Celie's Search for Identity: A Psychoanalytic Developmental Reading of Alice Walker's "The Color Purple"
Author(s): Charles L. Proudfit
Published by: University of Wisconsin Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208336
Accessed: 21-01-2016 19:36 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp
JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
CELIE'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY:
A PSYCHOANALYTIC DEVELOPMENTAL READING
OF ALICE WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE

Charles L. Proudfit

It is my belief and my faith that whenever you are trying to convey a sense of a common reality to people, they will want to read and hear about it.
—Alice Walker, “The Eighties and Me”

Since the publication of Alice Walker's The Color Purple, both novel and author continue to elicit a wide range of praise and censure from an increasing number of black and white, female and male reviewers, literary critics, and general readers. At one extreme are those who find the work “an American novel of permanent importance” (Prescott 67); who place the author “in the company of Faulkner” (Smith 183); and who praise Walker for her creation of the unique voice of her protagonist, Celie, a “poor, ugly, uneducated [black girl] . . . [from] rural Georgia,” for “the universality of the themes of redemptive love, strength in adversity, independence, and self-assertion through the values of community,” and for “creating a unique set of people who speak to the human condition” (McFadden 139-43). At the other extreme are those who feel that the novel should be “ignored” rather than “canonized” (Harris, “On The Color Purple” 155); who place Walker “closer to Harriet Beecher Stowe than to [Zora Neale] Hurston” (Pinckney 18); and who censure Walker for the creation of an unrealistic plot (Towers 36), for the “depiction of violent black men who physically and psychologically abuse their wives and children . . . [and for the] depiction of lesbianism” (Royster 347), and for peopling her novel with characters who “themselves do not seem to respond to [some form of] internal logic” (Harris, “Victimization” 9). Walker herself relates that her mother finds the book's language “offensive” and humorously describes a parent's attempt to have the novel banned in a California public school system (“Coming in from the Cold” 55-58). Between these extreme critical positions, one finds a growing body of measured.
literary criticism that addresses both the novel's formal qualities and thematic concerns1 and that validates the novel's having been awarded in 1983 both the American Book Award for Fiction and the Pulitzer Prize.

Although from the beginning critics have recognized the importance of the theme of "female bonding" in Celie's search for and development of a mature female identity,2 no one, to my knowledge, has viewed either this theme or the protagonist's character development from the perspective of contemporary psychoanalytic developmental psychology. Such a psychoanalytic developmental reading will help illuminate Walker's literary portrayal of the importance of the mother for the female infant, child, and adult as she struggles to separate, to individuate, to develop her own identity, and to make a final choice of love object; will suggest the need to reconsider certain negative criticisms of the novel, such as unequal narrative voices, unrealistic character development, faulty plot, unbelievable events, and a lesbian relationship "that represents the height of silly romanticism" (Harris, "On The Color Purple" 157); and will help account for the contrasting literary portraits of Celie and Nettie.

This reading is based upon a mother-daughter bond that, according to several current psychoanalytic theorists on female development, has its origins in deep, primitive ties to the mother of infancy and is a bond that must be worked through again and again during a woman's lifetime.3 Walker's descriptions of Celie's bonding, first with the biological mother of infancy and later with suitable mother surrogates, is psychologically realistic and ranges from the ministrations of Celie's younger sister Nettie, to Kate and Sofia, and to Shug's facilitating Celie's sensual awakening to adult female sexuality and a healthy emotional life. This "female bonding," which occurs over an extended period of time, enables Celie—a depressed survivor-victim of parent loss, emotional and physical neglect, rape, incest, trauma, and spousal abuse—to resume her arrested development and continue developmental processes that were thwarted in infancy and early adolescence. These processes are described with clinical accuracy; and, as they are revisited and reworked in Celie's interactions with appropriate mother surrogates, Celie is enabled to get in touch with her feelings, work

---

1See especially Fifer, Babb, Chambers, Cheung, and Tucker.
2See Prescott 68; Smith 182; McFadden 141–42; Steinem 90; Lenhart 3; Fifer 162–63; Shelton 386–87; McKenzie 54–57; Pinckney 17; Chambers 56–57; Tucker 85–90; Cheung 168; and Lewis 79–80.
3See Deutsch 20; Ritvo; Blos; Bergman; and Dalsimer, "Introduction" 1–12.
through old traumas, and achieve an emotional maturity and a firm sense of identity that is psychologically convincing.

Since some readers may not be familiar with psychoanalytic developmental psychology, often referred to as object relations theory, I should first like to make several observations about this approach to the study of child development and then acquaint the reader with several concepts and theories of the English analyst and pediatrician D. W. Winnicott that inform my developmental reading of the text. Stated simply, psychoanalytic developmental psychology is the study of the infant’s and the child’s development that focuses upon the unconscious, conscious, and maturational processes that occur within the mother-infant/child matrix. The infant’s and child’s object relations are both internal (intrapsychic) and external (the child experiences itself as separate from other objects [like mother or father] “objectively perceived” [Winnicott, *Maturational Processes* 57]). Most object relations theorists postulate that at birth the human infant is psychologically merged with its mother. Winnicott asserts that “There is no such thing as a baby”; rather, “one sees a ‘nursing couple’” (*Through Paediatrics* 99). Margaret Mahler observes that “from the beginning the child molds and unfolds in the matrix of the mother-infant dual unit” (5). Although Mahler, Winnicott, and other object relations theorists differ in their understanding of the developmental process that, if successfully “completed,” allows for the emergence of a healthy, creative self, they do agree that this process occurs within the mother-infant/child matrix (Greenberg and Mitchell). Furthermore, Winnicott, Mahler, and others

---

4For a succinct and useful summary of D. W. Winnicott’s theories of psychoanalytic developmental psychology, see Khan. For a more complete study, see Davis and Wallbridge.

I wish to thank James E. Marquardt, psychoanalyst and colleague, for reading an earlier version of this paper and for offering clarification of several psychoanalytic developmental concepts.

5For Winnicott, the “mother” is the infant’s “primary caretaker,” and the “infant” refers to that phase of life “prior to word presentation and the use of word symbols. The corollary is that [infancy] refers to a phase in which the infant depends on maternal care that is based on maternal empathy rather than on [the] understanding of what is or could be verbally expressed” (*Maturational Processes* 40).

The terms “good-enough mother” and “primary caretaker” are, for Winnicott and other object relations theorists, not gender specific, even though in our culture the infant’s primary caretaker is usually the biological mother. These terms are used to discuss the clinically observed importance of an adult person for the early psychological development of the infant. The focus of this paper is upon the importance of early object relations in the text for later change and development in adulthood, and not upon the current feminist political issues surrounding motherhood. I trust my readers will not accuse me of insensitivity to these issues.
agree with Daniel Stern: “Development is not a succession of events left behind in history. It is a continuing process, constantly updated” (260).6 Walker’s fictional treatment of Celie’s continuing development into middle age appears to be in agreement with this psychoanalytic developmental view.

