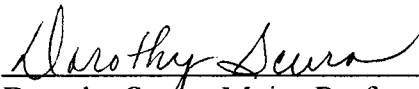


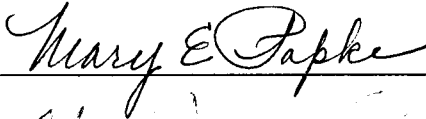
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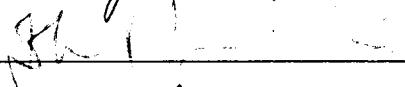
I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Tanya Long Bennett entitled "The Letter As Mirror: The Construction of the Self in Three Recent Epistolary Novels." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

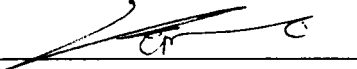


Dorothy Scura, Major Professor


We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:







Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

The Letter as Mirror:
The Construction of the Self in Three Recent
Epistolary Novels

A Dissertation
Presented for the Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Tanya Long Bennett
May 1996

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my sons

Zachary and Lucas

who have been at once my greatest inspiration and distraction,

to the sweet spirit

who kept me company while I finished this project,

and to Chuck

who has shared both the pain and the satisfaction of what it took to get here.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to several people whose efforts in helping move this project forward have been invaluable. Much thanks to John Zomchick and Odile Cazenave for their shrewd and constructive editing and for their encouragement. I also offer my sincere appreciation to Mary Papke and Dorothy Scura for acting not only as editors but also as friends during times that were taxing both professionally and personally. And, last but not least, thanks to Chuck Bennett for his contribution to the aesthetic quality of the text and for his constant love and support.

Abstract

This study explores the function of the letter in three recent epistolary novels--Lee Smith's Fair and Tender Ladies, Alice Walker's The Color Purple, and Ana Castillo's The Mixquiahuala Letters. For the protagonists of these novels, the letter serves as a mirror in which medium each can deconstruct the self she sees, a self that has been defined largely by ideologies, and can then reconstruct a noncoherent or fragmented self. This study examines these novels in light of theories of *self* explored in discussions by Jacques Lacan, Elizabeth Grosz, Catherine Belsey, and Toril Moi. It then observes the effects achieved by each protagonist as a result of her letterwriting. These effects include being able to juxtapose contradictory beliefs, or even contradictory *selves*, next to one another by placing two different letters next to each other in the collection; being able to say "I" in a variety of ways; and calling attention to the material quality, or the constructedness, of the letters themselves. The dissertation concludes that through their use of the epistolary form, the protagonists of these novels achieve an awareness of ideological definitions as arbitrary and constructed rather than "natural," and that through their

achievement of this awareness, they recognize a fragmented rather than a unitary self, thus liberating themselves.

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Introduction

Sometimes I despair of ever understanding anything right when it happens to me, it seems like I have to tell it in a letter to see what it was, even though I was right there all along!

Ivy Rowe in Lee Smith's Fair and Tender Ladies

The concept of "the letter as mirror" may seem an odd one at first, especially combined with the notion of constructing the self. A mirror image is usually considered a simple reflection, perhaps a way to see the body "as it really is." Conversely, letters are entirely constructed, scribbled out by the writer's own hand, and while we may be prone to consider a letter as a credible source of information about real events, most of us do not consider it a simple reflection since the information is necessarily filtered through the writer's perspective. If we consider, however, the function of the letter for the writer, it becomes clear that, besides serving as a way to communicate with the letter's addressee, the letter serves as a way for the writer to get some distance on what she/he writes. In many cases, as is exemplified by the letters of Fair and Tender Ladies, The Color Purple, and The Mixquiahuala Letters, what the writer writes is her/his self. The distance gained in writing offers the writer a perspective from which to *see* her/his self.

The idea of constructing the self is not a new one; postmodernists have for some years now been emphasizing the constructedness not only of the self but of reality as well.¹ However, the use of the epistolary novel to accomplish goals that are consistent with those of postmodernism is a notable choice. A form that became popular in the late seventeenth century and remained so through the end of the eighteenth century, the epistolary novel seemed to fit within accepted social conventions for "women's literature." Letterwriting was an accepted pastime of the day, especially for women, and, since it was seen as "an accomplishment rather than as an art" (Perry 17), women were even encouraged to write epistolary fiction. Many of the epistolary novels of that time were written by women, for example those works by Aphra Behn, Mary de la Riviere Manley, Mary Davys, and Eliza Haywood (Perry 17). Of course, many of the most well-known epistolary novels from that time are those written by men, including Samuel Richardson's Pamela and Clarissa, Tobias Smollett's The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's La Nouvelle Heloise. Even in a novel like Clarissa, in which society's treatment of

¹Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, in their Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations, characterize "postmodernism" by differentiating between it and modernism. They describe modernism as a perspective which "search[es] for a foundation of knowledge," makes "universalizing and totalizing claims," and employs what postmodernists allege is a "fallacious rationalism" (4). Best and Kellner then go on to explain that "postmodern theory provides a critique of representation and the modern belief that theory mirrors reality, taking instead 'perspectivist' and 'relativist' positions that theories at best provide partial perspectives on their objects, and that all cognitive representations of the world are historically and linguistically mediated" (4).

women was questioned, the narrative voice of Clarissa the letterwriter is that of a woman with acceptable morals and dignified character. Thus, even in light of complaints that the epistolary form produced novels flawed by a lack of coherence (MacArthur 1), the form has not generally been considered revolutionary.

Recently, however, critics have begun to see that the form has perhaps always held the potential for undermining ideologies. The very lack of coherence once seen as a flaw has lately been recognized as a quality that can undermine the notion of systematic meaning. Perhaps it is the recognition of this subversive potential that has resulted in what seems to be a renewed popularity for the epistolary form.

Godfrey Frank Singer's The Epistolary Novel: Its Origin, Development, Decline, and Residuary Influence, published in 1963, reveals that even after the letter novel's "heyday" at the end of the eighteenth century, the form has never been completely disregarded by novelists. Epistolary novels have continued to appear periodically ever since. However, the number of novels written in this form recently has caught the attention of critics. The last thirty-five years have seen the publication, in the United States, of Saul Bellow's Herzog (1961), Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey's A Woman of Independent Means (1978), John Barth's Letters (1979), Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1982), Ana Castillo's

The Mixquiahuala Letters (1986), John Updike's S (1988), and Lee Smith's Fair and Tender Ladies (1988). Internationally, recent publications in this form include Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's Heat and Dust (1975), The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters (1975), Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter (1980), Elizabeth Jolley's Miss Peabody's Inheritance (1983), and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (1985). A few critics have begun to turn their attention to this influx of epistolary novels, but the number of works dedicated to exploring the form is limited.

In addition to Singer's study, histories of the letter novel include Charles E. Kany's The Beginnings of the Epistolary Novel in France, Italy, and Spain (1937), F.G. Black's The Epistolary Novel in the Late Eighteenth Century (1940), R.A. Day's Told in Letters: Epistolary Fiction before Richardson (1966), and Laurent Versini's Le Roman epistolaire (1979). But, as Janet Gurkin Altman notes in her Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form, these studies simply provide a history of the epistolary novel rather than analyzing the effects of the form (6). Jean Rousset's Forme et signification (1962), however, does address the formal aspects of the letter novel, describing the activity of writer and reader in the context of this form and revealing that "[t]he writer who chooses to construct a novel in letters may find his material growing out of his chosen form and not vice versa" (Altman 8). Francois Jost also analyzes the

effects of the form in his article "Le Roman epistolaire et la technique narrative au XVIIIe siecle" (1966). He distinguishes between the "passive method," observed in the "'lettre-confidance,' in which the letter merely reports events and the writer and receiver play a passive role" (Altman 8), and the "kinetic method," "characterized by the 'lettre drame,' in which the action progresses through the letters themselves" (8).

More recent studies exploring the epistolary form include Ruth Perry's Women, Letters, and the Novel (1980), in which she explores the connection between women writers and the letter novel. Perry suggests that the developing spirit of individualism in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries left literate women "dispossessed of all meaningful activity save marrying and breeding" (x). Perry indicates that the epistolary form served as a medium in which the mental life of characters could be explored by a class of women "for whom the life of the imagination was more important than lived experience" (xii). Yet, her study, while concentrating on possibilities that are not addressed in earlier studies on the letter novel, is primarily historical.

On the other hand, Altman's Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form appeared in 1982 and is one of the most thorough formal studies to be written on the subject so far. Analyzing primarily seventeenth and eighteenth century works, but including references to works as recent as Viktor B. Shklovsky's

Zoo; or, Letters Not About Love (1923) and Jacques Derrida's Envois in La Carte postale de Socrate a Freud et au-dela (1980), Altman argues that "the concept of epistolarity is primarily a frame for reading. A work's epistolarity cannot be scientifically measured. It can only be argued by an interpretive act, which involves the critic's description of a letter novel's epistolarity as much as the novelist's or novel's actualization of the letter's potential to create narrative, figurative, and other types of meaning" (4). Another important addition to the scholarship, Linda S. Kauffman's Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions, published in 1986, also concentrates, for the most part, on seventeenth and eighteenth century texts, examining the "transgressions of genre" (18) which occur as new texts both "absorb" and "reply to" preceding texts (18).

In 1989, Elizabeth Goldsmith edited a collection of essays on the epistolary novel entitled Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature. This collection indicates a wide range of interest in the form, including essays such as "A Courtesan's Voice: Epistolary Self-Portraiture in Veronica Franco's Terze Rime" by Margaret F. Rosenthal, "Female Resources: Epistles, Plot, and Power" by Patricia Meyer Spacks, and "Special Delivery: Twenty-first Century Epistolarity in The Handmaid's Tale" by Linda S. Kauffman.

Ann Lieberman Bower's dissertation, "Rewriting the Self, Writing the Other: An Investigation of Recent Epistolary Novels," appeared the following year. Bower concentrates on the subversive nature of novels that use the form to "rewrite the self, writing a personal self-definition that contradicts or supercedes or supplements the identity others have assumed the writer to have" (1). Although she devotes one chapter entirely to "Writing Women," in which she discusses women's use of the letter to rewrite their parts in their cultures, Bower examines contemporary novels written by both men and women.

Elizabeth J. MacArthur's Extravagant Narratives: Closure and Dynamics in the Epistolary Form, also published in 1990, argues that according to existing models of narrative, desire for closure is a key force in narrative, and that in light of these theories, epistolary novels generally appear to be flawed. However, MacArthur suggests that this "lack" of coherence should be seen not as a flaw but as a sign that these novels are concerned with "play on meaning rather than the establishment of a fixed, authoritative significance" (23). Consistent with this view of the form as subversive, Elizabeth Ann Campbell's dissertation, The Social Context of the Epistolary Novel: A Critical Study with Exemplum, A Letter to Zenobia, published in 1991, concentrates on what women writers have done with the form, arguing (in light of her examination of contemporary, primarily international, letter novels) that these women write

"themselves in a way that reflects their experience as the 'other' in a culture in which they have been traditionally voiceless and, thus, powerless" (4).

Campbell suggests, as I will, that the letter is used as a mirror, serving as a medium through which the writer can free herself from the definitions placed on her by others, although I will expand on what it *means* for the letter to function as a mirror and will examine Fair and Tender Ladies, The Color Purple, and The Mixquiahuala Letters, none of which is discussed in her study.

Finally, Kauffman published her second book on the epistolary novel in 1992. This work, entitled Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction, emphasizes innovative contributions of modern epistolary works which satirize sentimentality. Kauffman analyzes these works, by both men and women, by focusing on seven specific motifs: representation, individualism, the ideology of romantic love, the oedipus myth as universal trope, generic disruption and defamiliarization, dialogism (between author and predecessors, between writer and reader, between writer and recipient of letters), and decentering the subject (xvii-xix).

An important question arising from the choices these scholars have made in deciding which texts to examine is how to define epistolarity. Altman defines it as "the use of the letter's formal properties to create meaning" (4). Her choices of epistolary texts include only those written distinctly as

collections of letters. However, in Diary Fiction: Writing As Action, H. Porter Abbott includes some letter novels, namely The Portuguese Letters and Pamela, in a study of diary novels. Porter holds that the similarities between diary novels and many works of epistolary fiction are so great as to justify their study as one genre. In support of this claim, Porter points out that while diary writing is usually assumed to be a reflexive "record of inner life" (9), many diaries address an anticipated reader, thus breaking the "seal" around the writer. Obviously, both diary and letter fiction are first-person accounts, often self-reflexive and, in light of Porter's point, often an attempt to find voice in the world outside the self.

Seemingly working against this broad notion of epistolarity, Campbell defines the letter novel thus:

Basically it is a novel written in the form of letters, either an exchange of letters between two or more correspondents, or a single letter, or a number of letters, from one correspondent to one or more recipients. Novels which are not composed exclusively of letters can also be classified as epistolary, but only if the plot is determined, advanced and resolved by letters. (6)

Interestingly, though, Campbell includes in her study of epistolary novels Helena Parente Cunha's Woman Between Mirrors, in which the narrator is

writing her self to her self but never addresses her self in standard form, with a salutation, or closes with a signature of any kind. In fact, there is nothing to indicate that the narrative is in the form of letters rather than journal entries except the narrator's occasional shifts in audience from her self to the reader. Campbell also includes in her study Sylvia Molloy's Certificate of Absence, about which she writes, "[a]lthough Certificate of Absence is not an epistolary novel, it bears the earmarks of epistolary fiction. The woman in Certificate of Absence 'writes as if this were a letter to no one, with a feeling of exultation'" (3). Consistent with this broadened notion of epistolarity, Kauffman describes as epistolary The Handmaid's Tale, in which the protagonist records her experiences on audio tape in present tense. The heroine chooses this medium during a future time when "writing has all but disappeared" (Kauffman xiv).

There would be no benefit to arguing that some of these texts are not epistolary. The increasing amount of scholarship dedicated to examining the epistolary form--its definition, its uses and its effects--indicates the richness and variety of the form. As Kauffman notes, the "very looseness of its conventions has made it resilient, adaptable, and relevant in diverse historical epochs" (xiv). What I would like to add to this growing body of scholarship, however, is a study examining in depth a narrow body of work: three novels, all relatively conventional in terms of their epistolarity, all contemporary, all published in the

United States, and all written by women. While previous work has revealed the history and the scope of novels that exhibit characteristics of epistolarity, I intend to contribute to what I believe will become a large body of work on specific types of epistolary literature.

In choosing for this study Fair and Tender Ladies, The Color Purple, and The Mixquiahuala Letters, I have selected a group of novels which can be examined for some particular characteristics. These novels are epistolary in the sense that each employs conventional devices of letters, such as salutation and signature as well as evidence of the writer's consciousness of her addressee. For example, Ivy Rowe, of Fair and Tender Ladies, writes her letters to a variety of addressees, many times to convey specific information to or to elicit particular actions from them. While she writes a number of letters to her dead sister Sylvaney, claiming that the news she will write is news she "can tell no one" (254), the letters Ivy addresses to recipients other than Sylvaney reveal her desire to send her voice beyond herself. Although all her letters exhibit the self-reflexive quality Porter describes, most of them also show that Ivy is a writer conscious of her recipient and his/her expectations. The Color Purple's Celie may seem to exhibit less of Ivy's desire to send her voice into the world since many of her letters are written to God. Yet, Celie is angered when God does not seem to be listening, revealing that she has been writing to provoke a

response. Her shift to her sister Nettie as addressee proves that while she is examining her self in her letters, Celie is also interested in writing someone who will read and understand what she writes and who, ideally, will respond to it. Similarly, Teresa, in The Mixquiahuala Letters, writes only to Alicia, whom she considers a trustworthy and understanding friend. Although she does not often write to inform Alicia of events--Alicia shared with Teresa most of the experiences about which Teresa writes--she exhibits a desire to interpret her experiences and to convey those interpretations to Alicia. Thus, the letter writers of all three novels employ conventional letter writing devices for specific effects.

In addition to their similar uses of conventions, all three novels have been published within the last thirteen years, and none of them has received much attention from scholars concentrating on the effects of epistolarity.² The historical contexts of the novels make them particularly interesting subjects for this type of study, generating questions about social mores and political pressures. In addition, that Ivy, Celie, and Teresa are United States citizens gives them the same ideological framework. Interestingly, the protagonist of

²Those who do focus on these novels include Campbell, who examines Celie's and Nettie's letters, in The Color Purple, as a revolutionary response to being "colonized"; and Bower, who discusses The Mixquiahuala Letters in terms of the isolated letter writer's trying to redefine the self, Fair and Tender Ladies as an example of how letters emphasize both presence and absence, and The Color Purple as a medium through which Celie rewrites her role in her culture.

each of these novels is not only American but also part of a regional and/or ethnic culture as well. Thus, there are distinct similarities in the conflicts that each experiences. Finally, since the authors, and the protagonists, of these works are women, the novels lend themselves well to discussions of feminist issues. The epistolary tradition is a feminine one, and these contemporary novels can be considered in light of that tradition.

An examination of these works also reveals the subversive potential of the epistolary form. Serving as mirror, the letter functions for the women in these novels as a way to see themselves. Significantly, in this "reflecting," the letter serves, as well, as a medium for deconstruction of self images that have been imposed by ideological influences. In deconstructing these oppressive images, each writer is liberated to construct her own images of her self, a self which is fragmented rather than unified, fluctuating rather than fixed.

Chapter 1 explores the notions of mirroring in letters, deconstructing ideologies, and constructing the fragmented self in order to lay a theoretical base for the later examination of Fair and Tender Ladies, The Color Purple, and The Mixquiahuala Letters. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 then explore each novel respectively in order to observe the process described in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, I consider Ivy Rowe's experiences in Fair and Tender Ladies as a native of mountain Appalachia and her need to understand these experiences.

This chapter demonstrates that Ivy undermines the authority of any identity predetermined for her by social or cultural labels by exerting control, through the medium of her letters, over the deconstruction, as well as the protean reconstruction, of her image. In Chapter 3, I examine the role of the epistolary form in the progressive deconstruction and tentative reconstruction of Celie's identity in The Color Purple. In the course of the novel, Celie goes from addressing her letters only to the traditional Christian God, and concluding them with no signature at all, to addressing her sister Nettie and signing herself as "Celie." This transition illustrates her move from an identity of "nothing," as a poor, black woman, an identity prescribed for her by the ideologies that oppress her, to a more positive identity that cannot be inscribed by those ideologies. In Chapter 4, I explore the subversive use of letters in The Mixquiahuala Letters. Through her experimental use of the epistolary form, Castillo (and/or Teresa) deconstructs Teresa's identity, an identity determined largely by culture and gender. A product of mestiza culture, Teresa must ultimately deal with her own misconceptions of who she is and accept the ambiguity of identity in general. It is her use of letters that allows her the space to do so. Finally, in the Conclusion, I discuss the significance of the epistolary form in light of my examination of these three novels.

While a study of this kind is necessarily limited, my hope is that attention to this important form is growing. My tendency is to regret not being able to explore more of the texts I considered as I narrowed the scope of this project. Yet the body of epistolary works worth examining lies like a feast ready for eating; I would not have traded my meal of these three novels for light snacks of many more novels. Hopefully, more guests will arrive soon, ready to indulge themselves, as a few of us have, and ultimately we will be able to report well on our culinary experience.

Chapter 1

Looking in the Mirror: Constructing the Fragmented Self

Now, when my faces come into alignment, one over another, and the dates come together, I'm going to begin my story. Here, where my body intersects with the space of my images. I have something to say because I'm going to say myself to myself, like anyone face to face with memory or a mirror.

the narrator in Helena Parenta Cunha's Woman Between Mirrors

Like the "woman between mirrors" who needs her mirrors not only to tell her story but also in order to gain a sense of self, the protagonists of Fair and Tender Ladies, The Color Purple, and The Mixquiahuala Letters seek a way to see for themselves who they are. While the narrator of Woman Between Mirrors makes use of literal mirrors, Ivy, Celie, and Teresa use the letter. That is, the epistolary form serves each of the protagonists of these novels as a mirror, which results in her being able to examine at a conscious level some of the ideologies which work upon her. As each protagonist employs the letter/mirror to help her gain a sense of "self," she discovers that this self is a complex product of the ideologies to which she is subject. Gaining the ability to examine those ideologies gives each of these protagonists a certain amount of agency, or control, over her own experience. Providing the groundwork for this argument, this chapter will define the scope of the study

and then will establish a working definition of the term "ideology." I will then examine the concept of the letter as mirror, in light of Lacan's "mirror stage," and how the use of the letter can work to aid in the deconstruction of ideologies. These steps will form the basis for examination in later chapters of how each novel employs the epistolary form in deconstructing the seemingly unified self and reconstructing a fragmentary and fluctuating self.

Although it can be argued that Ivy, Celie, and Teresa become somewhat liberated through the use of their letters, the implications of such an argument are, of course, limited. It cannot be proven that these women escape completely the ideologies that impinge upon them, for as we will see later in this discussion, a complete throwing off of limiting ideologies is impossible, although recognizing them as limiting can free one to a certain extent. Secondly, while it is necessary for this study to examine the impact of ideologies on an individual, the question of whether or not an essential self exists will not be answered here. Whether there is such a self or not is linked to the question of whether a universal Truth exists, and that question, at least for the purposes of this study, is irrelevant. If we and truth (in the form of ideologies) are constructed by our communities, our society, and our environment, then in order to understand ourselves, we ought to understand the ideologies that determine our construction. If, on the other hand, there is an

essential self, attached either to a soul or to a physical body, or to some combination of the two, we must acknowledge that this self--and Truth as well--is at least perceived differently by each of us. We observe that fixed entity through the filters of our own perceptions, which, most of us will agree, have been affected by our environments. So, if the essential self and/or universal Truth do exist, we cannot see them for what they are, undistorted by the ideologies that influence our perceptions. The aim of this study, however, is to show that the ability to question those ideologies, to undermine their potency by bringing them to the surface of the consciousness for examination, is a crucial factor in attaining some amount of freedom in defining who we are.

A definition of the term ideology should clarify the argument that the letter form allows for the undermining of ideologies. Twentieth-century Marxist critic, Louis Althusser, in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," defines ideologies as economically based. However, he also includes an explanation of ideology in general (as opposed to specific ideologies) as a thing which has no history. It is "endowed with a structure and a functioning such as to make it a non-historical reality, i.e. an omni-historical reality, in the sense in which that structure and functioning are immutable, present in the same form throughout what we can call history" (Althusser 161). He defines the term thus: "Ideology represents

the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162). He theorizes that a reason for the necessity of creating this kind of alienated structure is that humans themselves are alienated as a result of their conditions of existence. He explains, referring to Marx, that they do so because "these conditions are dominated by the essence of alienated society--'alienated labour' [Marx's term]" (164). However, Althusser also emphasizes that specific ideologies are made material, in apparatuses such as education, religion, and politics as well as in their practices. The importance of this distinction is that people who defend an ideology usually see it as a transcendental system, a system which represents in a real way the conditions of human existence. For example, those who say that only people who contribute a marketable skill to the workforce should and will be rewarded monetarily, and that that process simply follows "the nature of things," see the ideology of capitalism not as an ideology according to Althusser's definition but as a real and natural system that relates directly to the conditions of human existence.

