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INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

Alice Walker's The Color Purple

NEW EDITION



Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations

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Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations

Alice Walker's
The Color Purple
New Edition

Edited and with an introduction by
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**Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations:
Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*—New Edition**

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Contents

Editor's Note	vii
Introduction	1
<i>Harold Bloom</i>	
Celie in the Looking Glass: The Desire for Selfhood in <i>The Color Purple</i>	3
<i>Daniel W. Ross</i>	
Race, Gender, and Nation in <i>The Color Purple</i>	21
<i>Lauren Berlant</i>	
Sifting Through the Controversy: Reading <i>The Color Purple</i>	51
<i>Jacqueline Bobo</i>	
“What She Got to Sing About?”: Comedy and <i>The Color Purple</i>	65
<i>Priscilla L. Walton</i>	
The Purple Colour of Walker Women: Their Journey from Slavery to Liberation	79
<i>Om P. Juneja</i>	
Celie's Search for Identity: A Psychoanalytic Developmental Reading of Alice Walker's <i>The Color Purple</i>	89
<i>Charles L. Proudfit</i>	

With Ears to Hear and Eyes to See: Alice Walker's Parable <i>The Color Purple</i> <i>Diane Gabrielsen Scholl</i>	113
Race and Domesticity in <i>The Color Purple</i> <i>Linda Selzer</i>	125
Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker's Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in <i>The Color Purple</i> <i>Martha J. Cutter</i>	145
Sewing, Quilting, Knitting: Handicraft and Freedom in <i>The Color Purple</i> and <i>A Women's Story</i> <i>Catherine E. Lewis</i>	161
Chronology	175
Contributors	179
Bibliography	181
Acknowledgments	185
Index	187

Editor's Note

My Introduction ungallantly broods upon Alice Walker's agonistic struggle with the influence upon her of Zora Neale Hurston.

The essayists largely join Walker herself in denying any anxiety in literary relations between African American women authors. So deeply are most of them in amiable agreement that they differ only in emphases, not in judgment. Priscilla L. Watson finds a pathos of comedy in *The Color Purple*, after which Charles L. Proudfit bravely ventures a psychoanalysis of the heroine, Celie, while Linda Selzer centers upon black domestic ties.

Ethnic, gender, and black naturalist concerns are taken up by Daniel W. Ross and then by Lauren Berlant, after which Diane Gabrielsen Scholl praises Walker's novel as a stern parable.

Some of the controversies stirred up by Walker are sorted out by Jacqueline Bobo, while Martha J. Cutter invokes the myth of the ravished Philomela.

HAROLD BLOOM

Introduction

THE COLOR PURPLE (1982)

In my old age, as person and as literary critic, I am resolved to give up all polemic, and to limp off the battlefield, carrying my wounds with me, honorable and otherwise. Since I am (somewhat) at odds with nearly every essayist in this volume, as well as with their illustrious subject, a certain wariness necessarily informs my stance in what follows.

Alice Walker and her allied critics tend to idealize the influence-relationship between black women writers, indeed all women writers. Feminist ideology, at least in the academy, holds that rivalry, creative envy, and the sublime contest for the highest place among writers, are all masculine tendencies or anxieties. Either women do not beware other women and never compete with one another (or with their mothers), or else human nature is so purified by feminist discourse that all agonistic elements in literature subside.

Walker, whether in *The Color Purple* or *Meridian*, is very much Zora Neale Hurston's novelistic daughter. No book, she has affirmed, means more to her than *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Though poignant, this affirmation is a touch redundant, since both Celie and *Meridian* are palpable revisions of Hurston's Janie. The literary issue then becomes (at least for old Brontosaurus Bloom) what is added to the representation of character and personality when we turn from rereading Hurston to rereading Walker. And since we are all mortal, whatever our idealisms or our ideologies, do we reread Walker, as I certainly go back to Hurston, or do we yield Walker up, since time is limited?