Although a psychoanalytic literary critic might draw upon several schools of object relations in offering a developmental reading of Walker’s The Color Purple, I believe that Winnicott’s concepts and theories offer the most helpful insights into the psychological dynamics that underlie Walker’s literary portrayal of the significance of “female bonding” for the resumption of Celie’s arrested developmental processes in the early part of the novel. Furthermore, Winnicott’s view of the origin of what he calls the “True Self” and the “False Self” not only illuminates the contrasting literary portraits of Celie and her younger sister Nettie but also enables the reader to observe how Walker creatively uses diction, sentence structure, tone, and style in the sisters’ letters to each other in order to create “authentic” and “inauthentic” voices. Finally, Winnicott’s assertion that the developmental issues of infancy “are never fully established, and continue to be strengthened by the growth that continues in later childhood, and indeed in adult life, even in old age” (Maturational Processes 74) lends credence to Celie’s lengthy developmental process—a process that has been severely criticized (Harris, “Victimization” 16). Since Walker’s fictive description of Celie’s developmental history includes a brief sketch of the first several years of her life (Color Purple 160–61), I will begin with Winnicott’s concept of “primary maternal preoccupation” (Maturational Processes 85).

Winnicott observes that many expectant mothers experience a special psychological state during the latter part of their pregnancies and for several weeks after childbirth, in which they turn their attention inward and focus on the needs of the unborn and newly born. He calls this organized state “primary maternal preoccupation” and believes that the most successful mothers experience it. He believes that the mother and her newborn should be viewed as “a unit” (Maturational Processes 39) and asserts that the “good-enough mother” (57, 145; Playing 10),7 who is empathetically attuned to her infant’s

---

6See also Winnicott, Maturational Processes 73–74; and Mahler 3.
7Elsewhere Winnicott writes: “If the inherited potential is to have a chance to become actual in the sense of manifesting itself in the individual’s person, then the environmental provision must be adequate. It is convenient to use a phrase like ‘good-enough mothering’ to convey an unidealized view of the maternal function” (qtd. in Davis and Wallbridge 35; emphasis added).
needs, provides a “holding environment” (Maturational Processes 44–50, 86), in which the infant moves “from being merged with the mother to being separate from her, or to relating to her as separate and ‘not-me’” (45). During this time the “good-enough mother” serves both as an auxiliary ego for the immature ego of the infant (44, 56–63) and as a “mirror” in which the infant sees itself reflected: “[W]hen the mother is looking at the baby . . . what she looks like is related to what she sees there” (Playing 112). According to Winnicott, the “good-enough mother” provides the infant over time with enough such positive reflections of self that the infant begins to develop a “True Self” (118). If, however, a “mother [who is not good enough] reflects her own mood or, worse still, the rigidity of her own defenses” (112), then the infant perceives rather than apperceives (113), and we have the beginning of a compliant “False Self” (Maturational Processes 145). The origins of the “True Self” and the “False Self” begin before the infant has “separated off the ‘not me’ from the ‘me’” (158), that is, roughly prior to the sixth month.

Although Winnicott eschews a strict stage theory of infant development, he does note that the infant passes through several phases on its journey toward the development of a self. In the first phase of absolute dependence, the mother provides a facilitating environment (womb/first few weeks of life) for the totally helpless infant (Maturational Processes 87–88). In the next phase of relative dependence, the infant comes to separate the “not me” from the “me”; and from about six months to twenty-four months the infant becomes “aware of dependence,” comes to “know in his mind that mother is necessary,” and “gradually the need for the actual mother (in health) becomes fierce and truly terrible” (88). By two years of age, Winnicott believes that the infant has begun to develop inner capacities that will enable him or her to deal more effectively with loss (88). Prior to three years of age, however, loss of the mother or mothering agent can have profound adverse psychological effects upon a child. Finally, Winnicott asserts that throughout these phases of infant development “the whole procedure of infant-care has as its main characteristic a steady presentation of the world to the infant. . . . It can only be done by continuous management by a human being who is consistently herself. . . . This of course applies to father too” (87–88). These developmental concepts and theories, especially the “good-enough mother,” “the holding environment,” the “mirror role of the mother,” and the origin of the “True Self” and the “False Self,” underlie Walker’s dramatic theme of “female bonding” and help illuminate the author’s
literary portrayal of Celie’s lengthy search for and achievement of a mature female identity and healthy object relations.

Walker, like Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* (one of Walker’s favorite novels in childhood [Steinem 92]) begins *The Color Purple in medias res*: Celie, like Jane, is poised on the edge of adolescence after a childhood of loss, deprivation, and abuse. With Celie’s firstanguished letter to God, Walker enables the reader to enter into the private thoughts and emotional state of her traumatized, guilt- andshame-ridden, and depressed fourteen-year-old protagonist, who hasbeen repeatedly raped and impregnated by the man (Alphonso) whomshelieves to be her biological father: “Dear God, I am fourteen yearsold. I am I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give measign letting me know what is happening to me” (11). Celie drawsalineline through “I am” and writes “I have always been a good girl,”because the child victim of rape and incest often blames herself forher trauma; or, worse still, believes that this bad thing has happenedto her because she is bad and therefore deserves it. Celie writes to Godbecause she is ashamed of what is happening to her (122) and becaus eof the threat from Alphonso that immediately precedes Celie’s firstletter: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill yourmammy” (11). Threats and forced secrecy are usual parts of incest(Herman 88; Russell 132–33). The style of this letter, and of those thatimmediately follow, is characterized by short, choppy sentences,halting rhythms, repetitive grammatical structures of subject, verb,object, concrete physical descriptions in an ongoing present, andmatter-of-fact tone. It is a style that mirrors Celie’s traumatized cognitivedevelopment and depressed emotional state. We learn that Celie’sdepression is partly caused by her repressed rage when later in thenovelSofia asks her what she does when she gets mad: “I think. I can’t evenremember the last time I felt mad, I say. I used to git mad at mymammy cause she put a lot of work on me. Then I see how sick sheis. Couldn’t stay mad at her. Couldn’t be mad at my daddy cause hesemy daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what. Thenafter while every time I got mad, or start to feel mad, I got sick. Feltlike throwing up. Terrible feeling. Then I start to feel nothing at all”(47). Even the color purple, a mixture of the primary colors red (rage)and blue (depression), suggests Celie’s mood in the initial letters. Thecolor is also symbolic of the bruises resulting from the beatings inflicted upon Celie first by Alphonso (whom she later learns is her stepfather)and then her husband Albert.