In "Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text," Catherine Belsey explains Althusser's difficult concept, defining ideology as "a system of representations (discourses, images, myths) concerning the real relations in which people live" (46). Her list of discourses, images, and myths as examples of representations possible in a system offers explanation of how an ideology

influences members of the society in which it functions. Althusser states, for example, that the apparatus of education is the most powerful in keeping an ideology intact (152). It is easy to see how important discourses, images, and myths are to the state, to religious institutions, and to educational institutions in issuing moral, ethical, and religious lessons, lessons that shape people, usually at a very young age, into citizens who will conform to society and who are necessary to its survival.

Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean explain in their Materialist Feminisms that although "there is no simple escape from ideology" (5), an ideological system is "a necessary fiction that is more or less mystified about material reality depending on how much critical knowledge one has about one's circumstances--and about the theory of ideology, as well" (5). As we can see, an ideology is currently assumed to be a system of thought, a structure used to represent real life. In light of the elusiveness of truth, or Truth, it is not important to decide here whether or not there is some transcendent system that directly represents the real conditions of human existence since 1) as Althusser suggests, we need some notion of that kind of system in order to function whether it exists or not, and thus the need for ideologies; and 2) upon examination, our attempts either to create or to understand a coherent, noncontradictory ideology inevitably must fall short.

An example of this failure is Christian ideology. Most Christian doctrine asserts that the system God set up when He created the world is a system that exists whether one acknowledges it or not. It is fixed in that the rules of the system will not change, although some circumstances in the world will change. The Bible is a written description of the system, and the Bible is supposed to remain unchanged as well. It is the Word, handed down through divine inspiration directly from God. However, as any Biblical scholar will attest, no two people will agree on any single interpretation of the text in its entirety. Of course, part of the disagreement arises out of debates over exactly what writings make up the Bible. Yet even among Protestants, for example, reading from the same Bible, there is disagreement on interpretation of many passages. Even among members of a single Baptist church, there will be varied interpretations of their Biblical text. Regardless of whether the Bible represents the one system that accurately describes reality or not, the idea that humans can simply read it and inscribe that system, as is, on their hearts is a deceptive one. And the Bible is only a representation of God. Thus, we are twice removed from the transcendent Truth, Himself.

Another example of such an ideology is capitalism. Although most Americans do not view capitalism as a limiting ideology, it works as one. The controlling idea behind capitalism is that as individuals (a key concept of

capitalist society), each member of a capitalist society is responsible for his or her own success or failure. The ideology is based on the idea of a unified individual born with certain natural abilities and certain natural tendencies. The success or failure of an individual is defined in terms of material acquisition and financial worth. Thus, for example, even the women's movement of the 1960s determined to throw off the "shackles" of domesticity and to invade the workplace, demanding equal opportunity and equal pay for equal work. The problem of this move is that it reinforced the belief that domestic work is of little value. It did not result in a male countermovement to be given equal opportunity to work in the home. Not until recently has there been interest in such a change, and still the majority of families send children to daycare so that both parents can work outside the home rather than assigning either parent to duties at home. However, the fact that women demanded equal opportunity in the workplace rather than demanding that domestic work be valued as a necessary component of our society is not surprising. How many people in a capitalist society would pay attention to the latter argument? In such a society, even if domestic work were valued by being given "lip service," the ideology of materialism is so strong that if a sole-supporter husband leaves the home and does not continue financial support of his family, the value of the homemaker's/mother's work in sustaining the household and caring for the

children is easily transformed into negative consideration of her as a financial "burden" on society since now society must compensate her monetarily for her work. Women of the 1960s knew, either consciously or unconsciously, that the only way to have control over their own experience and mobility in a capitalist society was to become important to the public sphere of society, to become trained in a job that society is willing and happy to pay for. Indeed, most Americans see capitalism as a free and freeing system. Anyone can "pull him or herself up by the bootstraps" and become successful. What goes unexamined in this assumption is whether the majority, or even a goodly number, of Americans have access to this freedom. In these ways, the capitalist ideology is a fixed system dictating to its subjects what must be done in order to attain success, and escape from this ideology is difficult if not impossible for those who have been shaped by it.

In both of these examples, we see that regardless of whether or not there is an essential self or an essential Truth, our image of that self or of that Truth is, to a certain extent at least, constructed. All ideologies, not just the Christian ideology or the ideology of patriarchal capitalism, necessitate the construction of complementary images. Thus, our exploration of ideologies, both specific ideologies and the theory of ideology, can allow us to question those images in a way that undermines their power over us. The images are, if not erased,

changed from concrete to clay. We may see them, after examination, not as things to be entirely trusted but as things to be questioned or deconstructed continuously and, if necessary, things to be reconstructed continuously as well. This continual deconstruction and reconstruction is what the protagonists of Fair and Tender Ladies, The Color Purple, and The Mixquiahuala Letters accomplish through the epistolary form. For example, Ivy refuses to marry Lonnie Rash although she is pregnant as a result of their relationship. In a letter to her sister Beulah, she attempts to explain her decision. She tells Beulah that "Miss Maynard has said I am ruind and cannot come to help at the school anymore" (109). Yet, at the end of this letter, she reverses the negative connotations of her not marrying Lonnie in her explanation that, in light of her not loving him, if she did marry him, she "would end up acting like Emma Bovary" (111). In this reversal, by shaking up the order of things which society works diligently to maintain, and by exposing as a destructively romantic notion the belief that marriage will always satisfy the needs of a woman seeking happiness, Ivy has disrupted the traditional family ideology that refuses to accept an unmarried woman as a moral, and thus a rational, member of society. Likewise, in a letter Celie writes to her sister Nettie, she reverses Mr. _____'s definition of her. Irritated by her plans to leave for Memphis with Shug, he mocks her: "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say,

you nothing at all" (213). Her answer, the content subtle and only slightly more confident than usual, is fiery nonetheless: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook. . . . But I'm here" (214). This new description of herself, expressing her transition from being "nothing" to being "here," is a turning point for Celie. She has begun to see that Mr. _____'s definition of her is not set in stone but is only made up of society's and her community's, including Mr. _____'s, views of poor black women.

Perhaps more consciously than in the cases of either Ivy or Celie, Teresa pushes at the boundaries of ideologies that limit her. In Letter Nineteen to Alicia, she describes the reaction to her and Alicia as they, two American women of Hispanic background, traveled in Mexico: "How revolting we were, susceptible to ridicule, abuse, disrespect. We would have hoped for respect as human beings, but the only respect granted a woman is that which a gentleman bestows upon the lady. Clearly, we were no ladies" (65). During their trip, however, Teresa does have an affair with the rich Sergio Samora who represents Mexican tradition and who, while he carries on intrigues with women on the side, proposes marriage to Teresa. Although she does not love Sergio, Teresa is drawn to a world where people of Mexican heritage are not treated or thought of as inferiors but are, instead, the proud members of an upper class. After her return to the United States, however, she receives a

telegram from Sergio saying, "Ours can never be" (99). Teresa's mother points to her divorce and her sexual past as obvious objections he would have to marrying her. In Letter Twenty-Seven, Teresa, in a surreal, dreamlike state, searches a small village for confirmation of her identity. Finally, unable to find that confirmation, Teresa takes a loaded gun, and on behalf of all "who didn't seek to change the world but lived in good faith and prayer offered to an imposing God" (103), points the gun out of the "opaque window" (104) through which she aims at her oppressors. Whether or not she kills anyone, exploding the ideologies that trap her, her consciousness that these boundaries are products of ideologies ultimately liberates her to a certain extent. Though confused about her identity, she cannot simply accept the derogatory definitions placed on her by either the traditions of Mexico or of the United States.

The letter, serving as a mirror to aid Ivy, Celie, and Teresa in an exploration of the self, allows for new consciousness of ideological limits. An understanding of Lacan's "mirror stage" might be helpful in describing the function of the literal mirror. This description, in turn, would help illuminate the function of the letter as a sort of metaphorical mirror. Psychoanalysis as a whole has looked upon the rift between the internal and the external worlds of humans as a fascinating space. Freud's introduction of the terms id (the source

of anti-social feelings and sexual impulses, or desires) and ego (the agency which acts as mediator between the id and reality), helped initiate discussion of this space (Grosz 25).

Interestingly, the issue of a permanent reality is much debated in the realm of psychoanalysis. Elizabeth Grosz, for instance, discusses the apparent contradiction between two different versions of Freud's definition of the ego. One version, the realist ego, is based on the idea of "reality as inalterable, ahistorical 'civilization'" (26). This version also describes the ego as a "pre-given, natural, innate faculty" (26). However, the other version, and the one Lacan approves, is based on the idea of the ego as "an entirely fluid, mobile, amorphous series of identifications . . . [which] cannot be readily separated either from its own internal processes . . . or from external objects" (Lacan, Ecrits 28-29). This version of the ego is called the "narcissistic ego." In light of this type of ego, an explanation of the self's identity is based on the self's relations with others and with its own body. The ego is not present from birth but must emerge, and here is where Lacan's mirror stage comes in. Grosz explains that this stage includes "[t]he child's first recognition of a distinction between itself and the (m)other/mirror-image (self-as-other)" and a

[d]isplacing [of] the child's dependence on the (m)other with a self-reliance. The mirror stage is a compensation for the child's

acceptance of lack. It provides a promise or anticipation of (self)mastery and control the subject lacks, and which the mother provisionally covered over in gratifying the child's needs. (32)

The mirror, the discovery of the self as distinct from the (m)other, provides the child with a sense of personal unity.

It is the mirror stage, which initiates one's ability to view her or himself as an object, that leads one to the place where she or he can determine a "self," called the "I" by Lacan. Lacan stresses the importance of language as a tool for filling the gap between the id and reality once this split is recognized by the child. It is as a result of the mirror stage that the child learns to speak. Lacan states that "language restores to it [the I], in the universal, its function as subject" (Ecrits 2). The suggestion that language is a crucial factor in establishing a self also indicates that the relationship between the child and the image in the mirror is socially regulated. Grosz, reiterating Lacan, explains that "[t]he mirror image . . . provides the ground for the ego ideal, the image of the ego, derived from others, which the ego strives to achieve or live up to" (Ecrits 48).

That the relationship between an individual and her or his image as an object is socially regulated, at least to a certain extent, is exemplified in the response of many individuals to society's standards of beauty--for example, the

high number of women in our society with anorexia nervosa. Susan Bordo, in Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body, states in her discussion of the disease, "Our bodies, no less than anything else that is human, are constituted by culture" (142). Women who describe what the disease is like say that even when their bodies are so malnourished as to be in danger of cardiac arrest, they look in the mirror and see a fat person.¹ If we examine this reaction in light of psychoanalytic theory, the explanation of the anorexic's image of her self seems to lie in the mediation going on between her id and external forces. The ego's drive to reconcile the internal and the external actually shapes the anorexic's perception of her image in the mirror. This example of the self image's being influenced by outside forces may seem a strange choice since it is agreed that anorexia nervosa is a psychological disorder. However, Marilyn Lawrence explains that although not all women develop this disorder, it is "a disorder which springs from the very midst of women's experience of the world" (21). Lawrence also suggests that anorexia is only one reaction to the problems that "women and girls have in finding a place in the worlds of work and education, and on the effect of prevailing notions of womanhood on our abilities to accept ourselves as both successful and feminine" (25). Thus, while most women work through these difficulties

¹ This tendency is discussed by both Marilyn Lawrence in The Anorexic Experience (59) and Paul E. Garfinkel in Anorexia Nervosa: A Multidimensional Perspective (3, 8).

without developing anorexia, it is likely that their images of themselves are still, to a certain extent, influenced by external forces. Their egos are perhaps able to mediate between the id and those forces in a way that leaves them better able to cope with discrepancies between the two. Yet the image they see when they look in the mirror is still most likely one defined largely by society. In other words, if model Christy Turlington is "thin," and I weigh at least fifteen pounds more than she, then I am not "thin." What am I, then? The logical conclusion would seem to be that I am overweight.

However, as was suggested in the above discussion of ideology, it is possible for one to become aware of the external forces, the ideologies, which influence the shaping of her or his "self." Although a complete escape from these ideologies is probably impossible, an awareness of them makes possible the constant deconstruction and reconstruction of that self. Thus, the anorexic might be able to understand that her definition of "fat" has been socially determined. With that realization, she might be able to renegotiate her ideals of beauty, allowing for a much more flexible notion of beauty, one which would be more likely to include her with all of her singularities. There might be, then, some positive outcome of the anorexic's finding a way to release herself from unattainable social standards and moving away from fixed ideals of beauty.²

² Lawrence's discussion of anorexia bears out this idea. She states that while there are male anorexics, the disease is strikingly dominant among females (13). She notes that one of the causes of

In the above quote from Lacan about the role of language in determining the subject, the term *subject* appears such that I hope its context provides sufficient clues as to its meaning there. However, the term is a problematic one that should be examined further before this discussion proceeds. The term has undergone a great deal of transformation in the last few decades, moving out of the context of the "Cartesian cogito, the pre-given, indubitable, unified subject" (Grosz 147-48) and into that of post-modernity, the era of the idea that "where there is thinking, there is no I, no consciousness" (Grosz 2). Catherine Belsey's discussion of subjectivity is an enlightening one. She examines both the positive and the negative connotations of the word. Defining subject as "the individual in society" (47), she explains that within an ideology that requires the assumption that humans are unified, whole beings, "it appears 'obvious' that people are autonomous individuals, possessed of subjectivity or consciousness which is the source of their beliefs and actions" (47). She goes on to state, in accordance with Saussure and Benveniste, that "it is language which enables the speaker to posit himself or herself as 'I,' as the subject of a sentence" (47).

the disease is the "ideal" female image portrayed by the fashion industry and the media and the fact that from a very early age, girls are conditioned to depend on "the approval of other people" for their feelings of self-worth (37-42). Consistent with this diagnosis of the problem, Lawrence criticizes the insistence of some therapists that the patient gain a certain amount of weight in order to recover: "It is making a fundamentally 'anorexic' mistake; it treats weight as a magical quality, allowing numbers on the dial to take over from reality" (76). Of course, the disease is much more complicated than I have suggested above. Bordo agrees with Paul Garfinkel's and David Garner's claim that anorexia is a "multidimensional disorder" (Bordo 140). For example, in addition to social expectations which contribute to the problem, Bordo discusses the female body as an object by which a woman may exhibit control in a world where she might have little power otherwise (149).

This statement is two-pronged. Being able to say "I" gives one a certain amount of agency, of control over one's experience. Yet also, as a speaker, one is limited by the conventions of language, even trapped in the ideologies which shape language. The main emphasis of Belsey's argument, however, is that although as subjects, we may feel that we control our actions, we are subjects also in the sense that we are subject to "the authority of the social formation represented in ideology as the Absolute Subject (God, the king, the boss, Man, conscience)" (47). She suggests that a more beneficial concept of self is one consisting of multiple subject positions. This concept acknowledges the contradictions inherent in any one ideology (and in any language) and thus the conflicts of the individual trying to define her or his self within such a system. The acknowledgement of multiple subject positions would result only from a constant examination of ideologies and their effects upon the "subject."

A question might be raised here regarding the benefit of a self which cannot be represented by any particular identity. For example, lack of an identity, it could be said, might result in insanity. In addition, how can a person act on the material world without some sense of unifying identity to guide her or his actions? In Sexual/Textual Politics, Toril Moi discusses Elaine Showalter's insistence that a good novel must present "truthful images of strong women with which the reader may identify" (Moi 7), implying that strong

women are unified, feminine individuals. In response to Showalter's argument, Moi asserts, as does Belsey, that this type of character is deceptive: "the search for a unified self, or gender identity or indeed 'textual identity' in the literary work must be seen as drastically reductive" (Moi 10). She also discusses the merits of a deconstructive approach to both writing and criticism. Yet Moi does assert, as if in answer to the questions raised above, that, while occupying multiple subject positions, an individual is capable of "taking up" a particular subject position. Illustrating this notion, she states that it "remains politically essential for feminists to defend women *as* women in order to counteract the patriarchal oppression that precisely despises women *as* women" (13). This statement suggests two important points for our discussion: first, that categories such as that of woman or beautiful are socially constructed, though generally treated as natural; and second, that acknowledging that we are made up of multiple subject positions, and that we are not unified individuals, does not mean that we cannot act on behalf of a particular subject position. What I have tried to establish up to this point, though, is that the deconstruction of ideologies/subject positions makes us much more aware of their artificiality, thus potentially rendering us less trapped by them. Note that Moi suggests that the individual may decide which subject position to "take up." This ability to

decide comes only with a new understanding that the subject position(s) attributed to/exhibited by one are not simply natural.

My suggestion in this study is that mirrors of one kind or another are commonly used in defining the self, and, for those who reach an awareness that the image of that self is socially mediated, mirrors can be used in continuously deconstructing and reconstructing that self. This use of the mirror is exemplified in Helena Parente Cunha's novel Woman Between Mirrors. Although not an epistolary novel, Woman Between Mirrors is effective as a model of what Ivy, Celie, and Teresa do in constructing their epistles.³

The nameless narrator of this novel stands between two mirrors that open and shut, and, according to Fred P. Ellison and Naomi Lindstrom in their preface to the novel, she attempts to come to some understanding of her existence and to "free herself from other people's scripts" (vii), that is, from ideologies which control how she is defined. She introduces the reader to the "woman who writes me," a fragment of her self whom the narrator needs in

³ In her study, The Social Context of the Epistolary Novel, Elizabeth Ann Campbell includes an examination of Cunha's Woman Between Mirrors as an epistolary novel, classifying it as epistolary "in a modernist sense" (8). She explains that the narrator "quests for herself by writing and reading letters to herself from a split consciousness which is reflected in the split mirror" (101). However, since I am distinguishing between diary or journal writing and letterwriting in this study, I do not classify Woman Between Mirrors as epistolary. Although, as Campbell notes, the writing of Cunha's narrator does serve "as a subversive and freeing agent and also as a mirror in which [she] seek[s] [herself]" (8), she does not address her discourse to a particular audience outside herself, as Ivy, Celie, and Teresa do. Thus, while the novel is an appropriate model for the mirror function of Ivy's, Celie's and Teresa's letters, I do not consider Woman Between Mirrors an epistolary novel since its effects are not contingent on its use of or deviation from the conventions of the traditional epistolary novel.

order to get "a better focus on things" (Cunha 8). However, while she needs this part of her self, she explains that "the woman who writes me" is not in control of her own situation because she "cannot say I" (8). On the other hand, the narrator can say I; that is, she is enabled by her mirrors to speak her story.

The reflections in these mirrors give her glimpses at various perspectives of her self, a complex combination of subject positions. These positions are "subject" in that the narrator is a participant in and is subject to various ideologies. However, in the process of examining these positions, the woman between mirrors deconstructs them. From the beginning, tension is present between the narrator's position as "good girl" and her position as "Little Miss Sourpuss" (2), the little girl who is dissatisfied with her submissive position in an aristocratic Brazilian family. Later, in her marriage, her submissive role continues, and she is subjected to both physical and mental abuse from her husband and sons, considered by them a weak and laughable character. The recurrent image which has haunted her from childhood, of the black boy from the house next door to her father's, symbolizes the social limitation of her position in the upper class. She is not allowed to play with him since he is not only a boy but is also the son of a black cook, and so he is considered beneath her: "The black boys and girls, children of the cooks and fishermen, weren't part of the world my father was in charge of" (10). For her, then, he becomes a

symbol of the forbidden, of sexuality, which is taboo for her, and of Xango, the "king of the lightning" (23).

The deconstruction of the positions in which she is trapped happens neither quickly nor simply. Conflict between the narrator's conforming self and her rebellious self brings about gradual but constant change, these two selves at times merging and at times switching places. The narrator, defending her conformity to the woman who writes her, complains of that other self:

She sees only one side of things. But each thing has many sides, each person has many voices. Many silences. You need to see the other sides, hear the other voices, feel the many silences.

That way we'll know the truth is not the truth. Because I know that the truth comes to pieces in our hands. (15)

The process of arguing with herself allows the narrator to "see the other sides" to which she is referring, and when her husband leaves her alone at home during Carnival, she begins to expand the limits of her submissive position. She imagines herself an appealing and sexual being. When her husband fails to return even after Carnival, she begins the process of redefining who she is:

Where shall I begin. By putting on one of my sophisticated, provocative gowns? Or preferably my blue jeans? Which of my few friends and acquaintances should I look up first? Should I

get a job? . . . Which perfume should I use? . . . I open up my mirrors. I look for my face. (84)

By venturing into positions she has not experienced before, the narrator is able to deconstruct the positions which have for so long defined her. She has an affair, and then, rather than becoming a faithful partner to the man she has become involved with, she goes on to other affairs that suit her immediate desires better. She begins to write stories and poems and to consider publishing them. She even reexamines her role as a sacrificing mother to her grown sons. When one of them appears at her door to confront her about her new lifestyle, she explains, "I sacrificed myself. I walked through fire. I turned to ashes. Now I've had enough" (104).

Although the woman between mirrors never completely escapes the guilt she feels in abandoning her sons and the traditions she has inherited, her willingness to examine and press against the boundaries of the patriarchal and class ideologies that oppress her has allowed her to redefine herself in new and constantly fluctuating terms. She has even sought out "the good-looking black man" (124), a man who represents for her in her adult life the boundary she could never cross; he is for her the king of lightning. The sex she experiences with him becomes for her a running into the storm. She describes the "streaks of lightning, the flood of burning torrents, the gasping of the storm, and finally,

once again, night transfixed by the scream beyond all" (124-25). In her immediate reflection on the experience, she says, "I know where I am in this my present situation. Fulfilled and total. I'm here. Whole and multiple" (125). She realizes, then, the combination of selves that make up who she is.

Later, in a final confrontation with her self, she is weary rather than jubilant. "Everything I could have wanted to try, I tried. It's all over. We've followed our footsteps right down to the last one. Now we're standing here, each looking at the other. . . . The mirrors multiply our images ad infinitum" (132).⁴ However, in this last confrontation with her self, she becomes integrated in her fragmentation: "My face in the mirror is her face. I'm her. She's me. We are one" (132). At this moment, a storm that has been brewing outside begins to rumble. Suddenly, lightning strikes the open mirrors, shattering them "into a thousand pieces" (132). This shattering of what only moments ago appeared to be a unified image confirms for the narrator the idea that the self exists in fragments. Looking at the pieces of glass, she sees "an entire face in a shard of glass. A single face" (132). Even though the idea of a fragmented personality is generally not thought of positively, this moment is a liberating one for the narrator. By deconstructing the subject positions offered her by society, and by learning to accept herself as not a unified individual but

⁴The narrator's shifting of pronouns, employing *she*, *you*, *we*, and *I*, all in reference to her self, indicates the multiplicity of that self.

a fluctuating combination of identities, she has gained some agency over who she is, and the mirror has served as a primary device enabling her to do so.

In the case of a letter, the effect is a similar one. The writers of the letters in Fair and Tender Ladies, The Color Purple, and The Mixquiahuala Letters write their letters because they need to establish some sense of self. For example, early in Fair and Tender Ladies, Ivy notes the novelty of mirrors in her experience: "I was looking in the mirrer and trying to see, but it is dark in the back of that store and the mirrer is wavy" (70).⁵ Later, as she and Beulah walk by the window of the pharmacy in their new dresses, she at first does not even recognize the reflected image as her own: "Now who is that? I thought to myself as we turned the corner" (70). Ivy, Celie, and Teresa need some sense of themselves as decision-making beings, and in order to have an image to behold, a representation of the self-as-object, they write themselves in letters. The letters actually serve as mirrors for them.