Walker's most glowing tribute to Hurston has the title: "On Refusing to Be Humbled by Second Place in a Contest You Did Not Design." I fear that all of literature is a contest that any new writer did not and could not design. Nietzsche wrote persuasively of "Hesiod's Contest with Homer," and Hemingway memorably boasted of being in training to take on Tolstoy himself. I grant you that Homer, Hesiod, Nietzsche, Tolstoy, and Hemingway were male, but George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and Iris Murdoch reveal intense agonistic relations between them. Ah, but these were none of them African-American. True. Toni Morrison's superb struggles with precursors involve Faulkner, Woolf, and Ralph Ellison, though Morrison, herself now highly ideological, also denies any share in the anxiety of influence. Perhaps we must wait another generation, and then we will see how younger black women novelists, of comparable gifts, resolve their struggle with Morrison.

The Color Purple, like *Meridian*, closely follows *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by giving us a heroine who has lived more than one revisionist moment in regard to her cultural context. If you repeat that moment, as Walker consciously does, then your imaginative gesture will not be one of origination. Hurston, who was anything but an ideologue, who was neither a feminist nor an African-American nationalist, wrote with the freedom of an original. Shadowed always by Hurston's achievement, Walker has shifted the agonistic ground to issues of feminism and political liberation, but at the high cost (at least for me) of speaking in a voice never altogether her own, the voice of Hurston's Janie.

DANIEL W. ROSS

*Celie in the Looking Glass:
The Desire for Selfhood in The Color Purple*

For many readers the turning point of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* occurs when Celie, the principal character, asserts her freedom from her husband and proclaims her right to exist: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly, and can't cook. . . . But I'm here" (187). Celie's claim is startling because throughout her life she has been subjected to a cruel form of male dominance grounded in control over speech. The novel's very first words alert us to the prohibition against speech served on Celie by her father: "You'd better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy." Thus, Celie writes, addressing her letters to God because she has no one else to write to and because she knows she must never tell no "body." But even then Celie addresses her letters to the orthodox Christian God, another version of the father. In short, Celie's language exists through much of the book without a body or audience, just as she exists without a self or identity.

Finding the courage to speak is a major theme of *The Color Purple*. But the novel also suggests that speech cannot come from the hollow shell of selfhood that Celie presents early on. Thus, I would like to focus on the discovery that must necessarily precede Celie's discovery of speech: the discovery of desire—for selfhood, for other, for community, and for a meaningful place in the Creation. The process of discovering or developing desire begins, for Celie, with the reappropriation of her own body, which was taken from her

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by men—first by her brutal stepfather and then passed on to her husband, Albert. The repossession of her body encourages Celie to seek selfhood and later to assert that selfhood through spoken language. During this process Celie learns to love herself and others and to address even her written language to a body, her sister Nettie, rather than to the disembodied God she has blindly inherited from white Christian mythology. The crucial scene, I will argue, in initiating this process is the mirror scene. In this scene Celie first comes to terms with her own body, thus changing her life forever.

I

One of the primary projects of modern feminism has been to restore women's bodies, appropriated long ago by a patriarchal culture, to them. Because the female body is the most exploited target of male aggression, women have learned to fear or even to hate their bodies. According to Adrienne Rich, women must overcome these negative attitudes if they are to achieve intellectual progress:

But fear and hatred of our bodies had often crippled our brains. Some of the most brilliant women of our time are still trying to think from somewhere outside their female bodies—hence they are still merely reproducing old forms of intellection. (284)

Coming to terms with the body can be, for women, a painful experience. Alicia Ostriker, for example, notes that although among contemporary poets females are more likely to describe the body or to use it as a source of imagery than their male counterparts are, their images often focus on strangulation, cutting, mutilation, or depictions of “psychic hurt in somatic terms” (249). Consequently, women often think of their bodies as torn or fragmented, a pattern evident in Walker's *Celie*. To confront the body is to confront not only an individual's abuse but also the abuse of women's bodies throughout history; as the external symbol of women's enslavement, this abuse represents for woman a reminder of her degradation and her consignment to an inferior status. As the subject of repeated rapes and beatings, Celie tries alternately to ignore and to annihilate her body. The latter is her strategy for defense against her husband's assaults:

He beat me like he beat the children. . . . It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man. (30)

But Celie's ignorance of her body is even more shocking than her desire to annihilate it, as her language makes clear. She describes her own hysterical-

tomy in the words of a child: "A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don't bleed no more" (15). Even this knowledge, personal as it is, comes to Celie second hand.