In Celie’s second letter, written about a year later, Celie’s mother
has died, screaming and cursing her pregnant daughter. After the birth of Celie’s second child, Alphonso gives her infant son away, as he had her infant daughter, though Celie believes that he has killed them. She stops menstruating after the second birth. During the next five years, Celie lives at home with Alphonso, his new young wife, and a growing number of their children; she serves as a maid, and as protector of her younger sister Nettie against Alphonso’s sexual advances. At twenty, Celie is married off to Albert, a widower with children, who also abuses her. Nettie joins them but is soon told by Albert to leave.

It is not until sometime later, when Albert brings home his old flame Shug Avery, that Celie is enabled, with Shug’s help, to find Nettie’s letters to her. These letters, written after Nettie goes to live with the missionaries Corrine and Samuel but hidden by Albert, reveal to Celie the truth of her origin. She discovers that Alphonso is not her biological father and that she lived for the first two years of her life as the only child in a loving family. The father adored his pregnant wife and, we would expect, his daughter Celie. But one night, when she was barely two years old, her successful father’s store and blacksmith shop were burned and destroyed; he and his two brothers were dragged from their homes and hanged by jealous white merchants; and, when his mutilated and burned body was brought home to his wife by neighbors, she gave birth to Nettie and suffered an emotional breakdown:

Although the widow’s body recovered, her mind was never the same. She continued to fix her husband’s plate at mealtimes just as she’d always done and was always full of talk about the plans she and her husband had made. The neighbors, though not always intending to, shunned her more and more, partly because the plans she talked about were grander than anything they could even conceive of for colored people, and partly because her attachment to the past was so pitiful. She was a good-looking woman, though, and still owned land, but there was no one to work it for her, and she didn’t know how herself; besides she kept waiting for her husband to finish the meal she’d cooked for him and go to the fields himself. Soon there was nothing to eat that the neighbors did not bring, and she and her small children grubbed around in the yard as best they could.

While the second child was still a baby, a stranger appeared in the community, and lavished all his attention on the widow and her children; in a short while, they were married. Almost at once she was pregnant a third time, though her mental health was no better. Every year thereafter, she was pregnant, every year she became weaker and more mentally unstable, until, many years after she married the stranger, she died.

Two years before she died she had a baby girl that she was too sick to
keep. Then a baby boy [in fact Celie's kidnapped babies (12–13)]. These children were named Olivia and Adam. (161)

Thus, in a single evening, the two-year-old Celie experiences several catastrophic losses: (1) the death of a loving father; (2) the emotional loss of a loving mother (at first through a psychotic episode and later through sickness and depression); (3) the loss of a safe and nurturing family environment; and (4) the loss of her place as an only child. During the next several months, Celie and her newborn baby sister Nettie experience hunger, neglect, and other deprivations. When Alphonso appears on the scene within the year and “lavished all his attention on the widow and her children,” Celie’s and Nettie’s physical needs were probably met, but their mentally unstable, ill, and often pregnant mother would not have been able to provide either of her daughters with the “good-enough mothering” that they needed. Given the description of Alphonso in Celie’s early letters, he would not have been temperamentally fit to serve as a mother substitute. We can reasonably postulate that Celie became mother surrogate to Nettie, as well as to her ill and half-crazed mother’s unwanted babies.8 When Celie’s mother goes “to visit her sister doctor over Macon” (11), Alphonso rapes Celie and begins to use her as a sexual replacement for his exhausted wife—a not uncommon situation in actual cases of father-daughter incest (Herman 47–49).

This dramatic literary portrait of Celie as a traumatized and depressed survivor-victim of parent loss, physical and emotional neglect, rape, incest, and spousal abuse, which one black female critic finds unbelievable (Harris, “On The Color Purple” 155–56), is in fact a clinically accurate description of what Leonard Shengold calls “soul murder”:

Soul, or psychic, murder involves trauma imposed from the world outside the mind that is so overwhelming that the mental apparatus is flooded with feeling. The same overstimulated state can result as a reaction to great deprivation. The terrifying too-muchness requires massive and mind-distorting defensive operations for the child to continue to think and feel and live. The child’s sense of identity (that is, the emotional maintenance of the mental images of his or her self) is threatened. Our identity depends initially on good parental care and good parental caring—on the transmitted feeling that it is good that we are there. . . . What happens to the child subjected to soul murder is so

8Hilda S. Rollman-Branch writes: “Auxiliary mothering by older siblings supplements the mother’s care and even replaces it entirely. The infant’s need for attachment to a human object can be satisfied by another child” (412).
terrible, so overwhelming, and usually so recurrent that the child must not feel it and cannot register it, and resorts to a massive isolation of feeling, which is maintained by brainwashing (a mixture of confusion, denial, and identifying with the aggressor). A hypnotic living deadness, a state of existing "as if" one were there, is often the result of chronic early overstimulation or deprivation. As [Sandor] Ferenczi (1933) put it, "The [abused] child changes into a mechanical obedient automaton." . . . But the automaton has murder within. (24–25)

As a survivor of deprivation in childhood and of overstimulation in adolescence and young adulthood, Celie exhibits several characteristics of those who have experienced "soul murder." When her husband Albert, whom she addresses as "Mr. _____" until the very end of the novel, orders Celie to get his belt and then beats her, she isolates her feelings: "It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree" (30). Unable to deal with her feelings of jealousy and rage (46), Celie identifies with her male aggressors: when Harpo asks her how to make his wife Sofia mind, Celie writes, "I don't mention how happy he is now. How three years pass and he still whistle and sing. I think bout how every time I jump when Mr. _____ call me, she [Sofia] look surprise. And like she pity me. Beat her, I say" (43). And Celie, like other victims of "soul murder" who have been reduced to "a mechanical obedient automaton," harbors a murderous rage that almost surfaces when Albert's father denigrates Shug (58–59) and when she learns that Albert has for many years been intercepting and hiding Nettie's letters (114–15).

How does Celie survive her early losses and subsequent "soul murder" and begin to move successfully through the developmental stages arrested in infancy and adolescence toward a mature female identity? How is she enabled to take pleasure—her own pleasure—in creative work and unselfish love as an adult? In short, how is Celie able first to verbalize and then to fulfill with her authentic living the promise inherent in those Stevie Wonder verses quoted by Walker at the beginning of her novel: "Show me how to do like you / Show me how to do it."