Like the child experiencing Lacan's mirror stage, Ivy, Celie, and Teresa all experience the need to gain a sense of self. Unlike the child, these women are aware of the identities society has placed on them; for example, each is aware of society's expectations of her as a mother and as a wife. Yet for each

⁵ Ivy's Appalachian dialect, as well as her only sporadic formal education, result in her use of unconventional spellings in her letters. I offer this explanation here, rather than noting in the text each of Ivy's misspellings, in order to avoid disruption.

of these protagonists, the alienation of her self-image is a necessary step in coming to terms with her identity. Like the child who discovers the concept of "other" when she/he sees her/his image in the mirror, the letterwriter is able to look at a letter she has written and observe from a distance the self that is reflected in that letter. Yet, similar to the anorexic's seeing herself as "fat," the identities portrayed in these characters' letters are often socially mediated. To illustrate, in a letter to her sister Beulah, Ivy calls herself "ruint," in accordance with the moral standards of her community, because of her premarital affair with Lonnie Rash (123). In the beginning of The Color Purple, Celie sees herself as "ugly," and in Letter Thirty-One, Teresa reconstructs the moment when her lover Alexis addresses her as "[y]ou bitch" (116).

Thus, the "subjectivity" of each of these women includes her subjection to ideologies which impose limits on each of her subject positions. These subject positions are determined by a number of factors, including gender, ethnicity, class, and familial position. Yet, for each, letterwriting is a way not only to reflect a socially regulated self, a self that is ostensibly unified, but also to deconstruct it, thereby exercising some agency over her own experience.

Letterwriting is used in the narratives of these characters for several specific effects, the ultimate outcome of which is attainment of agency. The use of the epistolary form to accomplish these effects is worth noting, since the

novel, in its various forms, has often been employed to less liberating political ends. Classic realist novels have been charged with reinforcing traditional and oppressive ideologies while appearing to expose life as it really is. Catherine Belsey argues that in portraying what she describes as "obvious" characteristics of reality, this type of novel deceptively depicts reality as an ideologically coherent world, thus positioning the reader as a subject not only in the sense that he or she can act autonomously but also in that he or she is subject to the authority posed by dominant ideologies (49). In light of the earlier definitions of ideology discussed here, it follows that in any text there are contradictions that reveal the impossibility of inscribing a coherent ideology, and thus any author's project can be deconstructed to reveal its discrepancies. However, Fair and Tender Ladies, The Color Purple, and The Mixquiahuala Letters seem to exhibit an awareness of their own contradictions, contradictions inherent in the positions of the authors, characters, and readers as subjects of ideologies.

One important effect of the epistolary form in achieving this element of agency is the fragmented structure of the narrative. The letterwriter can reflect a variety of subject positions which can and do contradict one another. The juxtaposition of such conflicting elements of identity makes clear for the reader that the ideologies imposing on the letterwriter fail to inscribe a unified self. Secondly, the letterwriter can not only say "I," but in order to subvert the limits

of that act, limits determined greatly by the conventions of language, she can say it in a variety of ways, expanding the identity that can be encompassed by "I." For example, Teresa can, in her signature, call herself "Teresa," "Tere," or "T." or she can sign "Checkmate" (81), identifying herself as a worthy opponent for Ponce, the engineer. A third effect of the epistolary form is that the letterwriter has or attains agency by calling attention to the material of the letter itself. As Linda Kauffman notes regarding the writers examined in Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction, this decision to "dramatiz[e] the processes of textual production and reception . . . undermine[s] the tenets of representation" (xvii), or the notion "that the function of art is to hold a mirror up to nature" (xvii). Kauffman explains that emphasizing the material quality of the letter "demonstrat[es] that what appears 'natural'. . . is instead socially constructed" (xvii). Drawing attention to this fact, Ivy burns the letters she finds in her trunk in order to control their function, Celie takes possession of the letters written by her sister Nettie, and Teresa forces the reader to participate in the narrative by giving the letters to her/him and requiring that she/he arrange them in the order to be read.

Here it is apparent that there is some difference between a mirror and a letter in that the letter, once it is written, exists independently of its writer. It can become an agent of a sort. In Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'"

he notes that the letter in question in Poe's story and/or the absence of this letter control the actions of the characters: "[I]t is the letter and its diversion which governs their entries and roles" (44). Who holds the letter becomes a key issue in terms of who holds control over the circumstances of the story's characters. Thus, possession of the letter may seem to determine who holds the most power. However, the breaking down of ideologies may free the letter writer even from the oppression of the letter holder. For example, Celie is able to gain some advantage in her relationship with Mr. _____ once she has realized that his definition of her is not fixed. It is true that he has held a certain amount of power over her through the possession of the letters Nettie has written her, and Shug's recovery of those letters is a turning point for her. Yet, ultimately, it is her new understanding that the power of the word can be deconstructed that liberates her. Likewise, Ivy's burning of her letters and Teresa's refusal to arrange her letters for the reader call attention to the material quality of the letters and to the arbitrariness of one's perceptions of reality and self and, thus, to their deconstructability as well.

For Ivy, Celie, and Teresa, the letter has the potential to serve them in several ways. It may be a way to break their isolation. It is a way to communicate with others. Additionally, it may become an indicator of power.

Most importantly, the letter serves each of these women as a mirror, as a resource for discovery/construction of the self. In this same capacity, it may offer a way for ideologies to be examined and deconstructed and for the notion of a fixed image or self to be replaced by that of a fluctuating self. Thus, I see the use of the epistolary form in these novels as a liberating, rather than oppressive, choice of forms. Although as a collection of letters, each novel may project a semblance of coherence, of wholeness, the letters themselves serve as fragments of that whole, allowing for a self that is not definable by any unified ideology. By writing her letters, saying I, each protagonist opens her mirrors, which act, in turn, enables her to explore, deconstruct, and reconstruct her fragmentary self.

Chapter 2

The Protean Ivy

in Lee Smith's Fair and Tender Ladies

It was a new world, with even the shape of it changed. . . . The smoke from the burning letters rose and was lost in the clouds. It took me upwards of an hour to burn them all. With every one I burned, my soul grew lighter, lighter as if it rose too with the smoke. . . . I came to understand something in that moment, Joli, which I had never understood in all these years.

The letters didn't mean anything.

Not to the dead girl Silvaney, of course--nor to me.

Nor had they ever.

It was the writing of them, that signified. (314)

Ivy Rowe in Lee Smith's Fair and Tender Ladies

Ivy Rowe, the captivating protagonist of Lee Smith's Fair and Tender Ladies, has intrigued readers from the time of the novel's publication in 1988. Praised by reviewers, she is described as a "born storyteller" (Booklist 1259), an "enchanted heroine" (Publishers Weekly 51), and an "engaging narrator" (Starr E. Smith 95). A review by Keddy Outlaw notes the "verve and immediacy" (209) of Ivy's writing, and Roz Kaveney states in her own review that in Fair and Tender Ladies, one of Lee Smith's best works, "[Smith] allows the rhythm of speech to be the local manifestation of the flow of lives" (803) in this Appalachian setting. These reviewers seem captivated by Ivy's letters;

however, they note the novel's epistolarity only in passing. Similarly, Anne Goodwyn Jones, in "The World of Lee Smith," focuses primarily on Smith's genius in depicting the complex "human experience in the South" (271) rather than on the forms Smith employs in doing so. A few critics, on the other hand, have recognized the importance of the novel's form. Katherine Kearns writes in "From Shadow to Substance: The Empowerment of the Artist Figure in Lee Smith's Fiction," that Ivy speaks "through the naked form of personal letters" (190) and that in making this choice to write, "she does not abandon her artistic impulses" (190). Lucinda MacKethan, in Daughters of Time: Creating Woman's Voice in Southern Story, notes Ivy's "urgent effort of setting down her world in words" (109). MacKethan argues that in writing to her dead sister Silvaney, Ivy's alter ego, Ivy "creates a sustaining, integrated image of herself" (108). In Lee Smith, Dorothy Combs Hill argues that through her letters, Ivy "has imagined her way out of the accepted social construction" (105). And in her dissertation, "Rewriting the Self, Writing the Other: An Investigation of Recent American Epistolary Novels," Anne Lieberman Bower addresses the epistolary representation of presence and absence and its relationship to notions of origin, marginality, and indeterminacy. While these critical works have initiated serious study of Fair and Tender Ladies, scholarship on the novel is very limited. Aside from these articles exploring the sources of Ivy's strength

and creativity, there is no discussion of the importance of Ivy's choice to narrate her life in the form of letters.

Ivy's letters, written to a number of recipients, fulfill various functions for her. She uses them to communicate important news, to "keep in touch" (182) with family and friends, and to record events and feelings. Most importantly, however, Ivy's letters serve as a mirror in which she can see her self, through which she can better understand her self. This self is not a permanent or static self, revealed to her bit by bit in her letters. Rather, it is a fluid self, comprised of many identities; as Ivy writes to Joli, "I have been so many people" (266). Although Ivy experiences pressure from a number of dominant ideological influences, she resists definition by any one of these ideologies. This is not to say that Ivy is immune to the pressures they exert on her; certainly, her expressions often echo the terms of those ideologies. However, in the end, Ivy's identity is too protean to be fixed by any particular system. This fluidity results in large part from Ivy's habit of deconstructing, through her letters, systems which threaten to entrap her.

To describe Ivy's deconstruction of these systems is not a simple task. She does not systematically tear them apart; she does not even destroy them to the point that they ultimately have no effect upon her. Instead, Ivy, expressed to us through her letters, fluctuates between acceptance and rejection of the

ideologies that influence her. If we can view acceptance and rejection as opposite ends of a spectrum, however, we can see that although Ivy moves back and forth on the spectrum rather than progressing in one direction from acceptance to rejection, she ultimately *deconstructs* all the ideologies that work upon her. For example, while she still loves romances at the end of the novel, she exhibits an awareness that the formula behind them is an artificial one.

At the same time, Ivy does not set out, in writing her letters, to deconstruct the ideologies that dominate her culture. She writes instead for various reasons. Bower notes that Ivy uses the letter both to establish presence, as when she writes to "hold together a dispersing family and to continue traditions that are fading" (33) and to emphasize absence, which desire is exhibited in letters like the one to her pen pal Hanneke, in which she expresses her anger that Hanneke has not written back, and those to Silvaney in which Silvaney's absence is necessary to Ivy's self-exploration (46-47). Ivy often writes to convey information. Also, as her letters to Hanneke reveal, she is a lonely girl and yearns for a way to break the isolation of her existence up on Sugar Fork. Most significantly, however, she admits that her understanding of her self is limited and that her letters give her a way to understand her experience. She writes not only to remember her experiences and feelings but also to examine them. She explains this need in a letter to her friend Violet

Gayheart: "Sometimes I despair of ever understanding anything right when it happens to me, it seems like I have to tell it in a letter to see what it was, even though I was right there all along!" (181) Later, in a letter to her sister Silvaney, who has died, she says, "You know I have always got to write my letters, and think about what's happened and what I've done" (245).

Addressing Ivy's need to know herself, Hill suggests that

[t]he wound that the whole important body of Lee Smith's work redresses is the terrible cultural wound inflicted on creative women that keeps them from understanding themselves and even denies them any access to themselves. They have no access to themselves, neither in their own unfree imaginations nor in collective institutions. There is no form in which they can recognize themselves, no form in which others can recognize them, certainly not without unsexing them or deforming them.

(xvii)

Elisabeth Herion-Sarafidis, in an interview with Smith, addresses this problem for Smith's characters, specifically for Crystal from Black Mountain Breakdown. Herion-Sarafidis explains, "In looking for herself Crystal is never real to herself; she is only real as she is mirrored, as crystal, in how others see her and treat her" (15). Hill and Herion-Sarafidis acknowledge, however, what

I will argue in this chapter, that Ivy, unlike her predecessors in Smith's works, finds a way to see and to recognize a more substantial self. While Hill considers Ivy's retrieval of rejected ancient archetypes as the key to her finding her self, I would suggest that it is actually Ivy's use of the letter as mirror that allows her this construction of a liberated self.

Ivy's experience with actual mirrors repeatedly reveals the lack of seemingly any way for her literally to see herself. For instance, when her uncle Revel takes her and Beulah to town to get new dresses, Ivy tries on her dress and then tries to get a look at herself in the store mirror: "I was looking in the mirror and trying to see, but it is dark in the back of that store and the mirror is wavy" (70). Later, when Ivy and Beulah catch a glimpse of themselves in a window, Ivy does not even recognize herself at first: "Now who is that? I thought to myself as we turned the corner and waited in front of the pharmacy to cross the street. And Molly, it was us! Us in the winder looking like movie stars, me too" (70). The next mention of a mirror is not until much later in the novel, and still it is a novelty to Ivy. She writes to Silvaney about her experience with Franklin Ransom: "[H]e turned on the bedside light and got me to look in the mirror door. I had never seen a mirror door before. I had never looked at my whole body all at one time" (163). It is an affirming experience for her since it results in her discovery that "I am beautiful!" (163). In her

letterwriting, she is attempting something similar to looking in the mirror. Explaining that she needs to write things in order to understand them, Ivy reveals her need to be able to step back from an event, a feeling, or an image in order really to be able to look at it. The letters function for her as a way to do this, and in doing so, they foster in her the possibility of fluidity, of her identity as a fluctuating and fragmented self, rather than a fixed one.

A perfect example of her fluidity, Ivy's constant movement makes it impossible to define her position on virtually any issue. That is, in one letter, she may express a perspective that in another letter she contradicts. Since the novel is a collection of letters (each a fragment of the whole collection), Ivy can depart from the notion of the unified narrative, producing at the same time a *whole* work comprised of various images, the combination of which cannot ultimately be contained by any particular ideology. Composing complex and contradictory images is the most obvious way Ivy uses the letter to deconstruct the ideologies that impose upon her. For example, she wavers between regard and disgust for the conventional Christian God. In her sixth letter to Hanneke, angry at her family's poverty and her father's illness, and at Hanneke's failure to write back, Ivy unleashes her feelings: "I know I am evil and I wish evil for you too. Mister Brown told us one time that God is good, but He is not good or bad ether one, I think it is that He does not care" (17). Her statement that "He is not

good or bad ether one" implies that Ivy does believe in a male God, a God who, although He may not care about what happens to His creation, seems to have the ability to interfere with it at will. Indeed, she criticizes His divine actions: "no I do not pray, nor do I think much of God. It is not rigt what he sends on people. He sends too much to bare" (32).

From the beginning, then, Ivy doubts the innate goodness of the Christian God, thus undermining to some extent Christian ideology's power over her. Yet, there are also times when Ivy's letters indicate that she experiences some fear of God. She writes Beulah, for instance, about how she almost got "saved" at "the meeting" where Sam Russell Sage has been preaching. Ivy feels that if it had not been for Miss Torrington's almost fainting, she would have responded to the invitational, and afterward, as she writes her letter, she worries: "I have not been saved yet, so I hope I will not die anytime soon!" (94) Soon, however, she discovers Sam Russell Sage's hypocrisy and returns to her initial position on the nature of God, claiming that "if Sam Russell Sage is who God has sent, then I don't know if I even want to be saved ether, in spite of the firey hand!" (97)

Later in the novel, after Ivy's brother Garnie has grown up and become an evangelist much after the model of Sage, his mentor, he becomes determined to bring Ivy under the umbrella of his own ideology. Ivy begins this story in a

letter to Silvaney with "I have to write to you, for I can tell no one. This is the story of how I was not saved" (254). Ivy then writes of how she attends one of Garnie's services but that her mind wanders, and she spends her time concentrating on who is at the meeting rather than on Garnie's message. Yet, after Oakley expresses, during the car ride home from church, his desire for her to "believe," she considers the possibility that "[m]ay be it is finally time" (258). She has blamed herself, her affair with Honey Breeding, for Lulda's death, thus assuming some sort of cosmic justice system. She deliberates on the idea that she is a sinner and that God can "work in mysterious ways" (259), yet there is still a point at which she simply cannot buy fully into the ideology that gives rise to so much hypocrisy:

So it hit me, there on the hillside, This could be it, after all these years. It could be God speaking out through your fat little brother Garnie, and why not? Stranger things have happened. But because I am so contrary, Silvaney, another part of me said, Well, if this is the vessel God has picked to carry his message, then it is a mighty damn poor one! (259)

Ivy's wavering confidence in this system of salvation, particularly as it is represented by Garnie, is finally shattered when, in the name of "righteousness," Garnie condemns her pride and begins to remove his belt,

"with a furious face and drooling spit and panting out like a dog" (262). While Ivy assumes his plan is to whip her with his belt, his intentions are left to our imaginations since Oakley arrives in time to beat Garnie until he can only stumble back to his car.

The contradictory perspectives exhibited by Ivy in regard to Christianity are juxtaposed against a different type of transcendent experience. Ivy experiences a sort of spiritual life connected to nature and, significantly, *constructed* by Ivy. In these letters describing this alternative spirituality, it is as if Ivy believes in the Christian God but makes a conscious choice to exist outside of His kingdom or protection. Instead, she unexpectedly reaps spiritual fulfillment during moments of her daily life. Interestingly, several of those experiences involve ice or water, a substance which, like herself, is protean. Although in the form of frost, it can kill, this substance can also encompass awesome beauty and light and, at times, can work to create a sort of transcendental moment for Ivy. In contrast to her letters about formal religion, Ivy describes this experience in a letter to Mrs. Brown:

it [the ice] was so pretty that it like to have took my breth
away. . . . It was like I looked out on the whole world and I could
see for miles, off down the mountain here, but it was new. The

whole world was new, and it was like I was the onliest person that had ever looked upon it, and it was mine. It belonged to me. . . . My breath hung like clouds in the air and the sun come up then, it like to have blinded me. (18)

Rather than being molded into a form acceptable to the Christian God as Ivy understands him, here she "authorizes" her own transcendental experience.

Water in the form of rain has its effect on Ivy as well. When Ivy's father dies, she has difficulty getting to the Foxes' place because of the rain which causes her to slip on stones. However, on the day of the burying, the rain has a different effect on her: "It was the softest palest prettest morning. Everthing smelt so new because of the rain, it was like Genesis in the Bible" (41). Ivy's mother refuses to allow a prayer to be said over her dead husband, yet Ivy thinks, "Now . . . , Daddy is free to go" (42). She describes the fog surrounding her during the walk to the grave site thus:

We past by the smokehouse and then we was on our way throgh the orcherd it was like the ocean I think thogh I have never seed it, or it was like clouds, white clouds on every side. Somehow in the pale perly ligt these apple trees seemed the prettest I have ever seed them, and smelled the sweetest, and this on the day we

berried my daddy wich shuld of been the worstest in my life, but somehow it was not. It was not. (42)

The rain seems to have risen like Ivy's spirits have, producing an effect of comfort, perhaps even of elation. Later, when her brother Danny dies, Ivy writes to her deceased father about that funeral, including details about the effects of the rain: "I gess we will have to walk on up there now in the rain, it is not a hard rain relly but more of a drizzle, it makes everthing look like its covered with dimonds" (75). The last letter Ivy writes--as, we assume, she is making the transition from life to death--is written on the day of the last snow of the year. Again, she elatedly describes its beauty: "The whole round world is so bright with the sun, and the snow melts before my eyes, a hundred little rivers running down the yard and all of them shining" (314-15). These moments are given meaning by the letters in which Ivy recreates them. Through these letters, collected with other letters that would contradict their status as absolute Truth, Ivy's transcendental moments are individualized rather than made universal like Christian notions of salvation, which commonality would make them seem oppressive. Although she writes to recreate the moment for the reader and/or herself, she does not attempt to pull anyone into the moment with her like Garnie or Sam Russell Sage would insist upon doing in sermons about salvation. She does not even try to persuade the letter

recipient that the experience is one that she or he ought to repeat. Instead, she seems to describe it in particular and poetic detail in order to see it for herself from a distance--that is, from both within and outside herself.

Significantly, though, she does not encourage those around her to disregard Christian ideology. While she is glad for Garnie's wife when she stays behind with Geneva rather than continuing her oppressive life on the circuit with Garnie, she appreciates Oakley's spiritual life. Although she does not join him in his regard for the church, she observes the effect it has on him: "[H]e will close his eyes and bite his lips as if in prayer, swaying back and forth, it is clear that he is carried away, and after church he is absent-minded in the truck going home, and seems thinner to me somehow, and purified" (247). After his death, she goes so far as to say in a letter to Joli that "[i]f there is a heaven, your daddy is right there" (275). Exhibiting what some might call inconsistency, Ivy avoids positioning herself in a dialectic between "true" spirituality and that of the church. In doing so, she avoids the imposition of a new ideology, the nature of which would inevitably be oppressive.

Hill, in her argument that Ivy reconciles the sexual with the sacred, the creative with the maternal, suggests that she does so through a calling up of forgotten archetypes. She argues that Smith calls up images of Lilith, Mary Magdalene, and a synthesized Aphrodite and Demeter and then uses them to

undermine those archetypes embraced and imposed by the patriarchal structure, like that of the legendary King Arthur:

Smith's imagination, and particularly her linguistic sense, restlessly returns to root sources of cultural constructs that have to do with white/black, female/male, and human/animal. If the name Arthur does come from perhaps an animal and perhaps a female deity (the postulated root of Celtic *arto-* yields "bear" and "Arthur"), then all the boundaries drawn by patriarchal constructions--reified in heroic tales of such semihistorical figures as Arthur--are breached. (114)

Hill builds a convincing argument that these "unorthodox" archetypes, defined as such by the patriarchy, subvert the power and the control of the "orthodox" ones. Smith does employ figures not only from Biblical sources but also from mountain/Celtic sources. Yet Hill's emphasis on the archetype as an inescapable source of truth is troubling. She even goes so far as to suggest "that one reason this [the reconciliation of the father and the animal through Whitebear Whittington] feels so satisfying is that Smith's unerring linguistic sense has rediscovered an ancient connection" (114). The move that Hill lauds seems a positive one since it provides a way for Ivy to reconcile her creative self with her maternal self, something that is not possible within the patriarchal

system, yet Hill's suggestion is that the problem lies in society's ignoring the archetype of the "powerful goddess figures" (xix). This suggestion seems to imply that humanity would not have the problems of an oppressive power structure if we could only recognize and acknowledge all, rather than only some, of the archetypes etched into our psyches. This implication also necessarily carries with it, then, the notion of a fixed and universal truth, inherent in the ancient archetypes. However, what Ivy does is more complex than simply rejecting patriarchal Christian myths and embracing those of the powerful goddess. She juxtaposes letters, some of which express regard for the Christian God as an authority to be feared, others of which position Him as an adversary whom she has the power to reject, and still others of which ignore Him as a source of transcendental experience. In combining these conflicting positions, she constructs a world in which she is not enclosed within the fixed system of traditional Christian ideology, or the fixed systems predicated by the notion of a universal psyche, but in which she also has the freedom to experience a variety of spiritually transcendent moments. Ivy's spiritual perspective encompasses many things, even contradictory notions.