Celie has no desire to get to know her body until the arrival of her husband's lover, Shug Avery. While serving Shug in the traditional female capacity of nurse, Celie feels her first erotic stirrings and associates them with a new spirituality: "I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying" (53). Celie's stirrings foreshadow her discovery, under Shug's guidance, of a new God that allows her to love sexual pleasure guiltlessly. Shug introduces Celie to the mysteries of the body and sexual experience, making possible both Celie's discovery of speech and her freedom from masculine brutality. But the introduction requires that Celie see her body and feel its components first. For this a hand-held mirror is necessary, as is Shug's encouragement that there is something worth seeing.

When Shug urges her to look at herself, Celie reacts much like a child who fears being caught by a parent: she giggles and feels "like us been doing something wrong" (80). Even Shug, for all her promiscuity, talks like a child in preparing Celie for what she will find:

Listen, she say, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot *when you do you know what with somebody*. It gets hotter and hotter and then it melt. That the good part. (79; my emphasis)

The simplicity of Shug's language must certainly be designed in part to titillate Celie, but her uncharacteristic euphemism ("when you do you know what with somebody") suggests that even the free-spirited Shug has trouble speaking straightforwardly about sex or the body. While Celie looks in the mirror, Shug guards the door like a naughty schoolgirl, letting Celie know when the coast is clear.

Celie is astonished by what she sees in the mirror:

Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose. (79)

After her initial revulsion Celie sees in succession three things: the hair that shielded her vagina from view, her black lips, and, finally, her feminine beauty, symbolized as a rose. When Shug asks her what she thinks, Celie's immediate response abnegates her previous annihilation and ignorance of her body: "It mine, I say" (80). In discovering and accepting with pride her own body, Celie initiates a desire for selfhood. Next she begins to find an identity through a network of female relationships with Shug, Nettie (whose

letters she soon discovers), Sofia, and Mary Agnes. With her newfound identity, Celie is able to break free from the masculine prohibition against speech and to join a community of women, thus freeing herself from dependence on and subjection to male brutality.

II

The hair, the lips, the rose. Each symbolizes an important aspect of Celie's attitude toward her body, an attitude that must change if she is ever to be free of male brutality. The hair represents Celie's old attitude of self-revulsion, evident in her spontaneous "Ugh." The pubic hair no doubt arouses Celie's memories of her stepfather's raping her; he came to her with scissors in hand, ostensibly to have her cut his hair. But inside herself Celie finds the wet rose, a symbol of her new attitude, which includes not only love but also an entirely different attitude toward God and Creation. Shug teaches Celie to find God in herself, in nature, and in her own feelings, including erotic ones: "God loves *all* them feelings," Shug tells her (178; my emphasis). In between are the lips, representing Celie's present ambivalence. Although she is gradually learning, under Shug's guidance, to discover her body, her lips are for the time being dry, indicative of her virginity (in Shug's sense of the word) and her silence. Both orifices, vagina and mouth, need moistening if Celie is to replace sexual abuse with sexual pleasure and then to assert her independence from Albert. When she and Shug make love for the first time, their pleasure is purely oral. They "kiss and kiss until [they] can't hardly kiss no more" (109). This scene culminates in an ecstasy that is both maternal and infantile for Celie:

Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth.