Alice Walker writes: "Let's hope people can hear Celie's voice. There are so many people like Celie who make it who come out of nothing. People who triumph" (Anillo and Abramson 67). According to psychoanalytic developmental psychology, however, a successful survivor does not emerge "out of nothing"; Celie, as a successful survivor, is able to learn "how to do it" because (1) her family of origin gave her "good parental care" during the first two years of her life;
she is able to make use of several nurturing surrogate mother figures, foremost among whom is “the Queen Honeybee” herself, Shug Avery; and (3) as a survivor of “soul murder” she uses “adaptive powers and talents” (Shengold 7). In the remainder of this paper, I shall first speculate upon the psychological state of the pretraumatized two-year-old Celie viewed from the perspective of psychoanalytic developmental psychology; then attempt to show how Celie “bonds” with developmentally appropriate mother surrogates (Winnicott’s “good-enough mother”) as she resumes working through several developmental processes that were traumatically halted at age two and that need to be readdressed in her skewed and delayed adolescence in order for her to achieve psychological maturity and a firm sense of identity; and, finally, compare Celie and Nettie as examples of what Winnicott calls the “True Self” and the “False Self.”

Since Samuel’s story of Celie’s family of origin before its destruction includes a father who was a successful farmer and landowner, who prospered at whatever he turned his hand to, and who adored his wife (160), we can infer that Celie’s first two years of life were spent in a supportive, caring family environment in which her basic physiological and psychological needs were met. We can assume that Celie bonded successfully with her mother and received “good-enough mothering.” We find this mutually loving, triangular yet preoedipal family re-experienced by Celie in several places in the text. When Albert’s father pays his son and Celie, now in her twenties, a call and denounces Shug Avery as a “whore,” Albert and Celie, each of whom loves Shug, exchange a glance, and Celie writes: “This the closest we ever felt. He [Albert] say, Hand Pa his hat, Celie” (59). A little while later, Albert’s brother Tobias drops by with a box of chocolate for the “Queen Honeybee.” After Shug enters and sits by Celie without looking at Albert, Celie has a moment of intense self-awareness: “Then I see myself sitting there quilting tween Shug Avery and Mr. _____ Us three set together again Tobias and his fly speck box of choc-o-late. For the first time in my life, I feel just right” (61). Finally, in Celie’s last letter, written in her early fifties, she describes herself and Albert and Shug “sitting out on the porch after dinner. Talking. Not talking. Rocking and fanning flies. . . . sitting on the porch with Albert and Shug feel real pleasant” (249). These adult experiences of Celie’s

*Shengold discusses the effects of “soul murder” upon artistic creativity in the works of three literary survivors: Dickens, Chekhov, and Kipling (181–208; 209–32; 233–83). Several critics have observed that Celie survives through the act of writing (Davis 50–52; Fifer 155–56; Chambers 59; Tucker 82–83; and Cheung 162).
are pleasurable because they are unconsciously experienced as that loving relationship she had had with her preoedipal father and mother during the latter part of her first two years of life. They help fulfill the need that has remained for such family object relations since the early separations.

Celie's father's adoration of his pregnant wife and mother of his daughter also strongly suggests that femaleness and femininity were highly valued by both mother and father, and that Celie's core gender identity is femaleness. According to Robert Stoller, our "core gender identity is the sense we have of our sex—of maleness in males and of femaleness in females. . . . It is a part of, but not identical with, what I have called gender identity—a broader concept, standing for the mix of masculinity and femininity found in every person. . . . Core gender identity develops first and is the central nexus around which masculinity and femininity gradually accrete" ("Primary Femininity" 61). Stoller's research leads him to believe that "core gender identity" is solidified for the most part by the end of the second year; gender identity, however, is determined by a wide variety of biological, psychological, social, and cultural influences and is usually not finalized until middle or late adolescence.10 Thus, by two, Celie's "core gender identity," her sense of femaleness, is fairly well established, and the groundwork has been laid for the further development of her "gender identity."

Perhaps most important for Celie's ability to bond successfully with females in adolescence and young adulthood, and thus to resume her development of an identity, of a "True Self" in Winnicott's terminology, is her partial but incomplete resolution of a transitional developmental phase that occurs roughly between six and twenty-four months. Winnicott calls this phase "relative dependence" and describes the infant's need for its mother at this time as "fierce and truly terrible." Since the infant has not yet developed the permanent capacity to image mother either consciously or unconsciously when she is absent, the infant is subject to being overwhelmed with "separation anxiety." Mahler offers the term "rapprochement crisis" for this phase and describes it as a time of ambivalence, when the infant's needs for separateness and autonomy and identity formation are in conflict with its need for mother (76–120). If the mother is understanding and empathetic at this difficult time, the infant will, in the third year, go

---

10 For further psychoanalytic thinking about "core gender identity" and "gender identity," see Chodorow; Stoller, "Current Concepts" 793–96; Tyson, "Developmental Line" 61–63 and 72–84, and "Current Concepts" 796–99; and Tyson and Tyson.
on to develop a stable sense of self and others. If, however, there are serious maternal failures, severe adult psychopathology may result, and the developmental tasks of adolescence, especially the finalizing of gender identity and a firm sense of self, will be made even more difficult. Since Celie loses her “good-enough mother” at the height of her “rapprochement crisis,” when she has yet to develop stable conscious and unconscious images of mother and her identity formation is in the early stages of development, it is hardly surprising that Celie should later respond to the ministrations of women and resume the developmental tasks of separation, autonomy, and identity formation.

Although the white, patriarchal God Celie writes to in the first part of the novel never sends her a sign (175–76), life does—primarily in the form of caring and nurturing black women. These “good-enough mothers,” with the notable exception of Shug Avery, take the initiative; they intuit the depressed and traumatized Celie’s deeply buried needs and break through her defensive passivity. When Nettie runs away from home to escape Alphonso’s unwanted sexual advances and joins Celie and Albert, she teaches Celie “spelling and everything else she think I need to know. . . . to teach me what go on in the world” (25).

Nettie not only tries to give Celie the tools that will free her, she also, even more importantly, conveys to Celie her belief that Celie is of value. Kate, one of Albert’s sisters, convinces him of Celie’s need for clothes and takes her to a store to select cloth so that a dress can be made. When Celie is overcome with emotion and cannot speak, Kate reassures her and says: “You deserve more than this. Maybe so. I think” (28). And when Sofia, Harpo’s wife and Albert’s daughter-in-law, suggests that Celie and she make quilt pieces, Celie writes: “I run git my pattern book. I sleeps like a baby now” (47).