Just as Ivy's letters reveal a spiritually complex world, they also reflect a world in which the role of the patriarchal structure is inadequate, though it affects Ivy significantly. In her family, consistent with her culture, the land is

handed from male to male so that even though Ivy and her mother and sisters work the land to survive, it is assumed that her oldest brother Victor will inherit it (36). Similarly, Mister Castle, Ivy's appropriately named maternal grandfather, decides that since his daughter is marrying without his approval, she will be cut off from all of the family wealth and will be deprived of any of the advantages of ties with her family. Yet when Maud dies, rather than allowing her to be buried next to her husband on Blue Star Mountain, her father claims her body, taking it back to Rich Valley to be placed in his family's burial plot. Her own children have no say in the matter. Ivy's sister Beulah later experiences the oppressive nature of a patriarchal society as well, such as after the birth of her second son when she asks Doctor Gray to do something to "fix" her so she will not have any more children. As Ivy writes, "[B]ut he said No mam, I can not, in a definite Northern voice" (129).

Throughout the novel, Ivy has mixed reactions to the patriarchy. Her assumptions include, in some letters, an acceptance that being male is an advantage in such a society; for example, she does not question, as a young girl, Victor's inheritance of the land. On the other hand, there are some letters in which she expresses some regret about the discrepancy in the treatment of the sexes. After watching the boys and men on the river preparing to take the logs down to Kentucky, she writes to Silvaney, "I wuld give anything to be one of

them boys and ride the rafts down to Kentucky on the great spring tide! . . . I will say I have even thought of wearing jeans and a boys shirt and shoes and trying to sneak along, but Momma and Geneva would have a fit" (86). She admits that she could never get away with it since her body has begun to change from a girl's to that of a woman. Inhibited by her blossoming and the resulting stares of the men and boys of Majestic, she expresses her wish to be small and plain like Jane Eyre, but "instead I am getting a bosom like Beulah, this is what they star at threw my dress" (80).

However, in contrast to this attitude of submission, Ivy also writes letters expressing her refusal to accept the demands of the patriarchy. She refuses to marry Lonnie Rash even though it is known she has had sex with him, becoming "ruined" (109). Instead, having become pregnant as a result of the affair, she moves to Diamond Fork to live with Beulah. Later, when Oakley claims that she is "his girl" and should not be seeing Franklin Ransom, she writes Ethel about the incident, stating that the idea is ridiculous because "I am not anybody's girl, Ethel" (154). Even though she sees Ransom and enjoys his attention and his wild lifestyle, she does not allow him to control her. She writes Silvaney of their last time together, explaining that he urged her to let him take her to Memphis, and when she refused, he attempted to rape her. She tells Silvaney that she stopped him, however, by asserting herself: "I am not

your baby, I said" (166). Finally, after her marriage to Oakley, Ivy and her family, not Victor, take over the Rowe family house and land and begin to farm again. Informing her son Danny Ray of her determination to preserve the land, Ivy describes an incident in which she stood pointing "Oakley's old thirty-ought-six" (307) at the man on the bulldozer who had come representing the Peabody Coal Company.

Not only does Ivy resist being controlled by the patriarchal system, but her letters also exhibit a blurring of the very boundaries of gender. She describes women who exhibit "masculine" characteristics, such as "Momma [who] stood too with her face as hard as a man's face" (41) and Molly who has "a square hand like a man's" (304), and men who appear "feminine," like Revel who once dressed up like an old woman to avoid the wrath of the sheriff (39). Even more significantly, Ivy describes in a letter to Silvaney her merging with Honey Breeding, whose name surely suggests his gender blurring, in a scene in which the boundaries of their genders have no meaning: "But I am as big and strong as he is, and I toppled him into the starry flowers where we laid face to face and leg to leg and toe to toe. He is just the same size as me. In fact I think he is me, and I am him, and it will be so forever and ever" (230). Interestingly, Honey's existence seems to depend upon Ivy in a way that suggests that he is Ivy, that he is a figure constructed from her imagination. She writes again to

Silvaney, "Sometimes now when I think of Honey Breeding, it is almost like I made him up out of thin air because I needed him so bad" (247). Yet something happens to Ivy in recognizing this part of herself that is Honey Breeding. She is surprised at herself for finally making it up to the top of Blue Star Mountain at the urging of Honey, but "[a]ll of a sudden I thought, I could of climbed up here by myself, anytime! But I had not. I remembered as girls how you and me would beg to go hunting on the mountain, Silvaney, but they said, That is for boys. . . . And I had got up there myself at long last with a man it is true, but not a man like any I had ever seen before in all my life" (232-33). In some way, rather than requiring the companionship of a man to climb to this height, Ivy has accomplished it by acquiring (and writing) herself as a companion, a self who is not limited to one gender but encompasses both.

In addition to the blurring of gender boundaries, Ivy's letters question the "naturalness" of compulsory heterosexuality. Although Fair and Tender Ladies deals with this issue only cursorily in comparison with a novel like The Color Purple, the issue is still addressed. The first transgression of compulsory heterosexuality that Ivy writes about involves Miss Gertrude Torrington. She writes of her experience with her teacher and friend in a letter to Silvaney. Seemingly representing Christian principle, Miss Torrington tells Ivy, "I feel that God has sent me here to save you Ivy, to offer you a life which will enable

you to use your gifts to his glory" (100). She tells Ivy that she should drop her "backward customs" (99) and Lonnie Rash as well. Ivy is hesitant to give herself over to Miss Torrington because, as she tells Silvaney, "It was like she owned me" (104). Yet Ivy expresses some excitement as a result of Miss Torrington's advances toward her. Although she panics when Miss Torrington kisses the back of her neck during a drawing lesson, jumping up and upsetting the table, flinging "the charcoal drawing pencil across the room as hard as ever I could" (105), she is also not entirely displeased with her teacher's advances. She writes Silvaney of meeting Lonnie, who was waiting for her in the hall: "What's the matter Ivy? You are shaking, Lonnie said, and I said, I think I am getting a cold, but the fact is that I was real excited. I was real excited from the drawing lesson and from what Miss Torrington had done, which was awful" (106).

Ivy's labeling Miss Torrington's actions as "awful," though, does not keep her from future contact with her teacher. In Ivy's later life, when she is married to Oakley and living back at Sugar Fork, she writes letters of gratitude to Miss Torrington for Christmas boxes she sends which are filled with clothes and books for Ivy's children. By this point, Ivy has reconciled herself to having a distant friendship with Miss Torrington; she seems to have learned the validity of her teacher's statement that "there are kinds and kinds of love" (114).

Further, the sexual tension she experienced with Miss Torrington has a lasting impact on her. Her teacher's kiss is one of the memories which flows through Ivy's final expressions in her last letter: "I see Miss Torrington so severe her kiss like fire on the back of my neck yet first born of all my kisses all my life" (316)—this said even though Ivy's first kiss was with Oakley.

Ivy's attitude toward homosexuality wavers, then, between acceptance and discomfort. She advises her daughter, after Joli divorces her husband, who she has discovered is homosexual, not to take any money from his mother so that she will not be " beholden " to her: "I can see her feeling guilty since he has run off to California with that person. I guess she is embarrassed too, I would be!" (281). She reveals clearly in this letter her inhibitions about a sexuality that falls outside the patriarchal system's definition of "normal." But one letter earlier, she has described "Taylor Three's" sexual preference as "his nature" (279). She has explained that "[t]he true nature will come whether or no, we have all got a true nature and we can't hide it, it will pop out when you least expect it" (280). This passage suggests that Ivy views homosexuality as "natural" in the sense that a person with this preference is only following his or her "true nature."¹ Yet, the juxtaposition of letters revealing her conflicting

¹Ivy's discussion of "true nature"—which she suggests is exhibited in blocks of wood and in people—might seem to imply that Ivy believes in an essential self. However, based on her own statement that "I have been so many people" (266) and her refusal to limit the roles of others, I do not think Ivy implies an unchanging or fixed self. Otherwise, "Taylor Three" might become trapped in a

feelings about the issue makes it impossible to determine any one stance on the issue as hers.

Ivy's letters do reveal, though, based on her reaction to the limits of Christianity and patriarchal standards, that she strains against the moral demands of both. The "firey hand" becomes, after she misses being saved at Sam Russell Sage's meeting, Lonnie Rash's hand under her clothes (98), and she refuses to marry him even after she has been "compromised" (113). Later, she gives birth to his daughter, Joli, and Lonnie dies in the war, never having known about the baby. Before Lonnie goes to war, Ivy decides to refrain from telling him she will not marry him when he returns. She asks Silvaney, "Must we always tell the truth, even if it hurts another very much? So I bit my tonge. . . . It is either awful or grown up, I am not sure which" (113).

Similarly, after hearing of Lonnie's death in the war, she later writes his sister that "yes I did love your brother very much, and so I am real sorry to hear of his death in France" (142). She reconsiders her feelings for him, again in a letter to Silvaney: "I feel like I did love him, though I did not" (143). Here she questions the very idea of truth as an unchanging or inherently good thing.

compulsory homosexuality, or, more likely, he would be told that his "natural" sexual preference is women and that in engaging in a homosexual relationship, he is going *against* his "true self." Rather, Ivy seems to be suggesting that Joli not give in to the pressures of ideology, the pressure to define people according to a limited and imposing system.

Perhaps, she suggests, truth is not always good, and perhaps truth can even be two contradictory things at once.

Indeed, her attitude throughout exhibits a tendency to treat truth as relative. For example, Ivy encourages her sister Ethel in her marriage to Stoney Branham, even though he is twenty-five years older than Ethel and many people have expressed their disapproval: "So my advice is, hold your head up high, Ethel, and shut your ears. For people will forget it soon enough" (141). In regard to Beulah's social aspirations of rising above her background, Ivy worries that she will not be satisfied with what she might get, stating, "I am glad I am ruint, and don't have to worry over such as that" (160). Although she is devoted to Joli such that ultimately she cannot continue seeing Franklin Ransom, who has no regard for her being a mother, she eventually leaves all her children behind and follows Honey Breeding up the mountain. Gone for who knows how long, she says that "I would have stayed right there with him if he hadn't of made me leave, and that's a fact" (236). Though she later bears the guilt of LuIda's death as, she believes, the punishment for her actions, she feels from the beginning of the talk about Honey Breeding that something will happen when he comes. She writes Silvaney, "I can't do no different, either, I swear it" (211). Her notions of "truth" and morality lie closer, then, to a system of relativity and causality than to one of universality. She reacts to a situation

when it arises rather than projecting truth as an absolute that precedes every situation.

Not surprisingly, in light of patriarchy's moral demands on mothers, Ivy's representation of the creative/maternal split has caught the attention of critics.

Kearns explains that

Ivy . . . chooses domestic life over the necessarily more autonomous life of the self-defined artist, but she does so reluctantly and with full recognition of what she is forfeiting to her maternity. . . . Her illusion has been that she may make a choice between domesticity and intellectuality—between not becoming an artist and becoming one. Her pregnancy dispels the illusion of clarity, for while she resigns herself to poverty, a comparatively rural life, and a compromised education, she does not abandon her artistic impulses. In fact she discovers that the very life she chooses, beginning with her unborn child and continuing through a long marriage and many more children and grandchildren, is the renewable source of her art. (188)

As Kearns suggests, Ivy is able to reconcile, through her life and through her letters, the creative with the maternal.

It does, however, appear at times that Ivy has sacrificed everything for motherhood. Lucinda MacKethan notes, for instance, Ivy's reaction to her first pregnancy: "Ivy's woman's body, her world of poverty and ignorance, her dreams, and a perfectly romantic love all combine to make a prison in which daughter must become mother, trapped in the child she has created, herself held by what her womb holds" (106). And yet she welcomes motherhood when it arrives; when Joli is born, she says that "all the poems I ever knew raced through my head, for she was the prettiest thing I have ever seen" (144). In addition to her giving up Franklin Ransom, in some measure for Joli, she later confines herself to the farm, writing Silvaney that "[a] woman just can't go off and leave so many children" (193). Her letter to Silvaney about her experience with Honey seems to suggest a rejection of her life as a mother and wife at first, but in the following letter, we learn that she has returned to the farm and picked up where she left off, apparently better off in some way for having made the excursion. After Oakley dies, she writes Silvaney that she is refusing to have her nephew, Corey, or Martha's little boy come and stay with her since

I can read every book that John O'Hara ever wrote.

I can make up my own life now whichever way I want to,
it is like I am a girl again, for I am not beholden to a soul.

I can act like a crazy old woman if I want to which I do.

(278)

In the letter to Joli that follows, however, she tells her daughter to "[s]end him on" (278), referring to her grandson, David, because Joli is divorcing her husband and going back to school. Ivy does not chide Joli for not taking care of her own son but instead claims that having him around will keep her young. Ivy seems to believe her words to Ethel that "[c]hildren will swell up your heart" (206), and in taking care of David for Joli, she is allowing her daughter the chance she believes she herself never had, the chance to become a writer.

While Ivy has consciously devoted herself to raising children and preserving something of her mountain heritage, her refusal to embrace completely Christian and patriarchal ideologies has kept her from denying her creativity. With respect to divorce, although she suggests to Maudy that she reconsider divorcing her husband just because he "looked funny" (301), she writes Joli that she should not feel bad about divorcing Taylor Cunningham the Third since divorce is "the wave of the future it seems to me! And if people could of done it way back when--if they had of known they could do it, I mean--why there would be a lot of them divorced today instead of just crazy" (279). Likewise, her affair with Honey Breeding, in spite of the pressure of moral standards against such a thing, and her return home result from her

recognition that she cannot survive as only a mother but that she is both an artist—craving both the telling and the hearing of stories—*and* a mother.

Complementary to the patriarchal system, the ideology of capitalism is another strong influence on Ivy's world as well, and her letters reveal the contradictions between capitalist ideals and the negative effects of such a system. Inside her mountain community, capitalism is clearly at work, as mule traders employ their wily strategies, the Branhams run their general store, and Granny Rowe takes her herbs to town to sell. Yet there is, in Ivy's early letters, a sense of community that transcends the creed of moneymaking. For example, Ivy writes that knowing the Rows have no money, Doc Trout gives them little Danny's medicine "free of charge" (55) when the boy's health begins to decline rapidly and that when Ivy's brother Babe is killed, Early Cook donates a coffin to the Rowe family for Babe's burial.

Living in the early 1900's, Ivy's mountain community is largely separate from the world outside it. Miss Torrington is an example of an outsider whose perspective is so different from that of the Appalachian folk that she cannot appreciate their values and calls their ways "backward" (99). Ivy soon comes to know more fully the effects of capitalism of the "outside world," however. When Ivy moves to the mining town of Diamond Fork to live with Beulah and Curtis, her letters reveal her discovery that what looks like paradise is in fact a

tiny microcosm of the oppressive class system of capitalistic society. She writes Silvaney, "You can tell how important somebody is by how far up on Company Hill they live" (131). At the top of the hill lives the superintendent of the company, and Ivy and her sister's family live just below "Silk Stocking Row which is very grand" (133). In another holler entirely live the African-Americans, or "the colored people" (133), and in yet another, the "other foreigners" (133). Ivy's references to these people are simplemindedly racist, as when she calls the African-Americans, to whom this is her first exposure, "niggers" (183). Yet by the end of her stay at Diamond Fork, she has come to realize, at least, that the white people in the town "are so bad off themselves that they got to have somebody else to look down on, they have got to believe that there is somebody, someplace, lower than them. This is why they hate niggers so bad, in my opinion" (183).

Once Ivy moves back to the farm at Sugar Fork, she sees further the effects of capitalist ideology, the material costs of which have become more prevalent there. Although coal mining has provided jobs for many people, it has done irreparable damage to the land that is those people's home. Having encouraged her mother to sell the mineral rights to their land to John Reno before her mother died, Ivy now sees that it was a mistake. Further, she is upset by the lengths coal companies will go to for a minimal amount of coal.

She explains in a letter to her son Danny Ray the effects of the augering that has been done on the mountain. Men have died of lung problems and from working in the mines or been injured in accidents in the mines; the creeks, along with houses and roads, have begun to flood; and many of those who once found work with the coal companies have been replaced by machines and left in poverty. In addition to the destructive effects of coal mining, the mountain area has been ruined by lumbering. Ivy writes Danny Ray, "Everybody has took everything out of here now--first the trees, then the coal, then the children. We have been robbed and left for dead" (296). Capitalist ideology's effect on those children is the desire to be "bigger and better." The material possessions that are the supposed reward for engaging in the activities necessary for capitalism to "pay off" seem to many young people like paradise compared to the material poverty of the mountain folk. For instance, Ivy's daughter Maudy enters her daughter in beauty pageants to prove that she has risen in status. Danny Ray is a lawyer and is on the verge of becoming, as Ivy puts it, "a fat cat" (295) by becoming a Republican politician. Joli marries into Virginia aristocracy when she weds Taylor Cunningham the Third, and from the first time Ivy meets him, she does not trust him to make Joli happy. In these later letters, Ivy mourns the loss of all the young people in the community: "Every one that turns sixteen, before you know it, is out and gone. They have lit out

for Detroit or someplace else, you can't blame them, they is just not a thing for them to do here" (297).

Ivy's letters reveal, then, that capitalism's moving into the Appalachian country has transformed it from a place where once people stayed and married and worked, depending on the other members of the community to help perpetuate the survival of the community, to a place where work is not to be found and where one must look after oneself since the community is not made up of only mountain folk anymore but mountain folk mixed with people who have found that the mountain country is a good place to "make a buck." For instance, she writes that Ethel's store, Branham's, is sold just in time since a new "Magic Mart is putting a big dent in her business" (283). Ivy never embraces the ideology of capitalism as a "saving" system by which everybody can improve him or herself. The individualism that is a consequence of such a system is not something that appeals to her, and money itself does not seem to be a reward she seeks. It is the land, the life, the people of her home that are important to her. On the other hand, Ivy does not refuse all the technology that arises out of "progress," as she does own a radio and a telephone. Nancy C. Parrish notes that Smith does not succumb to the temptation to treat the old ways as simply romantic. She states that "[m]ountain life has richness and strength but," quoting Smith, "[a]t the same time you had babies dying right and

left, and you had people who were poor and miserable" (Parrish 44).² In a letter to Silvaney, Ivy even describes "rural electrification" as a grand moment: "[L]o and behold, all up and down the bottom, lights came on! And you can see them shining on the lower slopes of Bethel Mountain, too, they twinkle like stars" (191). Ivy's life includes, finally, elements of both capitalistic "progress" and Appalachian folk life as she continually traverses between opposed systems of value.

One ideology that does maintain a strong hold on Ivy, however, is that of romance. Its influence is apparent in Ivy's letters throughout the novel. From her delight in stories of Whitebear Whittington to her enjoyment of reading Raintree County, Ivy expresses a craving for romance. In her letter responding to Joli's own novel, in which the characters "just think an awful lot" (291), Ivy suggests, "I think you could of used more of a love interest" (291). From the beginning, Ivy plans to write about love: "I take a intrest in Love because I want to be in Love one day and write poems about it, do you? But I do not want to have a lot of babys thogh and get tittys as big as the moon" (7). She maintains that idealized notion of romance, revelling in the irrational love of Mr. Brown

²Anne Goodwyn Jones says of Smith, "[she] refuses to sentimentalize the loss, to offer a simplistic image of organic mountain life to counter the polyester present. For one thing, that 'organic life' is filled with brutality, tragedy, and loss, with death and betrayal, and just plain petty meanness and lies. But there is also . . . the barely utterable beauty of the natural world" (267).

for her teacher, Mrs. Brown, and enjoying the drama of being involved with Lonnie Rash even though she does not really love him.

Many of Ivy's own letters, in fact, take on the tone of romantic literature. When she meets Honey Breeding, although he seems to be real enough that the rest of the family sees him, too, his image for Ivy is at least partially constructed by her after the romantic model of such characters as Whitebear Whittington and Lochinvar. She writes to Silvaney, "Honey Breeding did not seem quite real. He seemed more like a woods creature fetched up somehow from the forest, created out of fancy, on a whim. Honey Breeding seemed like a man that I had made up in the cool dark springhouse, like a man I had immagined until he came true" (213). He reminds her of something, she claims, from the first time she sees him, and that something is the romantic image she has harbored all along garnered from the poems and stories she has read and heard. That something becomes "a poem" (232); as she explains, "It was coming back to me then, or part of it. I said, Let us be--something--of soul, as earth lies bare to heaven above, how is it under our control, to love or not to love?" (232). She describes Honey as being like Lochinvar whose "hair wuld stand out around his face like the rays of the sun" (53); when Honey first appears to her, "the sun was a blaze behind his head. . . . The sun shot out in rays behind his head" (212). Even though Honey tells her to "quit that talking about love. . . . It aint

nothing in it" (232), Ivy insists on Honey's fulfillment of a need she has, a need for romance.

Here we see her creativity fed by the romance of the stories she tells and is told. On Old Christmas, celebrated on January 5th rather than on the traditional December 25th, the Cline sisters come through the snow to the Rowe place to tell stories as they have always done. Ivy is the first to request a story since "the only way I could keep from running back out in the snow was to hear a story" (26). This element of Ivy's salvation is complicated because many of the stories she loves are romantic stories, such as that of Whitebear Whittington, who is as white as the snow. Not surprisingly, then, her attraction to Honey Breeding is his romantic nature. At a point when Ivy has been "sink[ing] into this soft warm darkness" (205) that it seems will eventually become insanity, she explains that she "could not afford to worry that she [Martha] would tell Oakley who I had gone off with" (222). Ivy writes that she could not have not gone with Honey. For her sanity, she needs the experience of escaping her life into a life of fantasy that she herself has constructed according to the conventions of romance literature. And during this time with Honey, stories are a major element of her salvation.

Yet, she also exhibits an overt awareness that the ideal romantic love does not match up with the world as she experiences it. She explains in a letter

to Beulah that she cannot marry Lonnie because "I would end up acting like Emma Bovary which was awful, but I can see why she did it, I know I would do it too" (111). Later, after her adventure with Honey, she returns, at Honey's bidding, to Oakley, who is not of Honey's ilk. Even as a young girl, Ivy writes Molly that Oakley is "a serious boy and he is not bad looking nether, but he is not Lochinvar" (53). Conversely, she later writes Silvaney that as she desperately waited for Oakley to come out of the collapsed mine shaft, what she saw when he appeared was Oakley "[I]imping and holding his arm funny, black-faced--still I could tell him, by the straight forward shock of his hair and his square shoulders, the way he held himself" (174). Although Oakley lacks the luminescence of Ivy's romantic lover, he is the one to whom she chooses to commit, and he is the one whose loss she mourns. Ivy does not, then, maintain a constant view of the world from a romantic perspective, but there is a balance achieved through her pursuit of romantic ideals and her engagement in the hardships of her life. She avoids the pitfall of setting up a dialectic between the two. Instead, they are both part of her protean world.

