

When I see Sofia I don't know why she still alive. They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her teef like a piece of rubber. She can't talk. And she just about the color of eggplant (77).

Celie recognizes that there are risks in fighting back, especially when it is against white men. The brutality that Sofia suffers from her jailers is far worse a beating than Celie received at the hands of black family members. However, Walker is illustrating that oppression occurs in all cultures and its aim is the same: to suppress and silence. The uppity slave woman gets punished and serves as a “lesson” to all of the other women within the community. When she visits Sofia in prison she asks how it is that she is able to survive. Sofia tells her, “Every time they ask me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say.” Celie observes that “Sofia look wild when she say that, and her bad eye wander round

the room” (78). Passivity for Sofia means survival at the cost of her sanity. It is Celie that constructs the plan to get Sofia out of prison and in the mayor’s home as a maid. Celie has moved from being passive victim to being an active sister within a community of women. Through her successful plan of rescuing Sofia she is able to redeem herself and her own complicity in patriarchy. Celie has joined a long standing tradition of black female activism. Because she has verbalized a plan to help Sofia she is breaking her own silence to help another woman. The “breaking of silence is not just a literary tactic designed to heal black women’s victimization. Braking silence lays the foundation for a collective group voice “ (Collins, 48). Coming to voice becomes an important stage in Celie’s progression in the process of Bildung.

Celie has found her voice and in doing so become an active member in fighting her own oppression as well as the oppression of others. When Celie is able to talk about the incest she relinquishes a part of herself that she’d tucked away since she was a young girl. Celie is able to tell Shug because she is the only person who has shown her any kindness, and the only one who bothered to ask. Barker suggests that Shug, “As a surrogate mother, subtly nurtures Celie into self-acceptance and guides her through all the stages of self actualization that most children go through early in their lives” (Barker, 57). In order to become self actualized Celie must unearth her repressed memories from the abuse she suffered as a child. Celie describes her repeated abuse:

I did love to cut hair, I say to Shug, since I was a little bitty thing. I’d run go git the scissors if I saw hair coming, and I’d cut and

cut, long as I could. That how come I was the one cut his hair. But always before I cut it on the front porch. It got to be the place where everytime I saw him coming with the scissors and the comb and the stool, I start to cry (Walker, 97).

Shug listens to Celie and then tells her, "I thought it was only the whitefolks do freakish things like that" (97). She then tells Celie she loves her, and the two of them proceed to make love.

Celie is the symbolic embodiment of the oppressed black woman in a racist and sexist society; it is crucial to Walker that she complete her spiritual journey by becoming healed through her community of friends. Celie has survived to love again. Because of Shug's love and support Celie has been able to safely come of age. Shug provides the positive adult role model that Celie desperately needed to trigger self-love. Her body is no longer that part of her she wishes to annihilate but emerges as that which can fortify her. Learning to care for oneself is an important stage toward achieving a sense of self-worth. Without a core belief in one's own value the progression toward self-growth will remain stunted. Celie's acceptance of herself as one worthy of Shug's love enables her to begin to see herself as worthy of love in general. Celie's transformation does not occur in a vacuum. Walker is intent upon seeing all of her characters transform and move toward lives that are independent of oppression. Sofia represents the once free but now enslaved black woman. She states of her twelve years as an indentured servant to the white mayor that she is "a slave." It is Walker's keen characterization of Sofia that allows the reader to see the full and progressive impact of racism on a woman's psyche.

Sofia was born into patriarchy and was able to dismantle the power of male privilege by insisting she have an egalitarian marriage. Sofia didn't have to directly confront racism until she had to "work" for a white family. She is kept from her own family for five years at a stretch, is made to sleep under the porch and coddle Miss Millie, her childish "mistress." Sofia states, "White folks is a miracle of affliction" (92). Eventually, Sofia earns her release from the Mayor. However, the white child she raises while held captive continues to come and visit her. Unlike Mrs. Breedlove who dotes upon her white female charge, Sofia does not cherish Miss Eleanor Jane. She tolerates her on an individual basis because Eleanor Jane was the only one who was kind to her during her enslavement. Sofia's family resents Eleanor Jane's persistence in visiting their family and constantly seeking Sofia's approval. When Eleanor Jane asks Sofia if she likes the white baby she brings with her on these visits, Sofia tells her that she does not. What she says can be extrapolated to all white men:

No ma'am, say Sofia. I do not love Reynolds Stanley Earl. . . Look at him, she say. He can't even walk and already he in my house messing it up. Did I ast him to come? Do I care whether he sweet or not? Will it make any difference in the way he grow up to treat me what I think?. . . I don't feel nothing about him at all. I don't love, I don't hate him. I just wish he wouldn't run loose all the time messing up folks stuff (224).