It is the seemingly inappropriate nightclub singer Shug Avery, however, who provides Celie with an extended period of “female bonding”; who, with unconditional love, provides a “holding environment” in which Celie’s nascent self is reflected back to itself; and, who, as surrogate and “good-enough mother,” and lover, helps Celie to complete the development of those capacities that enable her to deal more effectively with loss, to finalize her gender identity and choice of mature love object, and to develop a stable sense of self. One might argue that the development of a nurturing and positive relationship between these two women is improbable. Celie, until she hears Shug’s name spoken, appears as a passive victim. After she is married to Albert, women who become mother surrogates have to reach out to her. How then can Shug’s name and her picture, provided to her by Alphonso’s
new wife (16), mobilize the depressed and passive Celie actively to seek a “good-enough mother” in Shug? And when the two women meet for the first time, the deathly ill Shug’s first words are “You sure is ugly” (50).

What may appear inappropriate and improbable is seen not to be so when we acknowledge Celie’s developmental history, her unconscious need to complete those developmental tasks that have been skewed and/or arrested—and most important initially, her adolescent longing for a transitional, idealized role model, figures that adolescents often draw from the entertainment and sports worlds: “Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail. She grinnin with her foot up on somebody motorcar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some. I ast her to give me the picture. An all night long I stare at it. An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery” (16).

After Celie’s immediate positive response to the glamorous figure in the photograph, she focuses on the singer’s “serious” and “sad eyes.” In so doing, she moves from her adolescent need to cathect a transitional, idealized role model to her unconscious infantile need to master the trauma of losing the emotional availability of her “good-enough mother.” Her initial negative encounters with the ill Shug parallel Celie’s frustrated infantile efforts to break through her mother’s psychosis and later her depression and deteriorating mental and physical condition. Celie perseveres, however, for she knows from the expression of the eyes in the photograph that this woman has the ability to mirror Celie back to herself. “What [mother] looks like is related to what she sees there,” asserts Winnicott (Playing 112), and Celie’s experience confirms this. When she sees Shug’s “serious” and “sad” eyes, she sees into her own murdered soul. When Alphonso is trying to convince Albert that Celie would make him a good wife despite her ugliness, Celie takes out Shug’s picture, looks in her eyes, and “Her eyes say Yeah, it bees that way sometime” (18). Celie’s ability to use Shug’s eyes as a mirror is predicated upon earlier, positive, and unconscious mirror reflections from a “good-enough mother” of happier days. Indeed, Celie’s ability to use Shug Avery herself as a mother surrogate for female bonding is predicated upon “good-enough mothering” during the first two years of Celie’s life.

Once Celie has cathected Shug’s photograph, her image permeates Celie’s conscious and unconscious mind. Shug serves both as a “good-enough [preoedipal] mother” and as a libidinal object. On her wedding
night, Celie thinks of Shug and, knowing that Albert and Shug were lovers, puts her arm around him (21). When Kate takes her to the store to buy cloth for her dress, Celie wonders what color Shug would wear (28). After hearing that Shug and her “orkestra” are coming to town, Celie carries an announcement with Shug’s picture on it in her pocket all day and wants desperately to go that night: “Not to dance. Not to drink. Not to play card. Not even to hear Shug Avery sing. I just be thankful to lay eyes on her” (33). And when Albert brings the sick Shug home to recuperate, Celie, though flooded with emotions and desiring to heal her, cannot move until she “see her eyes” (50). When Shug finally looks up at her, Celie notices those parts of Shug’s face that a nursing infant would see: “her face black. . . . She got a long pointed nose and big fleshy mouth. Lips look like black plum. Eyes big, glossy” (50).

Celia not only devours Shug with her eyes but wishes to incorporate her with her mouth. As she nurses Shug back to health, Celie at first hungrily looks at her naked body: “First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nippies, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man” (53). After Celie gives Shug coffee and a cigarette, she has a compulsion to take “hold of her hand, tasting her fingers in my mouth” (55). Shug, in her capacity as a “good-enough mother,” is unconsciously experienced by Celie as the maternal breast—a libidinal object. Celie’s intense hunger is soon satisfied by the physical presence of this woman whose nickname, in combination with “nippies,” forms a Southern expression for a pacifier. Later, Celie washes and combs Shug’s hair, saving the strands that “come out in my comb. . . . I work on her like she a doll or like she Olivia—or like she mama. I comb and pat, comb and pat. First she say, hurry up and git finish. Then she melt down a little and lean back against my knees. That feel just right, she say. That feel like mama used to do. Or maybe not mama. Maybe grandma” (57).

Although Celie has found a “good-enough mother” in Shug, it is only when Shug can provide an extended “holding environment” that Celie can build upon the efforts of previous mother surrogates and, in bonding with Shug, complete her previously stymied psychological development. One night Shug takes the initiative and asks to sleep with Celie. When Shug asks Celie how it was making love “with your children daddy,” Celie begins to tell another person for the first time about her rape and incest. Uncertain of Shug’s response, Celie soon pauses: “I lay there quiet, listening to Shug breathe.” After several more painful revelations, she pauses again: “Shug so quiet I think she
sleep. After he through, I say, he make me finish trimming his hair. I sneak a look at Shug. Oh, Miss Celie, she say. And put her arms round me. They black and smooth and kind of glowy from the lamp-light. I start to cry too. I cry and cry and cry. Seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug arms. How it hurt and how much I was surprise” (108–9). This bedroom scene is the beginning of Celie’s working through her rape trauma with abreaction and reconstruction of the traumatic events. Shug, as a “good-enough mother,” provides a “holding environment” that enables Celie to verbalize and to get in touch with long-repressed memories and feelings and work them through. Her severe dissociative state and cognitive deficiencies improve after this abreaction, as evidenced by the increasingly grammatical, stylistic, and tonal complexity of her letters.

It is also in this bedroom scene that the two women become lovers. Once again, Shug takes the initiative. After unburdening herself with words and tears, and unable consciously to recall the love of her preoedipal parents, Celie angrily says, “Nobody ever love me.” Shug immediately responds: “I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth.” After Celie responds with a kiss, the two kiss repeatedly — then touch — and then Celie says: “Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth.” And then: “Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too” (109).