Ivy's self is protean in that it is constantly moving, reshaping, impossible to define by any one particular ideology. Rather than rejecting the ideologies that have threatened to trap her and formulating her own position from which to battle them, Ivy shifts in and out of those oppressive ideologies, one moment

employing their terms to define her circumstances and the next moment undermining those very terms. One can see the increasing complexity of that self by looking at Ivy's initial definition of her self to her pen pal Hanneke: "I am a girl 12 years old very pretty I have very long hair and eight brothers and sisters and my Mother and my Father, he is ill. . . . I want to be a famous writer when I grow up, I will write of Love" (14). This description compared with the sense of her self that Ivy conveys in her last letter reveals that, as Ivy has written, she has been so many people: "I used to think I would be a writer. I thought then I would write of love (Ha!) but how little we know, we spend our years as a tale that is told I have spent my years so. I never became a writer at all. Instead I have loved, and loved, and loved. I am fair worn out with it" (316). Interestingly, this letter is written as the last snow is melting, and although "[t]he Ice Queen walks in beauty like the night of shooting stars and cloudless skies" (316), "[t]he ice is melting" (316). Like Ivy's identity, made up of multiple selves, the snow melts, "a hundred little rivers [run] down the yard and all of them shining" (315).

As I have suggested throughout, the role of the letter in creating Ivy's protean self is all-important. First, as we have seen, it serves as a form in which Ivy can mirror a fluctuating and fragmented self. Secondly, Ivy's letters are necessary for her reconciliation of the creative with the maternal. Without

them she most likely would have failed to encompass the creative self in her multiple identity since her choice of the maternal makes her life as a "real" writer, autonomous and "educated," in the conventional sense of the word, impossible. This reconciliation of Ivy's many identities, however, must be seen as *integrated* and not *unified*. MacKethan states that Ivy and Celie, from The Color Purple, "achieve reintegrations which restore their worlds, inner and outer, to wholeness" (102). However, Ivy and, as I will argue in the next chapter, Celie do not achieve this reintegration at the expense of the deconstruction of their worlds. Neither becomes what we would call a unified character. Even at the end of Fair and Tender Ladies, Ivy considers herself a mother rather than a writer, considering a writer to be something other than a storyteller and letterwriter. Yet in her stories, told in her letters, she has constructed a self that can pair Christian dogma with mountain/Celtic mythologies and nature-worship; some acceptance of patriarchal standards with, on many occasions, a disregard for those very standards; assimilation into a capitalist world with simultaneous subversion of capitalist principles; a view of the world as both romantic and harsh; and practice of both the artistic and the maternal.

One way Ivy accomplishes this feat of integration is in her choice of Silvaney as a recipient of her letters. The letters to Silvaney include

information that Ivy feels she can send only to Silvaney, who is in a home for the mentally ill for a short time but, early in the novel, dies in a fire. While all of her letters serve as a way for Ivy to see and create her self, her letters to Silvaney are particularly important. Often she can relate to Silvaney what she cannot tell anyone else:

O Silvaney,

I feel I am bursting with news but I can not tell it to a sole, I have no one to talk to. . . . Oh Silvaney my love and my hart, I can talk to you for you do not understand, I can write you this letter too and tell you all the deep things, the things in my hart. . . . And it is like you are a part of me Silvaney, in some way. So I can tell you things I would not tell another sole. (96-97)

Having established Silvaney as the recipient of her most intimate letters, Ivy has created a self that can exist in her otherwise harshly practical life. As MacKethan states, "Silvaney exists forcefully for Ivy as the part of herself who listens but has no voice, who lives on stories but has none of her own. In writing to Silvaney, Ivy connects voice and listener, teller and tale; in making these connections, she creates a sustaining, integrated image of herself" (108).³

³Kearns states, "Silvaney is a conduit to carry away madness, the sacrificial figure who remains necessary for the female artist to survive. Thus exorcised, Ivy may accommodate the world without going mad, unlike her mother Maude" (190). Ivy needs a way, however, not only to objectify this self

In establishing Silvaney as a character from a story in her imagination and as a silent listener in her letters, Ivy's letters to Silvaney not only allow Ivy to exist as Silvaney, "running wildly, silently, through the hills" (MacKethan 107), but also mirror a part of her self she could not otherwise see, the self who has refused to give herself to God and has responded with excitement to Miss Torrington's kiss.

A third effect of Ivy's letterwriting is that her stories remain one person's stories rather than what would conventionally be called "history." Consistent with her deconstruction of the ideologies that impinge upon her, Ivy keeps from recapitulating this impingement by refusing to set into ideological order the story of her own life. While she generalizes from time to time during the telling of her stories ("we have all got a true nature and we cant hide it" {280}), she will not pose as an authority through whom others may learn the truth of human existence. This position is well explained by Smith's description of her own attitude: "You just have to take all these accounts of the way it was and just kind of hope for the best, which is why I would really always prefer to call what I do *fiction*. . . . I think I have a better chance of being *true* if I call it *fiction*" (Parrish 44). Ivy's decision to burn the letters she has written to Silvaney and kept in a chest illustrates this necessary avoidance of producing

but also to encompass it in her overall identity. Through her letters, Ivy is able to hold on to this self rather than losing it entirely, viewing it in the mirror of her letters and encompassing it in her identity.

"The Word," a permanent and imposing construct. In a letter to Joli, Ivy explains that even though she has written to Sylvaney all these years, she has known she was dead, but she emphasizes that the *writing* of those letters has been significant. Nevertheless, she describes her subsequent burning of these letters with delight: "With every one I burned, my soul grew lighter, lighter as if it rose too with the smoke" (314). Since the burning of the letters seems so liberating for Ivy, it seems to me that the existence of the letters, in which Ivy has continually defined her life, her self, is a trap. The burning of the letters frees her from written definition of that self. Like smoke or water, her identity must be one of a material that cannot be fixed in any particular shape or form. Here in these last two letters, she has preserved that protean quality.

Through her letters, Ivy has both reconciled and fragmented herself. In the act of writing, she has exploited the creativity that by the standards of the patriarchal system might have been denied her in her choice of motherhood. In these letters, however, she represents a self that is fragmented, that is "so many people." Her fragmented identity allows her to subvert the limiting definitions imposed by dominant ideologies and to move fluidly between, into, and beyond the boundaries of these ideologies. It is through Ivy's movement in this protean state that she ultimately deconstructs these ideologies and is liberated.

Chapter 3

The Construction of the Fragmented Self

in Alice Walker's The Color Purple

She say, Here, take this mirror and go look at yourself down there, I bet you never seen it, have you?

.....
I stand there with the mirror.

She say, What, too shame even to go off and look at yourself?

Celie in Alice Walker's The Color Purple

Celie's inhibitions about looking at herself, upon Shug's suggestion, reveal much about the effects of the ideologies working on her in Alice Walker's The Color Purple. These inhibitions result from her low self-esteem, the product of her having been shaped by the ideologies of patriarchal dominance, including compulsory heterosexuality and racial and gender difference. Except for the opening two sentences, the novel is strictly epistolary in form, and although we ultimately have access to the letters from Celie's sister Nettie to Celie, we receive no direct description of Celie except from Celie herself, in her relation of what others say about her and in her own description of herself. In these descriptions, Celie moves from a view of herself

as ugly and worthless to a view of herself as God itself, part of the beauty of all things. Through her letters, Celie seeks and finds a sense of her self. In the early letters, she is looking for the kind of self she supposes, based on her observations and experiences, that she is: a unified, definable individual. She uses her limited knowledge of how the world works to try and understand that identity, and by the standards of dominant ideologies, she *is* ugly and worthless except that she can be used for domestic work and for sex. However, as the novel progresses, Celie comes into a new understanding of her self that depends upon a new understanding of the world. She comes to see the fallibility of the ideologies that have previously shaped her perception of her self and the world and grasps, ultimately, the notion of a world for which boundaries are arbitrary constructs which can and should be deconstructed and, in pencil rather than in ink, be reconstructed if necessary. This transformation of Celie's self-perception takes place as a result of her use of the letter as a mirror.

Lacan's concept of "the mirror stage" is helpful in exploring how the letter works for Celie. Although we would assume that Celie has already passed through the mirror stage as it occurs in childhood, the result of which would be that she recognizes herself as a being distinct from the (m)other (Grosz 32), Celie has, at fourteen years of age, a need for a stronger sense of

self. This need is evident in her decision to write to God. She wants not only to be aware of herself but to be able to *see* her self more objectively than she has been able to do without writing. Similar to journal writing, her letters to God will not be physically sent. She does seem to desire some response from God, but when she doesn't receive that response in the form of a direct sign as she has requested, she still continues to write. As Lacan explains, the mirror stage allows one to determine a self, to call oneself "I." Using language to fill the gap between the self and the self-as-object which is seen in the mirror (or in Celie's case, the letter), one may refer to oneself as "I" (Lacan 2). Writing allows Celie the chance to say "I," thus exploring her self-as-object. Of course, since the image in the mirror is socially regulated, Celie sees herself as others have defined her, at least in the beginning, and it is the work of Shug and Nettie in helping build a more positive self-image for Celie that causes her to question the image she has been seeing in the mirror/letter. It is this questioning that ultimately leads her to examine all the boundaries she has considered natural and to deconstruct those boundaries.

In Daniel W. Ross's analysis of Celie's transformation, he concludes that Celie's idea of self develops from the point of a *fragmented* identity to that of a *unified* one. He argues that Celie's experience of "the mirror stage" allows her a necessary "misrecognition" (74) of herself which makes it possible for her to

attain selfhood. Although he acknowledges the deceptiveness of the whole or unified image reflected in the mirror, he claims that "[t]he dangers of pursuing an illusory wholeness of selfhood are dwarfed by those of eliding the mirror stage. . . . Without a positive sense of him/herself as a body, and without an imago to replace the parental one, the child who does not pass through the mirror stage is left without an awareness of externality or otherness" (74). Ross notes Lacan's emphasis on this concept of "otherness" as necessary to one's ability to meet "life's demands" (74). However, Ross's argument assumes that in order to say "I," one must be able to view oneself as a unified whole. The mirror stage does initiate a child's experience as a being separated from those around her/him, yet, as Ross notes, the image reflected in the mirror creates "only an illusion of whole selfhood, when in fact the subject is always split" (73).

I would agree with Ross in his claim that Celie lacks a sufficient concept of self in the beginning of the novel, but I would argue that her development is not a transition from a fragmented self to a unified self. Rather it is the opposite: her concept of self changes from that of a self unified according to the definition of an ostensibly coherent ideology, within which subjects must be defined and categorized according to the system for the survival of the system, to that of a fragmented self. By fragmented, I do not mean, as Ross does, a

body whose physical parts do not seem to be attached together to make up an entity. As I stated before, Celie's having passed through the mirror stage already has determined her ability to see herself as separate from those around her, as we can see in her using the pronoun "I" to refer to herself. Although she is motivated by the need to explore the self she refers to as "I," she posits her self as a separate entity from the (m)other from the first letter, which she begins with the pronoun "I." It is true that the subjectivity resulting from the use of this pronoun is only imaginary, being necessary for her to speak/write, and thus this subjectivity is deceptive. Yet Celie's recognition of her fragmented identity, through a deconstruction that reveals various identities whose characteristics may very well contradict one another and which may change, as well, is a recognition of that deceptiveness. Thus, while Ross argues that it is necessary for Celie's self to become unified in order for her to be liberated, the opposite is true. Celie must recognize the fragmentation and fluctuation of her self in order to find that liberation.¹

¹ Jane Flax discusses the problems within psychoanalytic theory of developing an adequate concept of subjectivity. She notes the discrepancy between the types of self and subjectivity defined by psychoanalytic theorists and the resistance of such definitions by postmodernists. Flax is ambivalent toward post-modernism's function as a tool for political liberation. Defending psychoanalytic definitions of subjectivity, she states the necessity of a concept of a "core" self to a person's mental health, explaining that "a sense of continuity or 'going on being' is so much a part of the core self that it becomes a taken-for-granted background. Persons who have a core self find the experiences of those who lack or have lacked it almost unimaginable" (219). However, she differentiates between the concepts of the "unitary" and the "core" self. Like postmodernists, she acknowledges the problems inherent in the concept of the "unitary" self as being related directly to oppressive, "traditional, Western conceptions of self and masculinity" (218). I suggest that Celie's calling herself "I" is the act of a person with a "core" self. Even in the worst of circumstances, Celie is able to function without losing her sense

Like Ross, Charles Proudfit, in "Celie's Search for Identity: A Psychoanalytic Developmental Reading of Alice Walker's The Color Purple," argues that as a result of her experiences and her responses to those experiences, Celie is able to achieve a "True Self," or "an autonomous and stable sense of self" (27). Unlike Ross, Proudfit does not overtly define this stability as unified instead of fragmented; rather, he characterizes it as an independence from the (m)other following the necessary development during a dependent relationship, suggesting that she never completes this process with her biological mother because of her mother's emotional breakdown when Celie is quite young and finally because of her mother's death. He focuses on Shug's role as surrogate "good enough mother" (26) in her allowing Celie to pass through necessary stages of psychological development that were denied her during childhood. While offering a helpful analysis of the mother-daughter relationship between Shug and Celie, Proudfit does not address the complexities of the process Celie is experiencing--for example, the fact that, while between the two women, Shug serves primarily as the mother figure, both women serve in the roles of mother and child at various times (Celie describes her first sexual encounter with Shug this way: "Then I feels

that she is Celie. However, what she learns through her letterwriting is that Celie is a complex combination of subject positions, none of which can be defined coherently by a system that is itself unified and coherent.

something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth" {118}). Secondly, although he defines extensively Winnicott's concept of the "False Self," he defines the "True Self" only as a "stable and authentic sense of self" (31). Proudfit's argument asserts that Celie develops beyond her "False Self," an artificial self used as a defense mechanism to protect her "True Self," to a realization of her "True Self." There are some similarities between this argument and my own, yet Proudfit does not address the question of whether the "True Self" is unified or fragmented or the importance attached to that issue. It is surprising that he does not elaborate on Winnicott's definition of the "True Self" since according to Jane Flax, Winnicott's "True Self" "has many of the characteristics of the postmodernist 'decentered' one but fewer of the deficiencies [since it maintains the necessity of the 'core self']" (110).²

The self that Celie establishes by the end of the novel is not a unified one. Instead, she posits herself as "I" under the conditions of a destabilized self, a self consisting of multiple identities which are subject to change rather than being fixed. Sidonie Smith, in Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body,

² Even though the term "True Self" seems to characterize the fragmented kind of self Celie establishes, I will not take up the term since my own argument hinges not on the contrast between the defensive use of the "False Self" and the decentered "True Self," but on the deconstruction of a self formed by internalizing externally imposed ideologies in order to allow for a less limited self. Though the difference is subtle, the emphasis is clearly different. While Winnicott's terms focus on Celie's unconscious *motives* for presenting a "False Self," my own argument focuses on Celie's failure, in the beginning, to *realize* that the self she "sees" in the mirror/letter is one ideologically constructed and on her eventual recognition of that fact which leads to her transformation.

differentiates between various kinds of subjectivity. She explains that the *universal subject* is an "ahistorical or transcendent phenomenon and remains autonomous and free" (Smith 7). On the other hand, she explores the necessity, in defining universal subjectivity, to identify a *nonuniversal subject*: "To woman is attributed another kind of selfhood, but not the selfhood of the universal human/male subject" (11). Smith explains that while the masculine subject has been thought not to be determined by body, but rather to have transcended it, the female subject has been defined according to her body in order to make the dichotomy complete (12). However, Smith proposes that in autobiography (and, I would argue, in these epistolary novels as well), the subject "becomes what Lee Quinby labels 'multiply designated,' severally situated within diverse, sometimes congruous, often competing, even contradictory discursive fields" (21). She further explains, quoting Paul Smith, that "[t]his multiplication of speaking positions increases 'the possibility of resistance through a recognition of the *simultaneous* non-unity and non-consistency of subject positions [Paul Smith's emphasis]" (21).

Although many critics appreciate the story of Celie's transformation as a liberating one for African-Americans, for women, for gays and lesbians, for the oppressed as well as for the oppressor, the novel has received much negative criticism, as well. In "The Color Purple as Everybody's Protest Art," Early

condemns the novel, claiming that "The Color Purple is a poor novel because it ultimately fails the ideology that it purports to serve" (271). Early claims that Walker's attempt at protest against "the power of the environment, the whim of the state, and the orthodoxy of the institution" (271) fails to be subversive enough. He accuses the novel of lacking "intellectual or theological rigor or *coherence* [my emphasis]" (273). However, what Early and others, including Ross, seem to expect from a "good novel" is exactly what The Color Purple refuses to do: deconstruct dominant ideologies only to replace them with a new one. As Toril Moi notes, this process would be a self-defeating one, since the very belief that there is a "True" ideology which can, through language, describe reality in a unified or complete way is a failure to subvert the oppressiveness of ideologies (9). Avoiding this pitfall, The Color Purple negates the idea of a fixed truth, a coherent and permanent world, since it is this very idea that initiates Celie's perception of herself as being worth so little. Aside from being a traditionally woman's form, "a form which (along with diaries) was the only one allowed women to record their everyday lives, their 'herstory'" (Christian, "Trajectories or Self-Definition" 247), the epistolary form of The Color Purple effectively undermines the type of coherence Early demands by remaining a collection of fragments. Linda Kauffman comments, "Celie's writing, like her quilting, is 'piecework,' written (one assumes) in small

snatches of random segments in the course of her daily labors" (192). Like each patch of a quilt, each of the letters of the novel, some of them Nettie's, is only a piece of a whole. While the novel exhibits a quality of wholeness, it is not unified or coherent, and this is its beauty, just as the beauty of a quilt results in its bringing together pieces which may or may not seem to "belong together." Through her recognition of her self as fragmented and fluctuating, and her expression of that self in her letters, Celie is ultimately able to attain agency over her experience without striving to reconstruct either a world or a self that is coherent/oppressive.

Celie's initial desire to write results from her oppression by "Pa," her supposed father. In the beginning of the novel, we see her trapped into silence by Pa, who serves as Celie's most immediate representative of the ideologies which have shaped her up to this point. His uttering of the initial lines of the novel, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (1), leaves Celie with no voice. She has just been molested by her "Pa," and with no way to verbalize her experience, she turns to letterwriting as her outlet. However, God is the only reader available to her whom she can count on not to tell. Writing Him, Celie is not transgressing against Pa, either by disobeying him or by making his actions known to the public, yet for her, the decision to

write God is a necessary step toward understanding the experience herself. In attempting to understand her situation, Celie is examining her own identity, which until now has been defined by others. In her first address, she begins by describing herself: Dear God, / I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl" (1). In this description, she complies with patriarchal ideology in regarding herself as "bad" or, as Pa calls her, "spoiled" (9) because of her implied guilt for being involved in sexual intercourse outside of marriage, as well as what she supposes is incest. Although her participation in these activities has involved no choice of her own, she assumes the "dirtiness" attributed to her by the very person who is responsible for her rape, her Pa. She includes a request to God to "give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (1). In this request, Celie reveals her desire to understand the conditions in which she exists. Although she receives no direct response to this letter, she apparently gets something from the writing of her letters for she continues to write. She records further the descriptions of her offered by others. Pa, disgusted by the milk running down the front of Celie's dress as a result of her giving birth to a child whom he has immediately abducted, asks, "Why don't you look decent?" (4). Encouraging Mr. _____ to take her instead of Nettie for his wife, Pa says, "She ugly. . . . But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her" (9). He offers to send a cow with her if

Mr. _____ will take her, a gesture that, like his description of Celie, categorizes her as property, property only modestly worth the taking at that. His claim that "[s]he tell lies" (9) further restrains her voice, discounting as untruth any words she might utter, and omitting her as a threat to his power.

The relating of these descriptions by Celie in these letters serves for her as a mirror in that she can write herself (in the terms she has been given) and then step away from the image portrayed and observe it. She accepts this image as real at this early stage of the novel, commenting that "I know I'm not as pretty or as smart as Nettie" (10). After her momentary "feeling pretty cute" (18) as a result of Nettie's constant compliments, she claims that "a new dress won't help none with my notty head and dusty headrag, my old everyday shoes and the way I smell" (46). Even Shug Avery tells Celie, "You sure *is* ugly" (48), upon her introduction to Celie. Yet it is Shug's presence that causes Celie to begin reevaluating this inferior view of herself and her view of the world. Sitting on the porch between Shug and Mr. _____, teaching Shug to quilt, Celie considers the world:

First time I think about the world.

What the world got to do with anything, I think. Then I see myself sitting there quilting tween Shug Avery and Mr. _____. . . . For the first time in my life, I feel just right. (60)

Although Celie has only begun to deconstruct her world, she has begun to see that her view of it has heretofore been constructed according to the desires of others. She has begun to consider, as well, that her own happiness *does* matter.

Celie's viewing herself in a literal mirror, at Shug's urging, reveals the process of self-discovery Celie experiences throughout the novel. Shug says to her, "Here, take this mirror and go look at yourself down there, I bet you never seen it, have you?" (81) It takes Celie a little while to see the beauty Shug already knows about: "Stick the looking glass tween my black legs. Ugh. All that hair" (82). Yet she soon sees something that has been hidden from her until now, that "inside look like a wet rose" (82).

Although until now Celie has accepted the definition placed on her by the patriarchy, at this point in the novel, Celie's character begins to transform. She still writes to God, and as we see later, Celie's idea of God depends on her belief in the hierarchy that oppresses her. Thus, she has not completely deconstructed the ideologies that restrict her. However, some important changes occur. For example, she tells Squeak, after watching the abuse Squeak is subjected to by Harpo, "Make Harpo call you by your real name" (81). This suggestion is significant coming from Celie for it illustrates her increasing awareness that giving names is a powerful job and that the names themselves have the power to shape those to whom they are attached. This new awareness

is a step toward Celie's finding a speaking voice, as opposed to her writing voice, by which she can express the secrets of her oppression. Disappointed when Shug announces her decision to go back on the road after her illness, Celie tells her first secret:

He beat me when you not here, I say.

Who do, she say, Albert?

Mr. _____, I say." (78-79)

Perhaps to Celie's surprise, her revelation results in a reversal of Shug's decision to leave: "I won't leave, she say, until I know Albert won't even think about beating you" (79). But the ultimate test of Celie's newfound voice occurs in the same letter in which Celie writes about her first sexual encounter with Shug, the first sexual encounter that has ever been pleasurable for Celie. In the previous letter, relating the activities that follow Shug's return with Grady, Celie writes, "Me and Shug cook, talk, clean the house, talk, fix up the tree, talk, wake up in the morning, talk" (114). With all the talk between them, their commitment to one another becomes more apparent, for example in this discussion about Albert's treatment of Celie: "If you was my wife, [Shug] say, I'd cover you up with kisses stead of licks, and work hard for you too" (115). This conversation sets the stage for the next important exchange between them in which Celie tells what Pa told her never to tell, the story of his raping her.

His warning having silenced Celie, her remembrance of the event breaks the emotional dam she has built in order to protect herself from the pain.

It hurt me, you know, I say. I was just going on fourteen.

I never even thought bout men having nothing down there so big.

It scare me just to see it. And the way it poke itself and grow.

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 around me.

They black and smooth and kind of glowy from the lamplight.

I start to cry too. I cry and cry and cry. Seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug's arms. (116-17)

This letter marks a significant change both in Celie's relationship with Shug and in Celie's view of herself. When Celie states that "[n]obody ever love me" (117), Shug's response, "I love you, Miss Celie" (117), creates the potential for Celie to see herself in a more positive light.