Sofia has moved from her initial rage toward all whites after her imprisonment, to an acceptance of the fact that she does not and will not "love" her future oppressor. She is open to negotiating race relations on an individual basis and eventually hires Eleanor Jane to be her housekeeper. Walker uses Sofia's transformation from proud

young girl to mature experienced woman as a spiritual journey that ends with reclamation of self. It is the inverted relationship of black/white and slave/master between Sofia and Eleanor Jane that proves Walker's goal of personal transformation. The relationship between the women is one that is social rather than racial. Eleanor Jane is not a slave but is paid labor. Sofia has no personal investment in whether Eleanor Jane works for her or not. Sofia's self-worth is not contingent upon anyone else. She has a community of friends and family that will give her the love and support she needs, regardless of what an outsider can offer. Pecola Breedlove would have died and gone to heaven if she'd had a white friend so desperate was she to be validated.

Celie also turns the corner on selfhood when she is able to transform her relationship with Albert from submissive to assertive. Initially, when Celie discovers Albert has been keeping and hiding Nettie's letters from her for years she reacts by shutting down. She describes her disassociated state: "Where I'm at is peaceful. It calm. No Albert there. No Shug. Nothing" (103). Celie is educated and healed through Nettie's letters by reconnecting with both her African and familial past. Walker uses Nettie's letters to reveal that oppression is worldwide on a macroscopic level. Nettie's letters tell Celie how she is safe and reunited with Celie's children. The letters document life in Africa; including the oppression from patriarchy, racism, and the eventual colonization of the African people. The exploitive slave plantation mentality that existed in the South also exists in Africa as people are enslaved to work for Dutch chocolate companies. Celie begins to heal from her many losses as an adolescent through knowing that her loss will be returned to her. She writes, "Now I know Nettie

alive I begin to strut a little bit. Think, when she come home us leave here. Her and me and our two children” (126). After Celie has finished Nettie’s letters she realizes that her father was lynched, her mother was crazy, pa is not her father, and her children are not her brother and sister. In the face of this realization she tells God, “You must be sleep” (151). She tells Shug that she doesn’t believe in God anymore, and that if “He ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place” (164).

In light of her discoveries Celie decides it is time for action. At a family dinner Shug announces that Celie will be going with her to her home in Tennessee. Albert still believes that Celie is his to control and tells her she isn’t going anywhere, to which Celie states: “You took my sister Nettie away from me. And she was the only person love me in the world. But Nettie and my children coming home soon. And when she do, all us together gon’ whup your ass” (170). Harpo tries to defend his father but Celie says, “If you hadn’t tried to rule over Sofia the white folks never would have caught her. You were all rotten children. You made my life hell on earth. And your daddy here ain’t dead horse’s shit’ (171). Albert tries to hit Celie and instead gets her dinner knife jabbed in his hand. Celie has rejected the status of submissive and silent victim and accepted her status as warrior woman. Celie has moved from the objectified status of other to the subject of her own being. She issues a curse to Albert telling him, “Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble” (176). He responds by trying to stick Celie back under his thumb by reminding her that she is *not* Shug:

You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people. You black, you pore, you ugly, you woman. Goddam, you nothing at all (176).

Celie continues to curse Albert by telling him, "Anything you do to me, already done to you" (176). Her parting words to Albert signal the final stage in her awakening. Celie rejoices in her newly found self by telling all who can hear, "I'm poor, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook. But I am here" (176). In Celie's statement she recognizes that she has had unparalleled difficulty because of her poverty and race, and that she has *survived*.

Celie moves into Shug's house and it is here that she discovers her own creativity. Celie asks Shug for cloth and begins creating her own pants patterns. Celie's talent for creating patterns and sewing pants evolves into a self-supporting business. Eventually, she learns she has inherited the house and store she grew up in.

Celie now has her own home, business, and is even able to employ Sofia and Harpo to sell her pants in the store. Even Albert appears in the novel as changed man, he's clean, cordial, and humane. He gives Celie the remaining letters from Nettie. The effect of Celie's curse was to transform Albert. He notices the change within himself when he tells Celie, "The more I wonder, the more I love" (239). He asks Celie, "Do you like any special thing?" in an effort to know her as a woman and not a thing (214). Celie is able to forgive Albert because she notices his transformation, saying, "look like he trying to make something out himself" (221). Walker suggests that not only is it

important to change, but we must forgive our former selves if we are to move forward. Spiritual growth and redemption is available for everyone, even men.