Even though Celie’s sensuous “female bonding” with Shug leads to a deeply experienced and lengthy lesbian relationship between the two women, Shug continues to serve Celie as a “good-enough mother” who ministers to the unconscious developmental needs of her child. Besides “mirroring” and providing a “holding environment,” Shug also remains “consistently herself” (Winnicott, *Maturational Processes* 87) and allows for moments of quiescent transitional relatedness which, according to Winnicott, are essential for the development of a stable and personal self: “It is only when [the infant experiences himself] alone (that is to say, in the presence of someone) that the infant can discover his own personal life” (34). Celie describes the first of many such moments following their first night together: “Me and Shug sound asleep. Her back to me, my arms round her waist. What it like? Little like sleeping with mama, only I can’t hardly remember ever sleeping with her. Little like sleeping with Nettie, only sleeping with Nettie never feel this good. It warm and cushiony, and I feel Shug’s big tits sorta flop over my arms like suds. It feel like heaven is what it feel like, not like sleeping with Mr. _____ at all” (110).
Shug occasionally acts as an “auxiliary ego” for Celie and helps her modulate states of excitement. When Shug tells Celie that Albert has been hiding Nettie’s letters to her over the years, leading her to believe that her sister was dead, Celie is flooded with murderous rage and, without Shug’s intervention, would have cut Albert’s throat with his razor (114–15). Later, when Celie’s rage toward Albert makes her sexually impotent with Shug, Shug identifies Celie’s emotional state and tells her that strong emotions, such as “being mad, grief, wanting to kill somebody” (136), make one impotent. Shug then suggests that together they make Celie a pair of pants, thus giving Celie a lesson in sublimation: “A needle and not a razor in my hand, I think” (137).  

Shug also helps Celie to verbalize her feelings about Albert openly and to separate from him (180–83); long before they become lovers she gives Celie a lesson in and appreciation of her female reproductive organs (79–80); and her open bisexual behavior (which offends some critics) and her special blend of masculine and feminine gender identity facilitates Celie’s completion of her own adult sexual orientation (choice of a love object) and gender identity. When Shug takes Celie to her house in Memphis, described by Celie as “big and pink and look sort of like a barn,” in order “to love you and help you get on your feet” (188, 190), she provides Celie with a literal and psychological womlike “holding environment” in which Celie flourishes. While there, Celie discovers that she has a creative and unique talent as a designer of “perfect pants,” for women and men, and, with Shug’s financial backing, she establishes her own clothes business, “Folks-pants, Unlimited,” and thereby achieves economic independence: “Dear Nettie, I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends, and time” (193).

But before Celie can complete her final developmental task, the achievement of an autonomous and stable sense of self, she learns that Sofia’s mother has died and returns home for the funeral. As she approaches Harpo’s and Sofia’s house, Celie acknowledges to herself:

---

11Paul Lewis observes that Shug twice uses humor to deflect Celie’s murderous rage (Color Purple 134–35), and that Celie likewise uses humor to make the angry and embittered Sofia laugh for the first time “in three years” (Color Purple 99). He identifies it as “gallows humor” and asserts that such humor both “create[s] distance from our pain, . . . liberat[ing] us at least temporarily from otherwise inescapable torment” and helps further the humanity of “Miss Celie and Sofia, [and] even Albert and his foolish son Harpo” (80). I wish to thank my colleague Professor Siegfried Mandel for bringing Lewis’s book to my attention.

12See Harris, “Victimization” 9–10; and Royster 368.
“I feels different. Look different. Got on some dark blue pants and a white silk shirt that look righteous. Little red flat-heel slippers, and a flower in my hair. I pass Mr. ______ house and him sitting up on the porch and he didn’t even know who I was” (195). When Albert walks up to Celie after the funeral, she looks “in his eyes and I see he feeling scared of me. Well, good, I think. Let him feel what I felt” (199). These internal and external changes are soon followed by an unexpected inheritance.

Sometime after returning to Memphis and Shug, Celie learns from Alphonso’s wife Daisy that Alphonso is dead and that Nettie and Celie have inherited their dead parents’ land and the house and dry goods store that Alphonso rebuilt. When Celie wonders what Nettie and she would sell in such a store, Shug quickly replies, “How bout pants?” (216). Celie and Shug return home to look at the property and the buildings, and Celie spends the summer getting the house ready for Nettie, her husband, Celie’s grown children, Shug, and herself. When she returns home to Shug, Celie’s lover and “good-enough mother” inadvertently provides her with a painful opportunity to complete her development of an autonomous and stable sense of self.

“My heart broke,” Celie writes to Nettie, after hearing from Shug that she “got the hots for a boy of nineteen” (218–19). Although Shug protests that she still loves Celie and will return to her once she has had her “last fling,” Celie regresses briefly, returns to writing about her feelings—but then is able to verbalize her love for Shug “whatever happens, whatever you do” (221). Celie finds it necessary, however, to leave Shug’s house, and she returns to her own, where she undergoes a period of healthy mourning. At first Celie has little desire to live and writes Nettie that “the only thing keep me alive is watching Henrietta [Sofia’s ill daughter] fight for her life” (222). She breaks into tears after telling Albert how Shug taught her how to sublimate her murderous rage for him by helping her to make her first pair of pants (223). And one of the darkest days of her life occurs when she receives both a telegram informing her that Nettie’s homeward bound ship has been sunk by German mines and all of her letters written to Nettie—unopened: “I sit here in this big house by myself trying to sew, but what good is sewing gon do? What good is anything? Being alive begin to seem like a awful strain” (225). Alone and despairing, believing herself bereft of sister, adult children, and her “good-enough mother,” Celie confronts her existential aloneness and struggles to complete both her mourning process and her final developmental task.

As time passes, Celie occasionally questions Shug’s love: “I stand
looking at my naked self in the looking glass. What would she love? I ast myself. . . . My body just any woman's body going through the changes of age. . . . My heart must be young and fresh though, it feel like it blooming blood. . . . But look at you. When Shug left, happiness desert” (229). Although she periodically receives a post card from Shug, there is no mention of her return. Celie and Albert often spend time talking about their love for Shug and sharing their happy and sad memories—an activity that furthers the mourning process. After six months have passed, Celie sums up the first part of that process:

Well, your sister too crazy to kill herself. Most times I feels like shit but I felt like shit before in my life an what happen? I had me a fine sister name Nettie. I had me another fine woman friend name Shug. I had me some fine children growing up in Africa, singing and writing verses. The first two months was hell, though, I tell the world. But now Shug's six months is come and gone and she ain’t come back. And I try to teach my heart not to want nothing it can't have.

Besides, she give me so many good years. Plus, she learning new things in her new life. Now she and Germaine staying with one of her children. (235)

This extract from a letter to Nettie not only conveys the authentic voice of successful mourning but shows us that Celie is beginning to move beyond her need for a “good-enough mother” and, as a developing, autonomous, and stable self, Celie is able to express appreciation for Shug's generosity and even derive pleasure from the thought that Shug is “learning new things in her new life.”