Although she has also responded positively to Nettie's regard for her, in Nettie's absence, it takes a virtual earthquake, in the form of Shug Avery, to shake Celie out of her stupor, a state in which she has almost always seen

herself as unworthy. Celie's sexual relationship with Shug allows her agency. Until she speaks to Shug and uses her words for her own benefit, Celie has only had language used *on* her. The revelation of secrets made secret by the power of the father breaks the code that has kept them sealed. From here on, Celie's sense of agency over her own experience grows. She even goes so far as to demand that Shug "[m]ake Albert [whose name she now writes] let me sleep with you from now on, while you here" (151). Celie's and Shug's relationship itself is a transgression of "the law of the father."³ This relationship is not one defined or accepted by the patriarchal system since it allows no room for male ownership of the female body. Linda Abbandonato explains the problems created for the "masculine cultural narrative" by lesbian relationships, noting that the exchange of women is an element of "marriage as a social contract between men" (1109) and of "kinship as a means of reinforcing male power through the circulation of women" (1109). Necessary to this system, "[c]ompulsory heterosexuality . . . becomes the basis on which the society operates" (1109). Albert admits, later in the novel, that he saw Celie as a threat to his relationship with Shug. In contrast to the patriarchal system, however, Shug and Celie do not try to take possession of one another. Though Celie is

³Juliet Mitchell discusses the derivation of this concept in reference to Freud; it is the definition she gives to the term *patriarchy* (xvi). She notes, "A primary aspect of the law is that we live according to our sexed identity, our ever imperfect 'masculinity' or 'femininity'" (403).

jealous of Shug's other lovers, she and Shug teach and share with each other as equals.

Finally, the change that best exhibits Celie's increasing agency over her experience is that Celie, with Shug's help, discovers and takes possession of the letters Nettie has written to her. Interestingly, however, she incorporates them into her letters to God. She begins her first letter to God after her discovery of the letters by telling God all about what Albert has been doing. She tells Him where the letters are hidden and how she and Shug take them out of the trunk without Albert knowing. She introduces Nettie's first letter to God this way: "Dear Celie, *the first letter say*" (131). By holding God in His position as receiver of her correspondence, Celie is holding in place what for her is now the delicately balanced patriarchal hierarchy.

Celie has begun her move toward deconstruction, though. More comfortable in her relationship with Shug than she has ever been with Mr. _____, Celie begins to see the flaws in a gender ideology that defines women as the opposite of men. Her first reaction to Shug's suggestion that she wear pants rather than dresses is that "I ain't no man" (152). However, Celie concedes after Shug explains that "you don't have no dress do nothing for you. You not made like no dress pattern, neither" (152). After making and wearing her first pair of pants, Celie is delighted with the effect and thereafter wears

nothing but pants, the making of which eventually becomes her cottage industry. The pants, along with her homosexual relationship, effect a change in Celie's perception of the gender ideology that has previously defined her. This change and the one that follows enact a more overt deconstruction of restrictive ideologies than Celie has performed before.

After relating many of Nettie's long-lost letters to God, Celie writes one more letter to Him. A brief letter, it sums up Celie's reaction to all she has found out through Nettie's letters,

My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-
brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and
brother. Pa not pa.

You must be sleep. (183)

Now she begins to write to Nettie instead, and in her second letter to Nettie, she explains why: "[T]he God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown" (199).

Rather than have her throw out God altogether, however, Shug suggests that she expand her definition of God. She points out the origins of Celie's image of God as "big and old and tall and graybearded and white" (201) and replaces that image with a much more inclusive one, one which attempts to do away with boundaries:

God ain't a he or a she, but a It.

But what do it look like? I ast.

Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It. (202-3)

This deconstruction of the traditional Western Christian ideology with something that works better for Shug and ultimately for Celie is what finally allows Celie to question everything. This move destroys the dominance of patriarchal ideology as a coherent system by which Celie can define herself, or be defined.⁴

⁴Carolyn Williams describes the change in Celie's definition of God as a move from the external to the internal. Although in the beginning her concept of God is an externally formed one, "[f]or Celie, the practice of addressing God simply reaffirms her solitude; she is essentially writing to herself. . . . [The] introspective letter writing records the disciplined process of increasing self-knowledge" (277). Williams notes that by the end of the novel, however, Celie's external relationships with people who actively participate in her development of her self--Shug, Sofia, and Nettie--have figured into her revision of God, this time internally located. After this point, Williams explains, Celie is able to re-externalize: "Since she can no longer address Nettie [once Nettie has returned at the end of the novel], Celie returns to her earlier addressee, now thoroughly transformed, both internalized (as Spirit) and externalized (as Everything)" (283). Williams refers to Walker's role as "medium" in doing as she suggests Celie finally does, as Celie "defers to Everything, . . . speaks for Everything, . . . and [experiences] everyone[s] speak[ing] through her" (284). While I would agree that there is a democratization exhibited in Celie's new version of God, which includes all, Celie also exhibits an awareness in her revision that there is no such thing as unmediated expression of God, thus an awareness that she is, in effect, creating God. In this awareness, Celie reveals an understanding that to act as "medium" is to become an imposing authority, the damages of which act she does not wish to inflict.

Not only does Celie now address her letters to Nettie, but for the first time, she begins signing them. Significantly, she signs them "Amen." In her third letter to Nettie, consistent with her new perspective of the world, including Nettie as deity, she rewrites herself in the story of her confrontation with Mr. _____. Attempting to maintain power over Celie even in the face of her leaving with Shug, he predicts her failure and her return to him: "You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. . . . What you gon do?" (213) Having had enough of his abuse and control, Celie curses him, realizing her access to words which "ain't coming just from me" but "seem to come to me from the trees": "Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble" (213). Although these words seem to come from God as Celie has redefined It, ultimately their power comes from Celie's new willingness to use them. Struggling to keep her in her place, Mr. _____ tries to discount her words:

He laugh. Who you think you is? he say. You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all. (213)

Celie refuses to back down this time, repeating her curse and redefining herself as at least "here." Celie's curse reveals her new understanding that the ideologies by which she and Mr. _____ have been defined are flawed systems. Her curse carries impact less because the issuer of words wields power, though

this is true, than because, as Celie now understands, an ideology which limits by its very nature limits all who believe in it, the oppressor as well as the oppressed.

Early's criticisms that the outcome of the novel gives in to capitalistic and romantic ideals may seem valid on the surface; however, Celie's new understanding of self and world is not part of a new ideology, in the sense that it is not of a fixed system. For example, Celie's transformation, including her gaining financial independence through her pants business, might seem to be a problem for someone like Early, who claims that the story perpetuates a "conservative ethic: we must all pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. The victim, in essence, cures herself" (266). Aside from his ignoring the importance of Shug, Nettie, Sofia, and others in Celie's transformation, Early oversimplifies the transformation itself. It is true that in Celie's community, financial independence goes a long way in contributing to a person's agency over her own experience. Yet, unlike even the Olinka chief in the tribal legend that Nettie writes about, who indulged in his own greed by increasing his property simply because he had the power to do so, Celie treats her business as a way to give to her community. Illustrating the care she takes in making decisions about what kind of pants to make and for whom to make them, she

considers the pants she will make for Jack, the husband of Sophia's sister, Odessa. Celie has an affinity for Jack, who "is tall and kind and don't hardly say anything. Love children. Respect his wife, Odessa, and all Odessa amazon sisters" (220). Celie thinks carefully about how she will make Jack's pants:

They have to be camel. And soft and strong. And they have to have big pockets so he can keep a lot of children's things.

Marbles and string and pennies and rocks. And they have to be washable and they have to fit closer around the leg than Shug's so he can run if he need to snatch a child out the way of something.

And they have to be something he can lay back in when he hold Odessa in front of the fire. (220)

Celie does not plan to make a profit from this pair of pants, but even those she plans to sell must be right. Nettie and Sofia serve as models of the women for whom Celie sews. She makes pants for Nettie so that she won't feel too hot or overdressed; she makes red and purple pants for Sofia and dreams of Sofia jumping over the moon in them; she plans to make pants designed especially for pregnant women. In her store, she hires Sofia as a clerk not only because she is good at the job but also because working there makes Sofia happy. In general, although Celie has become a capitalist of sorts, she maintains a sense of community that demands her consideration and responsibility for those

around her. And even her acquired property becomes a sort of commune for all those she wishes to care for and share with.

In addition to Celie's financial independence, the novel's "utopic" ending poses a problem for many readers. Why would Walker conclude with a happy ending a novel dealing with the real problems of incest, wife abuse, and the abduction of children? Perhaps a more pertinent question is what is the merit of creating a novel that is not "realistic"? Addressing the issue from another perspective, Catherine Belsey questions the merits of novels written in the frame of realism. She argues that the novels of classic realism create a deceptively coherent world, implying that the world they portray is obviously "natural," obvious in that the reader recognizes what seem to be elements familiar to her/his own world. In constructing this type of fictional world, Belsey explains, the realist novel constructs the reader as a subject of that world. Belsey suggests that the "real" world in these novels is generally one in which the subject is constructed as "free, unified, [and] autonomous" (51). She argues that this concept of the individual is deceptive and does not exist, except as an ideological construct (52). Belsey notes that

Classic realist narrative . . . turns on the creation of enigma through the precipitation of disorder which throws into disarray the conventional cultural and signifying systems. . . . But the

story moves inevitably towards disclosure, the dissolution of enigma through the re-establishment of order which is understood to have preceded the events of the story itself. (53)

Early's claim that Celie "pulls herself up by her bootstraps" suggests that Celie is an example of a unified and autonomous character. Likewise, Celie's salutation in her last letter to her newly defined God, who includes the stars, the trees, the sky--"Everything" (293), might seem to be the recognition of a Truth, a truth that has always existed. However, the "utopic" ending throws into question the "naturalness" and the "coherence" of the novel.⁵ The novel's happy conclusion, accused of being a "fairy tale" ending (Harris 6), jars the contemporary reader into consciousness of the novel as a construct, as a fiction that is not a reflection of any "real" world. Trudier Harris responds to the novel skeptically:

While the reader is inclined to feel good that Celie does survive, and to appreciate the good qualities she has, she or he is still equally skeptical about accepting the logic of a novel that posits

⁵Alison Light, troubled by the debate over the novel's ending, asserts that, even though contemporary theorists see this happy conclusion as counterproductive for those working to expose the horrible consequences of oppression, there is some benefit from the mapping out of an ideal "rooting out" of that oppression. "[W]hen as critics we warn against the essentializing tendencies of humanist fictions, we need nevertheless to recognize their democratizing potential, their celebration of human agency and activity--an impulse without which both socialism and feminism are inert" (116). While I agree with Light's view that the utopic ending of the novel leaves us with hope, it is the combination of that reaction with a slight, if not great, distrust of such a subversive yet conventional ending that I wish to examine.

so many changes as a credible progression for a character. Such a total change of lifestyle, attitudes, and beliefs for a character well settled in her ways as she approaches fifty and the last third of her life asks more of the reader than can be reasonably expected. (16)

Harris's reaction is not unreasonable. The last information Celie receives regarding Nettie before her miraculous return is a telegram stating that it is likely Nettie, Samuel, Olivia, Adam, and Tashi have drowned, their ship having been sunk by the Germans. Yet in the last letter, Celie tells of looking up from her rocking chair on the porch to see the whole family returning, intact and unharmed. No explanation is requested or offered as to the contradiction between the telegram and this homecoming. By breaking up a world that has for the most part described hardships and conditions that seem real with an ending that does not seem real, the novel seems to call attention to its own incoherence.

Elizabeth J. MacArthur, in her Extravagant Narrative, proposes a narrative model to describe, in a general way, the tendencies of narrative either to incorporate closure or to remain open. She notes that in general, while most nineteenth century narratives exhibit closure, eighteenth century narratives tend more toward fragmented, "open" forms, including epistolary narrative. To

describe the dynamics of both types of narrative, MacArthur explains that all narratives are driven by two tendencies: "a tendency toward stability and meaning [emphasized in closural narratives] and a tendency toward mobility and desire [emphasized by narratives which seem to lack closure]" (25). Thus narratives of both types exhibit complicating action, driven by desire, and an element of coherence, or something that makes the text a text rather than a random combination of words and phrases, this element provided by the tendency toward stability and meaning. MacArthur argues that the "problems" many critics have found in epistolary narrative rest on its deviation from narrative models which require a coherent novel to exhibit throughout its text a working toward its moment of closure. MacArthur attributes this lack of coherence in epistolary novels to the lack of a narrator who knows, from the beginning of the narrative, how the story will end. She argues, however, that this "lack" does not make such a work inferior. She states that, on the contrary, "[t]hese extravagant narratives are about the dynamic, interminable process of giving shape and meaning to life" (35).

In light of MacArthur's argument, The Color Purple's ending does not seem entirely inconsistent with convention. The Color Purple exhibits the epistolary novel's characteristic lack of coherence; on the other hand, though, the closure the novel does provide goes to an extreme not observed in

eighteenth century epistolary novels to subvert accepted ideologies of the day. For example, in Pamela, virtue wins out in the end with Pamela rewarded with marriage and an advance in class status, thus confirming contemporary ideals of virtue even while subverting the limits of class. Similarly, in Les Liaisons Dangereuses, those crafty characters who seem to be so smart as to avoid punishment for their crimes fall in the end, and those who have suffered for their moral principles reap the long-term benefits. The reuniting of Celie with her loved ones, on the other hand, undermines current ideological notions even of virtue since Celie is not respectful of patriarchal power (including God's), the "naturalness" of heterosexuality, or even the notion of essential gender distinctions.

It seems to me that it is Walker's combination of a form which has often employed more traditionally romantic characters with characters who would fit more easily into the conventions of realism that has caused such negative reactions from many critics. In A Dictionary of Literary Terms, J.A. Cuddon includes in his definition of "realism" that this literature is "not concerned with idealization, with rendering things beautiful when they are not" (553). He notes that realists "concentrated attention on the lot of the common man and on the need to present life with all its warts" (555). The portrayal of Celie in The Color Purple, consistent with the standards for characters of realist novels,

predisposes the reader against a romantic ending to the novel. Celie is nitty-gritty "real." She experiences a lesbian relationship, a questioning of God, incest, and wife-beating, things not experienced by the protagonists of traditional romance novels. Those women do not have dark skin, "notty heads," or bad body odors. Celie, it seems, is closer to being a character from a realist novel than from a conventional romance novel. Yet a conventional realist novel would not allow for a "fairy tale" ending. So how is The Color Purple to be read? As Harris notes, one wants to be sympathetic with Celie but, toward the end of the novel, is left with the necessity of working hard to be able to do so. I suggest that the effect of combining conventions of both the traditional romance novel and the realist novel is not counterproductive to the novel's interests. The reader's mistrust resulting from thwarted expectations based on knowledge of literary conventions parallels Celie's own experience: her liberation occurs as a result of the breakdown of her trust in what she has assumed to be a coherent system, a unified and complete masternarrative. Thus, in forcing the reader to mistrust the narrative and to recognize its fictionality, Walker liberates the reader from the ideologies of those conventions.

As the writer of the letters making up the novel, Celie reflects a fragmented self, as well. Celie has attained for herself some agency over her

experience not only by writing the letters but also by subverting the concept of a unified world or a unified self. Teresa de Lauretis notes the need for this concept of self, that of "a multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identity, . . . an identity made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class, and often indeed across languages and cultures; an identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations, and that one insists on as a strategy" (9). Toward the end of the novel, Celie has a moment of relapse as she gazes into the mirror, describing herself again by the standards of the ideologies that originally oppressed her, yet several letters later, she is able to feel content with herself again. Within the bounds of the novel, this fluctuating ends with Celie's expressing a positive self-image; however, the use of her letters to reflect this fluctuation is an important strategy for Celie. Because one letter may reflect a very different Celie than another, they allow Celie the space for fluctuation. This close to the end of the novel, this late mirror scene suggests that resolution is a tricky thing. Celie is human and will probably not maintain permanently the exact identity we see in her final letter. She is a growing, changing person, encompassing various identities, including, as Gates notes, "both the subject and the object of narration" (249). I would suggest also that her multiple identities encompass those of a woman who has been a mother for years and a woman who has

become a new mother, an entrepreneur and an artist (identities which may very well battle each other at times), and a lover and a friend to Shug (also identities which may conflict at times). By expressing/constructing herself in letters, fragments of a collection, she allows herself the conditions for a fragmented identity.

Her new definition of God allows for this type of self. Rather than establishing a definition of the "real" God, as she has come to understand it, in her final salutation, Celie reflects her new understanding that she is constructing the world. The white, patriarchal God to whom Celie writes in the early part of the book is absolutely real to her in that her understanding of Him controls her understanding of the world and her self. However, the God she writes in her final salutation is one that works better for her, since she has learned that through language one may control the definition of oneself and one's world. God encompasses all, thus eliminating the potential for God as ideology. If God is "Everything," it encompasses even contradictory elements. It allows for discrepancies to exist in the same space and time. In her new expression of who God is, Celie creates a place for herself as a changing and fragmented person, with various identities, not to be limited by ideological definitions.

Not only have Celie's letters questioned the necessity of heterosexuality and blurred the boundaries of gender difference, but they have subtly examined the boundaries of racial difference as well. While the story maintains a black community with solidarity, there are details in Celie's letters which suggest that the boundaries of racial difference are arbitrary. Squeak's experience in the warden's office is one such episode. Though the warden is her white uncle, her father being the warden's brother, the warden rapes her in order to "prove" that he is not blood kin. Yet her position as a "Black" woman in the Black community is questionable as well. She feels the difference between her and those around her. The song she sings reveals her feeling of not belonging as a result of her color:

They calls me yellow
like yellow be my name

But if yellow is a name
Why ain't black the same (104)

Another example of the arbitrary nature of the color question is the experience of Shug's son on the Indian reservation. The Native Americans call him "the black white man," since "[e]verybody not an Indian they got no use for" (275). This man's experience is similar to Nettie's among the Olinka who do not see

her as one of them simply because she is black, but rather they see her as one of "[y]ou Christians" (167) who do not last long in the climate of Africa and ultimately "go back to England, or wherever you come from" (167). While The Color Purple is seen as an expression of affirmation for various groups, including African-Americans, the solidarity represented seems to be the kind that Moi approves when she suggests that "it still remains *politically* essential for feminists to defend women *as* women in order to counteract the patriarchal oppression that precisely despises women *as* women. But an 'undeconstructed' form of 'stage two' feminism, unaware of the metaphysical nature of gender identities, runs the risk of becoming an inverted form of sexism" (13). If translated from a statement on feminism to one on racial rights, the principle still holds true. After challenging even "the idealistic view of Africa as an image, a beautiful artifact to be used by Afro-Americans in their pursuit of racial pride" (Christian, "Alice Walker: The Black Woman Artist as Wayward" 459),⁶ The Color Purple reinforces the pride and hope in African-American community and rightly so. Doing so is an act counteracting the degradation that has been inflicted on that community by the establishment which has labeled the community as "other." However, proponents of solidarity for that community must remember the arbitrariness of racial definition since, as is

⁶Although Christian makes this comment in regard to Walker's early poetry, it describes the effect of the information about Africa contained in Nettie's letters to Celie, as well.

shown by Squeak's experience, labels can become abusive tools for political gain, both within and without the African-American community. Celie's letters and the act of deconstruction performed by those letters has revealed this danger and, as a response to that discovery, Celie has adopted an identity which does not cement her into any particular destiny.

Through her use of the letter as a mirror, Celie has gained a sense of her self which allows for fragmentation and fluctuation. Celie's transformation from a timid girl who accepts the definition given her by oppressive ideologies to an assertive woman who controls, through language, the definition of her self and her world reflects her understanding of her world as a construct. In her refusal to employ new ideological boundaries to undermine the ideologies that have oppressed her, she allows herself a space in which she can continuously construct, and deconstruct, her world and her self.

Chapter 4

No Country to Call Home:

Epistolary Mediation in Ana Castillo's The Mixquiahuala Letters

I cannot say I am a citizen of the world as Virginia Woolf, speaking as an Anglo woman born to economic means, declared herself; nor can I make the same claim to U.S. citizenship as Adrienne Rich does despite her universal feeling for humanity. As a mestiza born to the lower strata, I am treated at best, as a second class citizen, at worst, as a non-entity. I am commonly perceived as a foreigner everywhere I go, including in the United States and in Mexico.

Ana Castillo in her Massacre of the Dreamers

Ana Castillo is, of the three authors examined in this study, the most overtly postmodern in her approach to writing. Ivy disrupts conventions by her choice, in many cases, to take unconventional actions. Celie confronts the ideologies that oppress her by confronting the representative of that oppression, Albert. Yet even the comments made by Ivy and Celie which classify as critique of the limits placed on them differ sharply from those of Teresa, the protagonist of The Mixquiahuala Letters, in that Teresa's commentary focuses openly on the systematic nature of her oppression. That is, while Ivy's and Celie's criticisms and actions ultimately result in their subverting the notion of the unified self, Teresa ruminates intellectually on the problems of the

ideologies that impose that notion, even noting the discrepancies between that rumination and her desire for a "home."

The most notably postmodern features of Castillo's novel are its particular form of epistolary narrative, the structure of which may only be determined by the reader, and the narrator's reference to herself as "i." The novel is made up of letters from Teresa to her friend Alicia, letters which examine their friendship and the forces that work upon both women during their travels in Mexico and in the United States. The letters that make up the novel are numbered, but Castillo suggests that their arrangement is arbitrary and that the reader, according to her/his own preference for the novel's outcome, should determine the order of the letters her/himself. In designing such a flexible structure for the novel, Castillo creates a text that cannot inscribe or be defined by any unified ideology. Similarly, her choice of "i" as pronoun for her self undermines the notion of the authorial "I" in that it refuses to indicate the *authority* representing dominant discourses. Yet in saying "i," Teresa, through her letters, can voice a self, a fragmented self that resists ideological definition.

Despite Castillo's successful use of innovative technique, very few critics have noted the novel's importance. In one of only a few reviews of the novel, Raymond A. Paredes claims that the work lacks aesthetic appeal. While

he finds the novel "interesting ideologically and thematically" (127), he calls Castillo's prose "stilted" and asks "why anyone would write such elaborate letters simply to retell without analysis, what the recipient already knows" (117). Significantly, however, those who have been more favorably impressed with the novel have commented on both Castillo's effective use of the epistolary form and her poetic prowess. In a review of the novel for Choice, J. Luna Lawhn notes the importance of Teresa's letters to Alicia in order for Teresa to "confront the ghosts that often haunt women" (1392). In her own review, Barbara Dale May also notes the effects of the possible arrangements of the letters, arrangements for the "Conformist," the "Cynic," and the "Quixotic," and of the letters themselves, through which "both women are superbly characterized" (313). In addition to commenting on the form of the novel, Lawhn praises "Castillo's lyrical style [which] is evidence of a poetic ability that she has already displayed" (1392) in previous works. Likewise, Irene Campos Carr, in a review for Belles Lettres, comments, "Castillo interweaves the sounds, the words, the nuances, that create a Mexican-American ambiance. . . . Every time I read it, I savor the beautiful prose, become absorbed in the inevitable conflicts, and find new insights in the reflection of a woman who is caught between her desire to be free of societal expectations and her own internalized constrictions" (20). These reviews, including that of Paredes,

reveal that Castillo's employment of the epistolary form in combination with her postmodern vision and poetic abilities yields an original and dynamic text. The effect is the text's ability to reflect a character who is finally able to deconstruct an ideologically defined self.