Celie approaches her final stage of growth when she is able to let Shug go. Shug asks Celie to give her permission for one last fling, and Celie agrees. She thinks to herself, "If she come, I be happy. If she don't, I be content" (240). Celie is whole at last. She is confident that with or without someone else to love her, she will still love and accept herself. Celie's inner peace, her being "content" is a defining moment within the novel. Celie is able to empower herself because she is a whole being with her own sense of self-worth and security. Celie has moved from victim to survivor.

The novel closes with Shug having returned to Celie, and Albert sitting with both women on the porch sewing. As they sit on the porch, a blended family, a car approaches and stops. It is Nettie and the grown children. The last page of the novel is set on July fourth. Harpo tells the guests at the barbecue, "White people busy celebrating they independence from England July 4th, so most black folks don't have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other" (243).

Celebrating the survival of a people and a culture under the harshest of conditions is in many ways the essence of *The Color Purple*. It is a didactic novel that teaches the reader to deconstruct systems of oppression that are both cultural and social. Celie represents pure human potential. One can only imagine that she may have been like as an adult had she not had to contend with the obstacles placed before her. However, overcoming obstacles is the basis for Bildungsroman. Bonnie Hoover

Braendlin suggests that ethnic women writers, like Alice Walker, write a different kind of Bildungsroman:

Marginal women must contend with prejudice and sexism not only from the dominant culture, but also from others of their group—particularly the males; thus they struggle on several planes to attain maturity and self-understanding while being devalued both for being women and for their color and/or sexual preference (Braendlin, 76).

The Color Purple is both a political and a social novel. It serves as a manifesto to readers with regard to the importance of transforming ourselves as well as our society. Walker affirms individual autonomy in the lives of her most central characters, while at the same time validating the need for community. Celie's journey from victim to contented woman is a difficult one to read. However, Gregory Marshall suggests "we can attain moral consciousness only as we see our personhood and its demands reflected to us in the lives of others that are recounted to us in narrative art" (Marshall, 51). After reading *The Color Purple* one must reshape her ideas of the way female children of color are socialized and supported within our society. Walker presents the reader with one of many alternatives that can serve to engender a graceful entry to womanhood for adolescent girls. It is up to the reader to choose to accept this text as an affirmation or an entreaty; either way, change is imminent.

CONCLUSION

The typical plot for a coming of age story is one that involves a young, white, male hero making his way in the world. The Bildungsroman written by ethnic women writers complicates the plot by addressing the multiple layers of oppression confronting their protagonists. Both Toni Morrison and Alice Walker create culturally representative characters and politicize the Bildungsroman by doing so. The interplay of race, gender, and class create tension within their novels that must necessarily be addressed by the reader.

In her memoirs bell hooks stated that as a young reader she read Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Of Morrison she states, "She gave us girls confronting issues of class, race, identity, girls who were struggling to confront and cope with pain. She gave us black girls who were critical thinkers" (Bone Black, xii). hooks identifies the female protagonist's struggle as "fragments of my story" that helped her to create "the foundation of selfhood" (xi). A white reader may find that Bildungsroman of black women reveals her own unearned white privilege. Her understanding of new concepts that have to do with oppression may lead her toward a sense of empathy and activism. Patricia Hill Collins states "the best way of understanding another person's ideas. . . is to share the experiences that led the person to form those ideas" (Black Feminist Thought, 259).

Black feminist critical social theory is very much aligned with the complications that face the protagonists within both Morrison and Walker's novels. At the core of black feminist theory is the notion that by "stressing how African-American women must become self-defined and self-determining within intersecting oppressions. . . is the emphasis on the importance of knowledge for empowerment" (Collins, 272). The success of both Claudia and Celie is based in their learned experiences that led to their self-acceptance despite what they had been taught by a racist, sexist, and classist society. Claudia has broken the silence of her embittered childhood by being able to recognize her own heroic attempts to rescue Pecola. Likewise, Celie is able to allow herself to speak after reclaiming the part of her she'd silenced in order to survive.

The novel of formation is one that reveals the education of its protagonists as well educating its readers. June Jordan exhorts her readers to *respond* to what they have read:

If you do not actively oppose and reject every system and every deed that you must deem inhumane, then I believe you have been poorly educated; we have not taught you well; and you must now teach yourself new poems, new stories, and new craft requirements that will certify your own defensible humanity (30).

I want to close by suggesting that as we read novels written by African-American writers we look for the ways in which they defy the normative stories to which we have become accustomed. Both Morrison and Walker have taken hold of

existing forms originated by masculinist writers to address a set of social wrongs. I would like this study to serve as a starting place for reconstructing the way in which modern female Bildungsroman are read.

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