The mourning process is slow, however, and Celie is subject to a variety of contrasting thoughts and feelings about Shug: “I wish I could be traveling with her, but thank God she able to do it. Sometimes I feel mad at her. Feel like I could scratch her hair right off her head. But then I think, Shug got a right to live too. She got a right to look over the world in whatever company she choose. Just cause I love her don’t take away none of her rights” (236). At times Celie regresses and unconsciously experiences Shug as the sad mother of her childhood: “What I love best bout Shug is what she been through, I say. When you look in Shug's eyes you know she been where she been, seen what she seen, did what she did. And now she know” (236). There comes a time, however, when Celie's mourning process has done its work, and she is able to consciously acknowledge and unconsciously experience Shug’s separateness, uniqueness, and autonomy, as well as her own: “And then, just when I know I can live content without Shug, just when Mr. _____ done ast me to
marry him again, this time in the spirit as well as in the flesh, and just after I say Naw, I still don't like frogs, but let's us be friends, Shug write me she coming home. Now. Is this life or not? *I be so calm.* If she come, I be happy. If she don't, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was supposed to learn" (247–48). Celie has indeed learned "how to do like you." Through years of "female bonding" and "good-enough mothering," Celie has, in middle age, created a mature, stable, and autonomous identity for herself; she is what Winnicott would call a "True Self."

Nettie's literary portrait, however, contrasts sharply with Celie's; literary critics usually discuss this contrast in terms of the "narrative voices" that emerge from the letters. Whereas Celie's "voice" is praised by many,13 including one of Walker's harshest critics (Harris, "On The Color Purple" 156), Nettie's "voice," and her letters, have, like the novel itself, received a wide variety of negative and positive criticism. On the negative side are those who find Nettie's voice to be nondistinctive (Towers 36) and inauthentic (Robinson 2); her letters to be "often mere monologues on African history" (Watkins 7), didactic (Smith 182), "unconvincing" (Davis 53), "preachy" (McFadden 140), and "extraneous to the central concerns of the novel" (Harris, "On The Color Purple" 157); and her language "dull, devitalized, too correct. . . . written in 'white' missionary language" (Tucker 92). On the positive side are those who praise Nettie's and Celie's "voices" in terms of the authentic folk voice that emanates from the novel (Watkins 7; Chambers 54) and who find that Nettie's letters provide "important thematic parallels . . . [and] essential plot information" (McFadden 140), foster change in Celie (Fifer 158; Babb 114), and "add substantially to the depth and variety of the entire novel" (Tucker 91), while Nettie's language, "conventional, educated diction," bodies forth "the new self Nettie has created with her new language" (Fifer 155, 158). Thus at one extreme Towers and Robinson assert that Nettie is "essentially uncharacterized" (Towers 36) and has "no personality" (Robinson 2), and at the other extreme Fifer argues that Nettie, through mastering a new language, standard English, has created a new self for herself (158).

Whether one views Nettie's "narrative voice" or literary portrait as superficial or complex, her intellectual and educated mind contrasts vividly with the emotional intensity of her victimized older sister. In fact, Nettie gives the appearance of having overcome the traumatic incidents of their childhood and adolescence more successfully than

---

13See Watkins 7; Smith 183; McFadden 142; Fifer 155; and Chambers 54.
Celie and presents herself as a healthier character throughout her letters. But is this so? I suggest that the reverse is the case: that is, that Celie, often against overwhelming odds, works toward and achieves a stable and authentic sense of self, a “True Self,” and that Nettie, who is cared for and protected by Celie until she joins the black missionaries Corrine and Samuel, the adoptive parents of Celie’s two children, develops in infancy the beginning of a “False Self” that is strengthened and formed by her immediate family environment and the educational system. Approaching Nettie’s literary portrait in terms of Winnicott’s “False Self” helps account for the divergence of critical opinion concerning the authenticity of Nettie’s “voice.” Should Nettie appear to be what she is not, then those critics who find her “voice” authentic have been misled by her “False Self,” and those critics who find her “voice” superficial have penetrated Nettie’s “False Self.” Before proceeding with this developmental reading, I should like to review Winnicott’s thoughts about the origin and development of the “False Self.”

Winnicott believes that the “False Self” originates during the first stage of object relationships (Maturational Processes 145); that is, prior to the sixth month of life, before the infant has “separated off the ‘not me’ from the ‘me’” (58). The not “good-enough mother” mirrors her own self to the infant rather than mirroring the infant back to itself, thereby making the infant perceive rather than apperceive, and it complies with mother and her needs. The infant, according to Winnicott, begins to develop “an aspect of the personality that is false (false in that what is showing is a derivative not of the individual [True Self] but of the mothering aspect of the infant-mother coupling)” (58).

The adult who has a “False Self” system uses it “to hide and protect the True Self, whatever that may be” (142); the “False Self” “does [this] by compliance with environmental demands” (147). Winnicott also posits a continuum for “False Personalities”: “At one extreme: the False Self sets up as real and it is this that observers tend to think is the real person. . . . The True Self is hidden” (142–43), while “In health: the False Self is represented by the whole organization of the polite and mannered social attitude, a ‘not wearing the heart on the sleeve,’ as might be said” (143). Finally, Winnicott observes that “when a False Self becomes organized in an individual who has a high intellectual potential there is a very strong tendency for the mind to become the location of the False Self” (144).14

When Nettie’s infancy is compared with Celie’s, it is obvious that

---

14 For a brilliant contemporary psychoanalytic study of the “False Self,” see Miller.
each is born into a “different family” and that each has a strikingly different developmental history. Whereas Celie spends the first two years of her life in an intact, loving, traditional family with “good-enough mothering,” Nettie spends the first several months of her life experiencing severe physical and emotional deprivation and the first several years complying with the emotional needs of a depressed and mentally unstable mother. Although Celie was in all probability able to offer some mothering to Nettie in the early as well as the later years, she could not have been a “good-enough mother” in Winnicott’s sense. Thus it is reasonable to speculate that Nettie, in order to survive, quickly learned to comply with her environment; out of necessity she developed a “False Self” at the expense of her “True Self.” The text appears to corroborate this speculation.

During Nettie’s adolescent years, first at home with Alphonso and later with Celie and Albert, Celie encourages Nettie “to keep at her books” (14) in order to escape her older sister’s fate—and Nettie complies. When Albert decides that Nettie has to leave, Celie tells her to look up the wife of the “Reverend Mr. _____” (26)—and Nettie complies. And when Samuel and Corrine ask Nettie if she would like to join them in their African missionary enterprise, Nettie accepts, “But only if they would teach me everything they knew to make me useful as a missionary. . . . and my real education began at that time” (124).