Teresa is, from the outset, aware of the conflicting identities encompassed by her self. As a mestiza, she is U.S. American (from Chicago), Mexican, and Native American, or "Indian."¹ Further, she is Catholic, a religion that includes not only Christian superstition but also that of her Native American heritage, much of which has been absorbed by the Catholic tradition in the mestiza culture; and she is intellectual, a quality which requires her to disregard her superstitions. In addition, to complicate the relationships among these identities, she is a woman. Teresa writes her letters while she is roughly between the ages of twenty and thirty. These letters are written as a way for Teresa to "make sense" of the experiences of both Alicia and herself. By writing the letters, she is able to gain some distance on her experiences and feelings, as she expresses here:

¹ In Massacre of the Dreamers, Castillo comments about her heritage: "The woman in the United States who is politically self-described as Chicana, mestiza in terms of race, and Latina or Hispanic in regards to her Spanish-speaking heritage, and who numbers in the millions in the United States cannot be summarized nor neatly categorized" (1). She later terms herself a "mestiza Amerindian woman" (1). While she does not use the term "Indian" by itself to refer to the Native American, she uses the word "indio" in reference to the indigenous populations of the Americas (2). With respect for Castillo's careful description of her background, I attempt, in this chapter, to use her terminology as scrupulously and as accurately as possible.

i doubt if what i'm going to recall for both our sakes in the following pages will coincide one hundred percent with your recollections, but as you make use of my determination to attempt a record of some sort, to stir your memory, try not to look for flaws or inaccuracies.

Rather, keep the detachment you've strived for since knowing, if you kept it close, it would go on hurting. This isn't a tale of our experiences, but of two women who. . . . (53)

The act of writing these letters is often disturbing for Teresa, and the result of having written them does not necessarily leave her any more at peace than she was before writing them. As she notes in Letter Sixteen, "when one is confronted by the mirror, the spirit trembles" (55). Yet, there is a need to write. Although what Teresa learns by looking in the mirror/writing her letters is not comforting, it allows her a new sense of agency. This agency comes primarily from her observation that reality is constructed. That is, the act of writing gives her a medium for first deconstructing oppressive ideologies and then for constructing her own reality, including her self. The constructedness of things is emphasized by the structural play Castillo sets up in the text itself, demanding the reader's recognition of its nature as a construct and of her/his participation in the construction of her/his own reality.

As for Alicia's role as receiver of the letters, Teresa is clearly aware of the pitfalls of such a position, thus her acknowledgement that Alicia will undoubtedly have her own version of the events Teresa narrates. Anne Lieberman-Bower suggests that "Tere's [Teresa's] persistent effort to rewrite the past for herself and for Alicia could be termed, to borrow a phrase from Nancy K. Miller, an effort 'to unwrite the text which keeps her prisoner'" (105). Yet simply to *rewrite* the past for Alicia would be to reenact conventions that would imprison Alicia in yet another narrative not her own. Erlinda Gonzales-Berry explores The Mixquiahuala Letters in light of a conventional effect of epistolary fiction: the establishment of the subject-object or master-slave hierarchy. This hierarchy results from the control over the narrative that the writer usually exercises, *authorizing* experience and sending it to the receiver/object of correspondence. Yet, as Gonzales-Berry states, while on a certain level Teresa writes to convey information and feelings to Alicia, Castillo also complicates the conventional paradigm to subvert "traditional trappings" (231). First, she reverses the qualities of the pair of friends so that Teresa, who would traditionally be superior as writer, exhibits traditionally inferior qualities--she is "morena" (brown) with "round fleshy contours" and "Indian Ancestry" (231)--while Alicia's qualities are what would traditionally be considered superior--she is "fair skinned" with "thin muscular contours" and

"Anglo-Spanish Ancestry" (231). Second, as Gonzales-Berry suggests, Teresa writes, at least to a certain extent, to herself. She states, "The very conventions of the genre which traditionally have marked the boundaries between self and other [dates, clear pronouns, greetings, farewells, and signatures] begin to disappear and ambiguity shows her tantalizing face" (233). While Lieberman-Bower's point that Teresa desires a renewal of the bond between her and Alicia is well-taken, Gonzales-Berry suggests that the very notion of subject/object is broken down in the novel and that the two women begin to merge through "difference--plural, fluid, fragmentary" (234). In spite of this merging, however, Teresa does not intend to absorb Alicia's own narrative, as is evident in her suggestion that their "recollections" will differ. In Teresa's words, Alicia will "make use of [Teresa's] *determination* to attempt a record of some sort, to stir [Alicia's] memory" (53; emphasis added) rather than simply adopting Teresa's narrative as her own. Thus, while Teresa does rewrite her experience, she suggests in her letters to Alicia that her version of those experiences is only that, one version among many others.

The tension between Teresa's conflicting identities and her desire to establish a liberated self that is not constricted by ideological constructs, including the notion of binary oppositions, is the force that drives the novel. Language, metaphor, and form are the most apparent forums wherein this

tension is played out. The letter novel is, of course, a prime form in which such tension can be developed. The effect of Castillo's using one widely considered a conventional women's form (Perry ix)--and then developing a strong tension through language and metaphor in addition to manipulating form to show the nature of Teresa's fragmentation--is that Teresa and we readers are always somewhere between a perspective that acknowledges ideology and one that rejects ideological dominance. This fluctuating position reflects the impossibility of taking any permanent position and foregrounds the resulting fragmentation of Teresa's self.

As was suggested before, it is by no means easy to categorize the elements of Teresa's identities. In her language, both Spanish and English, at times formal and at others informal, often venturing even into the poetic, Teresa continually reveals the conflict she experiences as a "countryless woman" (Massacre 21). The letters are written primarily in English, and, typical of correspondence to friends, the tone is often informal. Further, Teresa uses idiomatic phrases and slang to create a tone of familiarity that is in keeping with the conventions of informal letterwriting. For instance, describing her *tia* Filomena (making the transition into Spanish to describe familial relationship, as she does consistently in her letters) to Alicia whom she has invited to California, she says, "She took in laundry, children of working-

out-of-the-home-mothers and whipped out some mean drapes on an old pedestal Singer" (17). Of Tia Filomena's oldest son, she says, "Eddie is now Edie--if you get my drift" (18). She uses words like "cool" for Tia Filomena, who does not mind Teresa's sunbathing (17), and "hot" to describe what Eddie/Edie is *not*, since he has become a woman (18). Though many of the letters are more formal or poetic than Letter One, written usually to reflect and/or to examine rather than to request action from Alicia, idiom and slang appear from time to time throughout the collection. For example, in a parenthetical note to Alicia/the reader in Letter Twenty-Five, Teresa writes, "Years later, only hindsight causes us to look upon the engineers' proposition as ludicrous, but we are not those of then, and if anyone else happens to read this account and would like to give us the benefit of the doubt, i warn him/her not to put money on it" (94). In Letter Thirty-Seven, she states, again idiomatically, "i want to take my ghosts, Alicia, confront them face to face, snarl at them, stick out my tongue, wiggle my fingers from the sides of my head, nya-nya!" (130).

On the other hand, there are times when Teresa takes a more formal or, according to white American academic standards, "sophisticated" tone. For example, in Letter Eleven, she offers an explanation of the complex relationship between her and Alicia: "We weren't free of society's tenets to be convinced we

could exist indefinitely without the demands and complications one aggregated with the supreme commitment to a man" (45). In a similar tone, in Letter Fourteen, she tries to clarify her definition of Alicia's beauty: "i'm not referring to that inner beauty one goes on about with diplomacy and discretion as consolation for the absence of external attributes, ever critical to women beings" (51). Interestingly, following this passage, Teresa moves into a more poetic expression to reveal what she *does* mean by beauty: "You keep your virgin hair long, long, a snake hung by its tail down the narrow ripples of your vertebrae. Putting antiquated values regarding feminine beauty aside, it *is* lovely. You know that. That's why you keep it, brushing fastidiously nightly like a weaver of precious silk" (51). Similarly, the poetry Teresa includes in some of her letters shifts between formal and informal, including the vernacular. Because Teresa's letters are informal ones, addressed to an intimate friend, there are no real restrictions on style or tone. Although most informal letters would be written in an informal style and tone, it is not unusual for such a letter to include poetry or philosophical deliberations that might require a more "elevated" style of language.

Teresa, then, moves repeatedly between formal English, necessary for her being heard by a "mainstream" audience, and informal English, which might be more commonly associated with a lower-strata, mestiza culture, and

between the two, she generates poetic expression that draws attention to the power of language itself, the power to produce vision and perspective and/or to explode those things. For example, the poem that occurs in Letter Twelve describing Alicia's experience with Rodney, her "boyfriend from Harlem" (34), employs an informal, and trivializing, tone to depict an image of an event that might more ideally--and more conventionally in the case of many male poets--be celebrated through ornate, elevated language. She describes the sexual encounter that began Alicia's long relationship with "Rodney / your lover since the age of sixteen. / While his father got wasted at a bar / the tiny red stain on a grey sheet / made you his" (47). In a later poem describing Teresa's encounter with "the old world" represented by the Mexican medical student, she mixes ornate, formal language with less formal words and images to emphasize the decay of a world she previously idealized. She describes her entry "[p]ast the wrought iron gates" and her being "swallowed by 16th century / deteriorated sanctum" (60). After "mak[ing] love / fast" with her under the "bare bulb" of the bathroom ceiling, the "son" of the old world "turned / a freckled back to her presence" (61). This rejection is significant since she is confronted by the collapse of her mythical "old world": "This was her last night / in the homeland / of spiritual devastation" (61). In this poem, formal words and phrases like "16th century deteriorated sanctum"--already suggesting that this

world is falling apart--are integrated with informal words and phrases such as "crumpled pack of cigarettes," "making love fast," and "bare bulb" to deconstruct the long-idealized "old world."

Yet, Teresa does not simply turn away from that collapsed world. Instead, she floats among the worlds of her relatives and ancestors, Native American, Mexican, and U.S. American. While she does not have access to the language of her Native American ancestors, she expresses herself readily in Spanish, even sometimes turning an English word into a Spanish-sounding one, like the substitution of "Nuyorquina" (18) for New Yorker. She relates Spanish dialogue from episodes with her relatives, friends, and acquaintances (e.g., "'Y traeme una para mi y el nino, hija,' tia Filo said, coming around the house with Peloncito by the hand" {19}), and includes Spanish words and phrases in her poetry as well, such as "Un cuento sin ritmo/Time is Fluid" (70). Her use of language associated with her various identities becomes, in fact, something of a collage, a collection of fragments brought together to make a powerful expression of who Teresa is. The shifts in tone and/or dialect and between English and Spanish generate an awareness for the reader that Teresa cannot be defined by any one of these languages, though each one shapes her in some way, as we will see, and that the medium of letters accommodates her fragmented identity.

The metaphors used by Teresa in her letters reveal the same tension seen in the use of multiple languages. These metaphors typically address the conflict between the desire for essentialism, for a "home," and the flaws in the capacity of essentialism as a concept for describing reality. For example, the religious representations are double-edged. For Teresa, the Catholic religion is inescapable. The church points to life that might be condemned by an almighty, all-knowing God. Teresa asks Alicia in Letter Four, "Do you know the smell of a church? . . . a CATHEDRAL, with doors the height of two very tall men and so heavy that when you pull one open to enter you feel as small as you are destined" (30). Teresa's memory of her past is steeped in the experience of this kind of church: "It smells of incense, hot oils, the wax of constant burning candles, melting at a vigilant pace, the plaster of an army of saints watching with fixed glass eyes, revered in exchange for being mediators and delivering your feeble prayers. It smells of flowers and palms that precede Easter. It smells of death" (30). Here, the church is revealed to be both wonderful and terrifying. Even though she ran out of the confession box at eighteen years of age and never returned to church, she cannot disregard the church's place in her life. When she gives birth to a son, she has him baptized; as she explains in Letter Forty, "It's been said once a Catholic, always a Catholic. Perhaps it was a superstitious idiosyncrasy that provoked me to want

Vittorio baptized" (134). Although the early experience in the confession box drove her away from her religious life temporarily, she writes in Letter Twenty-Four that her regard for her spiritual heritage serves as a liberating force when she and Alicia are threatened by bad spirits while staying at the home of the young engineers in Mexico for a few days. Since Alicia has no spiritual power as a result of her having no belief in spiritual matters, it is up to Teresa to protect them from the "massive rolling of energy blacker than the darkness in the room" (88): "Clutching the crystal-beaded rosary in my hands and winding it around your fingers against my chest. i whispered with an exorcist's will in your ear . . . *Our Father Who art in heaven* . . . [ellipses and emphasis Castillo's]" (88).

Yet, some of Teresa's letters reveal her recognition of the limiting effects of Christianity as well. Even in light of her bad experience in the confessional, she writes in Letter One that she was married not in the church but in a park by a Hare Krishna. She reflects back on this when her Madrina warns her of the consequences of divorce: "According to the Church, even if you get a divorce, you'll always be married and you'll live in sin with any other man, Teresita. . . . We didn't even get married *in* a church, i added" (22). Likewise, in Letter Twenty-Seven, she describes a dream in which she visits a village, one not yet destroyed by a world of "progress." This village "didn't seek to change the

world but lived in good faith and prayer offered to an imposing God" (103). Of course, in light of the impositions of God and of "the world," this village has no future. Its imposing God will put a stranglehold on it which will allow its absorption by European culture and which will also mean its virtual annihilation. The metaphors of the death-smell of the church and the dream-village are mitigated, however. For instance, she writes in Letter Three of the Toltec ruins which are symbols of gods who, for Teresa, pre-existed the Christian one: "monolithic statues in tribute to warriors and a benevolent god in self-exile who reappeared later on Mayan shores, and again, on the back of a four legged beast to display his mortal fallibilities" (25). However, even this benevolent vision includes only men. And it is still a monolith, a system in which truth is fixed, imposed, and imposing. While this mythic land may offer Teresa a source of strength, it ultimately holds no "home" for her.

The essentialist system of patriarchal rule, both in the United States and in Mexico, is represented ambivalently as well in metaphors that reveal its snakelike abilities both to embrace and to choke. When Alicia joins a women's group in order to become independent enough to pursue her career, the group imposes celibacy as a requirement for membership (111). The problems Alicia encounters after joining the group result from "the absence of what [she] couldn't pinpoint to anything but nature yielding [her] body and spirit despite

society's obstacles. Men and women belonged together" (112). Alicia wants a family, someone with whom to share the responsibilities and the joys of life. She ends up sharing her apartment with a Viet Nam veteran, Abdel. Teresa has acknowledged in Letter Eleven that the need Alicia seems to be filling in this episode is the need "to seek approval from man through sexual meetings" (45). Yet, Teresa has also betrayed the movement by returning to her husband the first time. Even after she has left him again, Teresa suggests in Letter Thirty that to commit to celibacy would be "biting your nose off to spite your face" (111). Although the feminist movement of this period succeeds in generating an awareness for women, and for some men, of the inequities experienced in United States society, the movement itself is not a saving entity for Alicia or for Teresa. As many have noted, one of the movement's biggest obstacles is the difficulty of effecting separatism in a world in which heterosexuality is dominant. Teresa feels, for instance, the impossibility of such a thing as separatism in the context of Alicia's and her experience. Yet, in Letter Thirty, even as she empathizes with what Alicia is feeling in her desire for a relationship with a man, Teresa describes being choked by her relationship with Alexis, the flamenco artist: "[I]t was a period in which all those ideals were twisted and made perverse by the man who held me rumped, like composition sheets, in his tight grip" (112).

This image of a hand keeping her trapped is enhanced by the snake metaphor used to describe the relationship between men and women. Teresa writes in Letter Ten that having rejected men for just a little while, Alicia, Teresa, and her childhood friend who had left her husband "to find herself" (44) lived together, seeking strength from one another, for, as she notes, "We were obsessed / with visions of snakes that threatened / to wind themselves around our yearning hearts . . ." (44). Although Letter Twenty-One describes from a third person point of view either her or Alicia's fascination with snakes as representative of Coatlicue, a version of the Mother Earth,² this symbol is a complex one. As Teresa and Alicia walk along the Yucatan beach, "[o]ne picked up a dead branch and lingeringly drew something in the sand. She drew a snake. S. She draws another snake. S. Two snakes. S.S. She was obsessed with snakes. The snake woman, Coatlicue" (72). This snake image is an empowered female one, yet it is also an image that depends upon the patriarchy's dominant position for its power. In Massacre of the Dreamers, Castillo explains that by the time the Mother Earth figure evolved into Coatlicue in the sixteenth century,

[t]he death aspect of the dual power of Mother--fertility and death--had taken over. Around her neck a necklace of men's

² Castillo's Massacre of the Dreamers 11.

hearts and hands was symbolic of her insatiable thirst for human sacrifice. Let's keep in mind that that image of Coatlicue was created in the context of a war-oriented, conquest-driven society, that of the Aztecs. (11)

Thus, the snake image in Teresa's letters is an ambivalent one, ultimately reflecting the patriarchy. In Letter Nineteen, in a description of Mexico, Teresa expresses her ambivalence toward the place she would like to call her homeland but which rejects her as "revolting" since "the only respect granted a woman is that which a gentleman bestows upon a lady. Clearly, we were no ladies" (65). She also describes this "homeland" using the snakelike image: "Mexico. Melancholy, profoundly right and wrong, it embraces as it strangulates" (65).

The image of self she has constructed from the internalization of these historical value systems and legends, while it is based on essential systems that pose as unified ones, does not, of course, hold up. As a fundamental proponent of truth, the Church fails. As a mythical homeland with the potential for reestablishment, the pre-Columbian culture of Mexico fails as well. And pervasive in both modern U.S. culture and that of modern Mexico is the deceptive system of the strangulating patriarchy, ostensibly promoting individualism yet oppressive of it in actuality. Teresa's grandmother gives her

insight into the power of these things over her: "i reminded myself of something my grandmother had revealed long ago. Spirits could do no physical harm to one; the only harm that could come would be from one's own fear"

(77). The metaphors for the Church, the Toltec world and modern day patriarchy reveal them to be essentialist and frightening. The cathedral with its big heavy doors and the ruins with their monoliths are imposing, limiting even as they claim essential, fixed truth. The patriarchal rule, resting upon the power established by these traditions and on its power to seduce, traps and ultimately destroys. On the other hand, Teresa's grandmother, the spiritual healer, who gives advice that it is Teresa who creates her own reality, suggests the other side of essentialism. That is, she suggests that it is Teresa who creates that which is to be feared, and it is only she who can disempower that fear.

The ambivalence Teresa feels about all of these ideologies results, then, from her constant movement between conflicting essentialist perspectives. Just as her metaphors of religious and political monoliths function to reveal that ambivalence, the form she chooses, letters, serves as a metaphor for that movement as well. Serving as a metaphorical mirror, the letters reveal the contrasting functions of a mirror. Not only may they serve ostensibly to reflect but also, more accurately, as a medium for deconstruction/construction of an

image. When Teresa meets Alvaro Perez Perez in the town square of a small Mexican town, she sees a reflection of herself because of "the Indian spirit of mutual ancestors" (54). Teresa comments that "[w]hen one is confronted by the mirror, the spirit trembles" (55). Yet soon Teresa's and Alvaro's different perspectives on the world send them on their own ways, the differences in their views caused mostly by their different genders in a culture wherein a woman's travelling without a man is enough to earn her the label of "tramp" (57). The ideal of her Native American ancestral heritage as a "home" for her does not mirror her fully, so she utilizes a mirror more fragmented and fluctuating, her letters.

In Letter Nineteen, Teresa makes the following statement: "Destiny is not a metaphysical confrontation with one's self, rather, society has knit its pattern so tight that a confrontation with it is inevitable" (65). Although her identity encompasses the tradition of Hispanic Catholicism and its own inheritance of Native American religious superstitions, including ideas of transcendent spirituality, this statement hits upon the inescapable fact of constructed reality. Although it might be an interesting ideal, and even a feasible one in some realm, that one has a metaphysical self that exists in a pure form outside of the influences of reality, in *this* realm, that reality

shapes the way one sees her very self. For instance, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano addresses the nature of Teresa's and Alicia's mirroring of one another:

While the text uses the image of the mirror to speak of the relationship between the two women, their mirroring of each other works paradoxically against their identification, due at times to the inaccuracy of the representation. In the other each sees the reflection of her own need and dependence from which she must avert her gaze. Yet they love each other more than men, and are "driven to see the other improved in her own reflection."

(67)

Teresa's letters exhibit the same subjectivity as a mirror image. Although Teresa and Alicia achieve, at various points in the novel, what Teresa perceives as a state of oneness, performing "cranelike movements in slow motion one and its mirror" (128), each is actively working to shape the other. As Teresa understands it, "We needled, stabbed, manipulated, cut, and through it all we loved, driven to see the other improved in her own reflection" (29). This comment is interesting in light of the suggestion in the previous quote that Teresa is Alicia's reflection and Alicia is Teresa's. Not only does each seek to improve the other, but also each needles, stabs, manipulates, and cuts at herself, longing to improve the reflection of the other--in other words, her self. Yet for

each, the agency she can exhibit in trying to shape her self is frustrated often by the pattern society has knit in the shape of herself. What does this fact say about the letters themselves?

The letters are certainly written by Teresa as a way to get to know her self. As such, they seem to have an essential quality, a reflexive one. Similarly, Teresa's reality, reflected in her letters, might seem to be passed on to the reader, Alicia, as well as to us, just as one might wish to pass on the truth, whole and material. Yet, there are several things which contradict this essential quality traditionally attributed to the written word. First of all, as I have discussed in regard to each of the novels in this study, Teresa is not only reflecting herself in the letters, but she is also creating herself. She exhibits this in referring to herself as "i." Yarbrow-Bejarano notes that

[w]riting the Chicana "I" questions the authority of dominant discourses, and resists the appropriation of the knowing subject either male or female that 'forgets' race and class oppression. Chicana writers', like Castillo's, struggle to claim the "I" of literary discourse is inseparable from their struggle for empowerment in the economic, social and political spheres. (72)

While Teresa is empowered by her ability to speak in the first person, she resists the tendency to become the authorial "I" and instead calls her self "i."

While hers is still the narrative voice, she also forces the reader to recognize her role by her unconventional choice of pronoun for her self. Further, as Teresa suggests, there is no essential Teresa to create that self; rather it is she, whose shape is at least partly molded by society, who is constructing the letters. Thus, there is no way to free her self entirely from what surrounds and constructs her. The idea of total individualism is thwarted, for good or for ill, and Teresa acknowledges that it and the benefits attributed to it, including the American dream, are impossible.