Several critics have observed how effectively Nettie responds to and complies with her immediate environment. Valerie Babb notes that Nettie’s first letter to Celie (119) “reads in a manner consistent with Celie’s oral style” and that after “her missionary employers, Corrine and Samuel, have had a hand in her education . . . Nettie’s letters are rendered completely in the standard” (113). Elizabeth Fifer describes Nettie as “controlled, religious, and idealistic” (163) and draws our attention to Celie’s initial “bewilderment at the new self Nettie has created with her new language: ‘What with being shock, crying and blowing my nose, and trying to puzzle out words us don’t know, it took a long time to read just the first two or three letters’” (158). Lindsey Tucker finds Nettie’s letters to be “written in ‘white’ missionary language. Metaphorically speaking, Nettie wears her language much like she wears Corrine’s clothing—at without total authenticity or comfort” (92). Tucker then asserts: “In spite of a new home, a new career, and a new self, at the end of the novel, Celie has held onto one precious possession, her language. Although urged to become ‘educated,’ to learn to talk as the books do, she refuses to change her speech patterns by submitting to white language” (92). Restated in psychological terms,
we might say that Celie will not and, in fact, cannot compromise the
integrity of her “True Self,” whereas Nettie’s compliance with “‘white’
missionary language” is in keeping with the protective nature of the
“False Self.” Nettie’s “real education,” it appears, is the final develop-
ment of a “False Self” system that has found a home in Nettie’s superior
intellect.

In the next-to-last scene of *The Color Purple*, Celie’s “True Self”
and Nettie’s “False Self,” as well as their family and loved ones, are
reunited. Although Trudier Harris calls this a “fairy-tale” ending (“On
*The Color Purple*” 160), I believe that the reunification scene offers
a psychological validity that transcends the contrivance of plot, and
that this psychological validity consists in offering closure to the
developmental processes that began with the sisters’ births. Celie,
feeling “real pleasant” as she sits “on the porch after dinner” between
Albert and Shug (249), has developed a mature, autonomous, and
“True” self, has been reunited with her lover Shug, and has also on
an unconscious level been reunited with her preodipal father (Albert)
and mother (Shug). Just as it is appropriate that the altered Albert,
who sent Nettie away thirty years before, should be the first to recog-
nize her among a group of people who have gotten out of a car with
their luggage at the end of the drive, so too is it psychologically ap-
propriate that Celie’s and Nettie’s meeting should be described from the
perspective of very little children:

When Nettie’s foot come down on the porch I almost die. . . . Then
us both start to moan and cry. Us totter toward one nother like us use to
do when us was babies. Then us feel so weak when us touch, us knock each
other down. But what us care? Us sit and lay there on the porch inside each
other’s arms.

After while, she say *Celite*.
I say *Nettie*.

Little bit more time pass. Us look round at a lot of peoples knees. Nettie
never let go my waist. This my husband Samuel, she say, pointing up. These
our children Olivia and Adam and this Adam’s wife Tashi, she say.
I point up at my peoples. This Shug and Albert, I say. (250)

Not only does this emotional meeting of two middle-aged sisters
enable them to regress and re-experience unconsciously earlier infantile
needs for each other, but their “True” and “False” selves are validated
with this encounter. Nettie brings nothing to this reunion that is truly
hers—including herself. Thirty years earlier, when she had sought
refuge with Samuel and Corrine, they treated her like family, “Like
family might have been, I mean” (121). In becoming a missionary and going to Africa, she assumes “‘white’ missionary language” and a professional role. And when she arrives at Celie’s and her house, she is accompanied by a dead woman’s husband and a living woman’s grown children. In order to complete this developmental portrait of Nettie as a “False Self,” Walker has her win a hollow “oedipal victory”: “You may have guessed that I loved [Samuel] all along; but I did not know it. Oh, I loved him as a brother and respected him as a friend, but Celie, I love him bodily, as a man!” (211). Corrine’s suspicion that Olivia and Adam are, in fact, Samuel’s and Nettie’s children is incorrect (158–59, 168–69); what she does sense, however, is Nettie’s love for the oedipal father. Nettie, unlike Celie, was not traumatized at the height of the rapprochement period, when a child needs its mother. Therefore, she passes through that “triangular period” that Freud termed the “Oedipus complex” (roughly from two and a half to six years) as a “False Self.” Celie, on the other hand, appears to have been largely unaffected by her passage through the oedipal years. Her traumatic losses at two and subsequent “soul murder” appear to have precluded the unfolding of this stage.

In contrast to Nettie, everything that Celie brings to this reunion is truly hers. As Nettie approaches, Celie, who “stand swaying, tween Albert and Shug” (250), is supported by her symbolic preoedipal family of origin as well as her lover Shug and now friend Albert. “Nettie stand swaying tween Samuel and . . . Adam” (250). Celie’s “True Self,” forged out years of abuse and suffering and “female bonding,” is face-to-face with Nettie’s “False Self,” created through compliance with the outside world in order to survive a chaotic infancy and childhood. Nettie, who appears to have everything, including husband, grown children, Celie, and her inheritance, lacks one essential thing—an authentic life. Celie, who has survived loss, “soul murder,” incest, and physical and emotional abuse, has, in the process, acquired a home, a career, friends, and a lover and has developed an authentic self that enables her to live an authentic life. Celie, unlike Nettie, is able to participate in mature object relationships: as a “True Self,” Celie can both successfully mourn the inevitable losses of life and go on to form new relationships and live authentically and deeply in the present moment (Winnicott, Maturational Processes 221, 148–49).

Although this psychoanalytic developmental reading of Walker’s The Color Purple is limited in scope and makes no pretension to address the many aesthetic, moral, and sociological problems and issues raised by this complex and controversial work of fiction, I have illumi-
nated several of the unconscious developmental processes that underlie Walker's presentation of "female bonding" and that facilitate Celie's search for and attainment of a mature, autonomous, and authentic sense of identity that enables her to live an authentic life. Drawing upon Winnicott's concepts of the "good-enough mother," the "mirror role of the mother," "the holding environment," and the origin of the "True Self" and the "False Self," I have traced the development of Celie's "True Self" and Nettie's "False Self" and, in the process, have addressed specific negative criticisms of the novel, such as unequal narrative voices, unrealistic character development, faulty plot, unbelievable events, and the "fairy-tale" quality of the lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug as well as Celie's and Nettie's reunion—arguing that a psychological reading of the text shows many of these negative criticisms to be spurious. Walker has given us in The Color Purple a brilliant psychological developmental novel (dedicated "To the Spirit: / Without whose assistance / Neither this book / Nor I / Would have been / Written"; Walker has "listened with the third ear"—her own unconscious). Celie's fictive narrative voice, that "speaks" to us though mute and that is never "heard" by those to whom she writes, transcends the limitations of her isolation and of the novel; as victim and survivor, Celie attests to the importance of "good-enough mothering" in the early years and to the healing power of human relationships.

University of Colorado at Boulder

WORKS CITED