Yet, in an act of agency--of a self empowered by the knowledge that ideologies are only that, ideologies--Teresa/Castillo designs a postmodern text whose shape is not predetermined by her. Barbara Brinson Curiel addresses the postmodern quality of Castillo's text, focusing on Castillo's crossing boundaries between different genres. In a discussion of the heteroglossia set up by Castillo's suggested readings of the novel, Curiel describes in particular Castillo's differentiation between appearances and reality. She notes that, for example, there are "strong intertextual links between The Mixquiahuala Letters and Miguel de Cervantes' Don Quixote [revealed most overtly by the suggestion of a Quixotic reading of The Mixquiahuala Letters]. . . . Both are metafiction, fictions about fiction" (15). Curiel argues further that in setting up this connection, Castillo chooses

to present the range of viewpoints on issues such as gender roles, courtship, and marriage, aspects of contemporary life which are in a supreme state of flux, and so has created a space for her own vision, presented with all of its living conflicts and contradictions. She has created, instead of a monoglot and closed narrative unity, a "dynamic-unity" which is uniquely capable of representing a conflicting and evolving cultural and social life.

(21)

Curiel's suggestion is, then, that in blurring the boundaries between the novel that employs a conventional ending and less conventional examples of the form (specifically those lacking a fixed ending), The Mixquiahuala Letters yields a more honest, though unresolved, commentary on its subject. Not only does Castillo refuse to provide a traditional fixed ending for the novel, but she forces the reader to an awareness that he/she helps determine his/her experience of reading the novel. The reader does not simply read an account of Teresa's and Alicia's experiences, but helps to construct that narrative. Further, Castillo forces the reader to acknowledge that social constructs will influence, perhaps even determine, the way the reader will "choose" to read the narrative. With labels like "cynic," "conformist," and "quixotic" to choose from, the reader must ask why she/he leans toward a particular way of reading the narrative and how

she/he was influenced to do so. I myself chose to read from first to last letter, which I think is perhaps even more conformist than Castillo's "conformist" order; Curiel calls it "[c]onventionalist" (12). Although the order Castillo suggests for the conformist allows for a happy perspective on reality, my own insists that if one thoroughly and systematically (chronologically, in this case) examines the evidence, one will better know the truth. Yet regardless of the reader's biases, Teresa's/Castillo's form brings her/him to an awareness of those choices and of the influences on those choices.³ It is this awareness, she suggests, that can effect some agency over one's experience.

In addition, the structural play she sets up raises some questions about dominance and control. As Alvina E. Quintana notes, both in her dissertation and in "The Novelist as Ethnographer," in the context of her letters, Teresa/Castillo mediates between ethnography and conventional fiction. Quintana argues that Chicana literature in general "functions as a bold cultural invention, which ironically enough resembles what we have come to respect as interpretive or experimental ethnography" (74-75). She suggests that rather than serving as an "objective" account of cultural habits, traditions, and values,

³ In an interview with Castillo, Mitchell, et al., ask about a story which parallels The Mixquiahuala Letters in its lack of a conventional plot: "Does that in any way reflect the 'limbo' that maybe the Chicano person has to deal with, in regards to identifying himself or herself?" Castillo answers, "I know you don't want that responsibility as a reader, but you got it" (154).

as a conventional ethnographical work would have proposed to be, or as a fictive account of personal experience, detached from social and cultural forces, The Mixquiahuala Letters is both. Quintana notes, "As a parody of modern ethnography [which would employ the voice of objective authority], Castillo's text becomes an enterprise that provides the voices and experiences involved in growing up Chicana, revealing in [Eric] Wolf's words 'unsuspected connections among sets of social activities and cultural forms'" (80). This issue of objective authority versus subjective participant overlaps with the issue of Anglo dominance. Although Teresa has no real space in which to create herself, she refuses to repeat the oppressive act of the ethnographer by taking on the voice of authority. Rather, she unravels the objective, ordered account of her experiences and makes it entirely a subjective but nevertheless an important comment on cultural, social, and gender differences.

The main effect of Castillo's use of language, metaphor, and form to exhibit the problems of essentialism is an undermining of dominant ideologies as systems by which one may be fully defined. Within a form historically accepted by the patriarchy as a "women's form," Castillo examines patriarchal rule as a factor in the shaping of all aspects of society. The variety of contradictory subject positions that Teresa experiences reveals, in turn, her problems of identity under the influence of the patriarchal system. She is not

accepted as an orthodox member of either her ancestral religion or of Catholicism since she chooses to pose as a free agent, leaving her husband and travelling through Mexico with "only" another woman as her companion and calling herself a poet. Here, Teresa faces another problem of identity: she seeks the acceptance and the affirmation of her Mexican roots, yet the more "liberal" definition of her sexuality clashes with cultural ones. Norma Alarcon well describes the conflict for a woman between commitment to cultural revolution and expression of her sexuality, specifically the erotic:

Given the assumed class position of the speaker herself, affirming the erotic, as she takes pause from the class struggle, is tantamount to speaking against herself, or so her "brother/lover" may attest. The implicit suggestion that the erotic and the class struggle may be incompatible in a patriarchal world, when both are made public, places the underclass female in a double bind, since she may be forced to choose between areas of life that, for her, are intertwined or indivisible. In my view, the speakers in Castillo's work refuse to make such choices. (95-96)

Teresa's refusal to choose presupposes an awareness of the gap between her sexual liberation and her Mexican roots. Yet, similar to Castillo's refusal to reject a traditional form like the epistolary novel, Teresa refuses to reject her

Mexican heritage since it is an important fragment of her world which may be of use to her.

In fact, in some ways, Teresa seems to have an easier time of it in Mexico than she does in the United States because in "the old world," the odds she is up against are overt and she can more easily set up a defense against them. For example, when Alicia is almost raped twice in one evening, Teresa has seen it coming, for she knows that "in the lion's den one doesn't play by one's own rules" (84). She knows that for a woman to dance freely with a man or men in this country is for her to "admit" her promiscuity. Although she feels her own weakness as a savior for her friend because she has "a vagina too" (84), she hurls words into the air anyway in an attempt to overcome the "spell" the men are under. Significantly the words are "LEAVE HER ALONE YOU SON OF A GOD-DAMNED FATHERLESS BITCH OR . . ." (84). Even the words she uses to break the spell are words that confirm woman's inferior position in this society. As fatherless, woman is condemned. Yet Teresa's acknowledgement, her understanding of this system, is a strength for her in situations like this one. She holds an advantage over Alicia who does not understand the system and does not, like Teresa, "hav[e] an edge on society's contradictions by admitting to their enforced power over us" (92). The advantage Teresa holds while in familiar territory parallels the agility she

exhibits in the epistolary mode. Her letters to Alicia, in a "women's form," offer her space within which she can express her fragmented self and not be as vulnerable in this regard as she might be in other circumstances.

In contrast to her experience in Mexico, in the United States, Teresa is not so advantaged. She states that "[w]omen in the United States could rally around government buildings, flash placards at media cameras, write letters of complaint to their congressmen (or congresswomen if that were the case)" (92). These things are true, and both Teresa and Alicia have a sense of the attainability of freedom as women as a result of the women's movement in the United States. Yet, there is a deceptiveness in the idea of this newfound freedom, for both Alicia and Teresa find themselves demeaned in relationships with men, even in the United States, because of their status as women. For instance, Alicia's relationship with Ahmad leaves her drained: "The man/who lived with you was like a mean draft to one in the last phases of pneumonia. He spent the food allowance on smoke and beer. He brought unsavory types to hang out in the apartment. The plants withered" (129). Although it is not only Alicia who suffers in this relationship--Ahmad commits suicide in the end, aware that he does not fit society's definition of a man--it is Alicia's understanding that she is not enough without a man that makes her vulnerable to this kind of relationship.

Similarly, even in the United States, Teresa takes a submissive role in her relationships. Her husband subjects her to humiliation even after she has left him once and then returned. After Teresa travels with her husband Libra, his partner Melvin, and Melvin's girlfriend Cristina to visit a farm in the country and see a horse that is up for sale, Melvin tells the women to hitch a ride back to town so the men can talk about "business" (41). When Teresa seems shocked at his suggestion, he charges her, "[C]ommon woman. Don't give Libra a hard time now. You always talkin' 'bout being equal to men, being able to do anything a man can do, don't tell us you afraid of hitching home!" (41). Even though Teresa leaves Libra after this episode, she falls often into the role of submissive partner to men. The gay poet who becomes her roommate is automatically given, by Teresa, the superior role as artist even though Teresa considers herself a poet. Yet, at least he does not dominate her in other ways. She explains, "I deferred humbly to his talent and as he was homosexual, he wasn't interested in making me a conquest" (109). As a gay man, he is sensitive to her need to have "someone's approval of [her] existence" (109). But when Alexis moves in, both submit to him. She explains, "Then the fire of Alexis spread, not just throughout our souls that ached for understanding, protection, approval, but to our minds and it manifested in petty jealousies and competitions for his attention" (110). Though Teresa ultimately triumphs in the

contest for Alexis, the relationship ends in trauma after she aborts the child that results from the affair. She has the abortion, exhibiting some control over her experience, because "he would never been out of my life if i'd had his child" (116), but she does not escape without some major scars--she has loved him. After he screams at her, "You bitch!", aims a blow at her which becomes a near miss, and accuses her of "never think[ing] of anyone but [her]self!" (115), she orders him out of her house. Yet, determined to maintain control of the relationship, control that she has stolen in having the abortion, Alexis refuses to leave "when i wanted him to go" (116). Rather, it is when she is "up and about, able to cook, do his laundry, that he decided to leave" (116). Further, while Teresa exhibits some agency in this episode, she has trouble recovering. She writes Alicia, "i'm much better now and will be up and around soon to gather the pieces of the woman who was my self" (114).

In Letter Thirty-Two, she writes Alicia her definition of love: "In the classic sense, it describes in one syllable all the humiliation that one is born to and pressed upon to surrender to a man" (117). Perhaps it is her failure to understand that in the United States she is involved in a system which oppresses her just as that of Mexico does that makes her vulnerable to this kind of humiliation. In Mexico, her recognition of this fact gives her an edge. In the U.S., she is deceived into thinking that she is an equal with the men of her

society, and this belief keeps her from having any advantages. She writes Alicia, "You had been angry that i never had problems attracting men. You pointed out the obvious, the big breasts, full hips and thighs, the kewpie doll mouth. Underlining the superficial attraction men felt toward me is what you did not recognize. i was docile" (119).⁴

Perhaps the most striking effect of patriarchal control over these women's experience is that, both in Mexico and in the United States, it keeps them from a homosexual relationship. Although both have been treated badly by men, even those with good intentions, Alicia and Teresa never sever sexual ties with men. Ultimately, they need men in order to be defined and approved of in a patriarchal system. Yet, they have also been intimate with one another. In some ways, they have understood each other in ways they have never understood or been understood by the men they have known. They have been like beacons to one another: "By candlelight we each found our way to a room for the night, like phantoms, called to each other out of the blackness to give a

⁴ Alarcon points out the contradictions between the "docile" Teresa and the more assertive and angry Teresa. While these contradictions are apparent and are key evidence of the multiplicity of Teresa's identity, Alarcon's suggestion that Castillo "mocks" Teresa's submissiveness seems misguided. She comments that "confessions [of docility and complicitous hopes] are barely audible. They tend to get lost in Tere's latter-day, after-the-fact sardonic anger" (100). Teresa does mock herself, as Alarcon notes. However, rather than mocking Teresa, Castillo seems to be generating for the reader a way of sympathizing with Teresa by constructing a narrative in which one can see the nature of her multiplicity. As Alarcon herself argues earlier in her essay, Castillo seems to refuse to commit either to her culture or to feminism to the exclusion of the other. The indication seems, rather, that, for Teresa, separating her culture from the oppressive roles it has set up is an impossibility. It is only the recognition of that fact that seems to liberate Teresa to some extent.

point of destination" (32). Although they have never been sexual lovers, Teresa defines their relationship as a "love affair"--"When i say ours was a love affair, it is an expression of nostalgia and melancholy for the depth of our empathy" (45). She explains that they have "never been lovers" and yet

It is true we slept together curled up on the rickety Mexican bus that wound its way through the nocturnal roads from one strange place to another; a soft shoulder served as a pillow for the other's head. . . .

It is true

we bathed together

in the most casual sense, scrubbed each other's back, combed out one another's wet hair, braided it with more care than grandmothers who invariably catch it on broken tooth combs. We pierced each other's ears.

For the first half of the decade we were an objective one, a single entity, nondiscriminate of the other's being. (127-28)⁵

There is a paradox, then, involved in the formation of this intimate relationship: while the patriarchy promotes it, the patriarchy also limits it.

⁵Teresa employs a somewhat poetic format in this passage. Here, I have tried to maintain this format at it appears in the novel.

Teresa acknowledges that it is struggling with the problems caused them by their status as women that has brought her and Alicia so close. She explains, "Our thoughts had been synchronized. The closeness we had felt for each other had been heightened by our desire to survive during our travels that had been filled with unpredictable dilemmas" (98). It is not biological essentialism that has generated their "uterine comprehension" (24). Rather, it is their common experience as women. Teresa explains that "our sticking together had become a habit born of preventative measures" (87). But, the patriarchal structure has taken measures to keep its control over even such a relationship. The fact that women are defined in such a society by their relationships with men, relationships with other women not being good enough, enters into the dynamics of Teresa's and Alicia's friendship. Even though Teresa describes their "being one," they are never *completely* synchronized because of tension between them in regard to men. Alicia resents Teresa for having a body that men desire. Teresa resents Alicia because she is white: "Society had made them [white women] above all possessions desired. And they believed it" (49). When they seek comfort from the danger and pain they have experienced in Mexico and in the United States at the hands of the men they have known, they turn again to men: "We licked our wounds with the underside of penises and applied semen to our tender bellies and breasts like

Tiger's balm" (106). Teresa's partner in this process is Alexis who ends up hurting her as much as, or worse than, any of her other lovers. Although she and Alicia are such compassionate companions to each other, society makes them feel that this relationship is inferior to that between man and woman:

"The assumption here is that neither served as a legitimate companion for the other" (66).

This feeling leads to bickering between the two friends as a result of their own insecurities. When Teresa and Alicia visit the Zapotec ruins and meet up with a local artist, a native of the area, his initial interest in Alicia's art is mistaken for romantic interest. When he begins to show romantic interest for Teresa instead, Alicia becomes jealous and resentful. Back at the hotel, Teresa, anxious to reconcile, speaks aloud of her weariness of men, but this does not break down the barrier that the episode has created between them. Alicia cries, "lifting [her] face to the dull mirror, 'You . . . just . . . don't . . . understand . . . Do . . . you . . . ?'" Teresa's answer, a lie, is "No!" (64). Even in her attempts to reconcile with Alicia, Teresa cannot admit her own part in the system, a part which she later characterizes as docility. Again, in Letter Thirty-Eight, Teresa chastises Alicia for stealing a former lover, Vicente, from her: "How long did you think i would tolerate your growing pains?" (131). Not particularly connected to the letters around it, it lies a fragment among fragments, evidence

of the element in the two women that is complicit with the patriarchal system to the extent that they cannot be "one." Teresa's description of Alicia's art seems to describe their relationship: "one angry doll inside the house, before a lopsided table with real, miniature copper utensils and clay vessels. The other drowns in the ocean, visible from the window of the little house" (124). Even though there seems to have been a type of merging between them during their experiences, as Gonzales-Berry suggests, it has been temporary, if periodic, since patriarchal standards are a force neither woman can ignore.

But, the epistolary form does allow a sort of agency. Carl Gutierrez-Jones argues that while Teresa fails to transcend patriarchal control over her relationship to men and to Alicia, in her failure to transfer her understanding of this ideology's workings to Alicia, through her letters, she "challenges the power [of the oppressor] as well as the process of gender construction and its goal of perpetuating silent acceptance" (115). She does what Ramon Saldivar suggests feminism is capable of doing: "pluralizing meaning by violating the taboos erected by the classist, racist, sexist ruling-order by opening her lips, politicizing the word, and proclaiming its revolutionary force" (198-99). One taboo that has been violated through this form involves the relationship between Teresa and Alicia. Here, in her letters, Teresa can call it a "love affair." Here, the patriarchy does not keep her from acknowledging the

significance of the relationship or its superiority over those Teresa and Alicia have with their male lovers.

In addition, the epistolary form allows Teresa to be all the fragments that make up her self. Her greetings and signatures show the fluctuation in that self. Her addresses to Alicia vary from "My sister, companion, my friend" (24) to "Poor Alicia" (34), "So Alicia, as you may reluctantly recall" (52), "Mi agridulce Alicia" (134), to no greeting at all. Her closures vary also, from "Always, Teresa" (38), to "i'm sorry, Alicia, T." (64), "just another pretty face" (70), "*Amen*" (90), "Always, Tere" (125), to no signature at all. At one moment a self who cannot admit to Alicia that she understands the effects of male rejection on her friend, she is in another moment, another letter, a self who can and does: "i wouldn't deny to you again that i understand why you hated yourself" (119). And not only is Teresa a composite of fragments, but she also seems aware of this, that she is like "a collage of imaginary realities" (120). Her description of Alicia's art can also be applied to Teresa's letters: "There are traces of Frida Kahlo and postmortem praise, her exposed heart as a blood pumping organ rather than the romantic metaphor expressing emotional rejection" (127). Teresa's metaphors are not romantic ones; rather, they serve to deconstruct romantic ones. In addition, she is able, through her letters, to

reconstruct a fragmented self, rather than an ostensibly unified one, and, in doing so, to construct a new metaphor of that kind of self.

By choosing the form she does, a collection of fragments that may be organized in any way the reader chooses, Teresa/Castillo suggests that the limits which keep Teresa and Alicia from the full benefits of their relationship can be deconstructed only after they are recognized. Teresa wrestles with the ideologies that shape her view of the world, never achieving a complete escape. However, the process of constructing the mirror image in which she may view, somewhat objectively, her self, her experiences, is what gives her a certain amount of agency over the definition of her self. Since constructing the self is a process, Castillo infers that it must be a continual activity. Further, since the reader is in a state of self-examination as soon as he/she comes to this text and attempts to organize it according to his/her own preferences, he/she simultaneously begins a process of deconstruction/construction as well. This process, Castillo suggests, is the only avenue away from the traps of ideological perspective.

Conclusion

For Ivy, Celie, and Teresa, the letter functions, as I have argued, as a way for them to observe imposed images of themselves, to deconstruct those images, and to reconstruct images which are fragmentary and fluctuating. Written primarily in the present tense, each letter serves as a fragment of the collection in addition to functioning as a reflection--and, as I have argued, a constructed reflection--of the self in the moment that the letter is written. Structurally, then, the letter works well in constructing the fragmentary self. Also, the writer gains the chance to say "I" and to send that projection of her self beyond herself because of her choice to write in letter form. Yet, it is specifically due to her calling attention to the material quality of the letters that each writer gains liberation from writing her self as "I." If she did not experience the awareness of the constructedness of reality, including the constructedness of her own version of her self and her world, the writer would only reinstate the power of ideologies that oppressed her from the start. Thus, Ivy's burning of her letters, Celie's disruptive construction of a utopic ending, and Teresa's forcing the reader to an awareness of how she/he reads the texts are acts that ultimately liberate the letter writer and the letter reader(s).

The multiple self that results from deconstructing ideologies of gender, race, sexual preference, capitalism, and Christianity, all of which are governed by patriarchal ideology, is a self freed from the notion that one can be inscribed in a unified way by any particular ideology. By the end of Fair and Tender Ladies, Ivy has established an identity that is fluid and that, thus, may not be easily appropriated by any ideology. Likewise, by the time Celie writes of her miraculous reunion with her loved ones in The Color Purple, she has constructed a self that has broken the oppressive ideological spell that has previously controlled her view of the world and of her self. In The Mixquiahuala Letters, Teresa's letters ultimately subvert the systematic oppressiveness of ideologies as well, though she does so not through utopic ending but by directly undermining the very notion of order, a notion which previously caused her much anxiety in light of her position in that order.

While I have concentrated in this study on the similarities among Fair and Tender Ladies, The Color Purple, and The Mixquiahuala Letters, the novels contain qualities which, of course, make each unique. The choices each protagonist makes in determining addressees, for example, set the novels apart. Ivy writes a multitude of people since, as she notes, "it means so much to me to keep in touch" (182). Although Ivy is poor and is somewhat isolated from her community in her home at Sugar Fork, the pain of her isolation seems to lessen

in comparison to that of Celie, who has been forbidden to speak. Celie's choice of God as the initial recipient of her letters reveals the limitation of her choices. God is the only one to whom she has not been forbidden to share her experiences and feelings. Teresa, on the other hand, chooses her addressee apparently because of Alicia's participation in the experiences that concern Teresa. While Alicia may not remember those experiences the same way Teresa does, Teresa spends a fair amount of time trying to recall for Alicia details of events that will explain her interpretation of them. Thus, not only do Teresa's efforts presumably draw the two friends closer, but they also aid Teresa in working through notions of her identity.

Another notable difference in the novels is the ethnic/cultural diversity amongst the protagonists. While it may be accurate to say that each woman experiences conflicts due to her ethnic/cultural associations, it is clear that Ivy's experience as a white woman from Appalachia is different from that of Celie. Likewise, though both Celie and Teresa are women of color, Celie's experience as a poor, uneducated black woman differs from that of Teresa, an educated mestiza woman. My emphasis on the similarities of the novels and of their main characters has not been intended as a way to gloss over the differences, for certainly there is as much to be gained in examining those differences as

there is in observing common characteristics among the works, but that would be another study.

Aside from the possibilities of such a study, the epistolary novel offers many more opportunities for future scholarship. The studies by Perry, Altman, Kauffman, and MacArthur of letter novels from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries form an important foundation for further work on epistolarity during that vast time period. Further, since contemporary letter novels have only recently been targeted in works concerned with exploring the epistolary form, those novels comprise a rich field for study. While Bower, Campbell, and Kauffman, in her second book, address many of these novels, each of those studies is, of course, limited in the perspectives from which it may examine each novel. Novels like Smith's Fair and Tender Ladies, Castillo's The Mixquiahuala Letters, Updike's S, and Barth's Letters have only recently been recognized for their contribution to the epistolary form.

As was suggested by the debate in my Introduction over the definition of epistolarity, a broader definition of the term opens up the field even further. Some questions that might be further explored include the following: What really is the difference between a diary novel that is addressed to a particular reader and a letter novel? Is a letter that is addressed to a recipient who never receives it really a letter? If so, what makes it such? Further, in an era when,

as Kauffman states, "letterwriting has practically become a lost art" (xiv), what forms of communication might be considered epistolary? Telephone calls? Faxes? E-mailings? If so, what qualities of traditional epistolarity could possibly be retained by these forms? What qualities would be transformed to adapt to the needs of contemporary society? At least some of these questions might be explored by an examination of Austin Wright's recent novel Telling Time, which Christopher Lehmann-Haupt calls, in the title to his New York Times Review, an "Epistolary Tale Told in Faxes and Messages" (B6).

Obviously, these questions open up possibilities not only for scholarly speculation but for future fiction as well. These possibilities reveal the insightfulness of Kauffman's remark that "the very looseness of [the epistolary novel's] conventions have made it resilient, adaptable, and relevant in diverse historical epochs" (Special Delivery xiv). Recent experimentation in the form portends much more to come in epistolary fiction. Thus, scholars would do well to attend to the life of the letter novel, both past and future.

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Vita

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