Way after while, I act like a lost baby too. (109)¹

Infantilism and maternity can provoke negative memories for Celie: her stepfather raped her because her mother did not satisfy him, and her mother died screaming and cursing at Celie, who, pregnant with her first child, could not move fast enough to be an efficient nurse. But Celie does effectively nurse Shug's ills, and Shug, in turn, plays a maternal role by teaching Celie how to love. She sucks from Celie's breast as Celie's lost babies were never allowed to; we must recall here that Celie's children were taken from her before she could "nurse" them, leaving her with "breasts full of milk running down [her]self" (13). Celie's orgasm suggests a rebirth or perhaps an initial birth into a world of love, a reenactment of the primal pleasure of the child at the mother's breast. In psychoanalytic terms this scene presents the inauguration of primary narcissism that, "as a psychical reality, can only be the primal myth of a return to the maternal breast" (Laplanche 72). In essence, the story of Celie's life begins

afresh here; as Terry Eagleton puts it, the desire to retrieve the mother's body drives "the narrative of our lives, impelling us to pursue substitutes for this lost paradise in the endless metonymic movement of desire" (185). I turn now to psychoanalysis to show how theories of infantile development can help explain just how far Celie comes in her development of an ego and love for another. Psychoanalysis demonstrates the crucial role Shug Avery plays in her development, especially in reconciling Celie with her own body.²

III

Modern psychoanalysis assigns great importance to mirror scenes. Such scenes are crucial in the development of an ego, for, as Freud noted, "the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed" ("On Narcissism" 77). Jacques Lacan posited the beginning of that development in "the mirror stage," which normally occurs between six and eighteen months of age. The mirror stage, a metaphor for Lacan, is literally enacted by Celie and Shug in *The Color Purple*. Up until this stage a child has no perception of an external world, only of himself as, in Freud's famous phrase, "His Majesty the Baby" ("On Narcissism" 91).

Lacan believes that the mirror stage offers the child only an illusion of whole selfhood, when in fact the subject is always split. But Lacan's view of the unattainableness of whole selfhood finds a more optimistic revision in Walker's novel. *The Color Purple*, in fact, endorses another view prevalent in modern thought—that such illusions are not destructive but are positive accommodations that allow one to find meaning in life, far preferable to the desire for self-annihilation Celie voices early in the book. In Eagleton's words, if we analyze our situations in the world rationally, we are bound to conclude that we lack centering, but most of us interpret ourselves otherwise, to assure ourselves of our life's significance. Eagleton believes the relation of an individual to society, interpreted thus, resembles Lacan's view of the small child's image of itself in the mirror:

In both cases, the human subject is supplied with a satisfying unified image of selfhood by identifying with an object which reflects this image back to it in a closed, narcissistic circle. In both cases, too, this image involves a *misrecognition*, since it idealizes the subject's real situation. (173)

But this *misrecognition*, Lacan's *meconnaissance*, says Eagleton, makes selfhood possible: "Duly enthralled by the image of myself I receive, I subject myself to it; and it is through this 'subjection' that I become a subject" (173).³ To put it another way, the *misrecognition* fuels the desire to construct selfhood, because "the first Desire of any human is the absolute one for recognition (the Desire to be desired), itself linked to the Desire to *be* a unity"

(Ragland-Sullivan 58). Spurred by this desire, the subject begins looking to others for validation. The self is an imaginary construct; what the mirror offers, says Juliet Mitchell, is a chance for a child to grasp itself “for the first time as a perfect whole, not a mess of uncoordinated movements and feelings” (40). For Celie, the mirror opens the door of her imagination, helping her envision a world of new possibilities for herself.

The dangers of pursuing an illusory wholeness of selfhood are dwarfed by those of eliding the mirror stage. The child who experiences no normal passage through a mirror stage can be arrested, trapped in a very early stage of development. Such a child may become autistic, a sign of extreme disturbance in one’s sense of identity (Mahler, Pine, and Bergman (11)).⁴ As I will show momentarily, this is Celie’s condition early in the novel, when she is arrested in the pre-mirror stage of development. 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. This lack of an other is extremely critical, for Lacan links the discovery of the other to our becoming social beings: without it we become overattached to early fixations of identity, unable to adapt them as necessary to life’s demands (Ragland-Sullivan 43–44).

At least one other area of development is retarded if the mirror stage is elided: speech. For Lacan speech presupposes the existence of “the Other to whom it is addressed” (Sheridan viii).⁵ Thus, Celie’s inability to find a listening audience for herself is another sign of her autism, another result of her arrested development.⁶ Only Shug Avery is able to draw Celie out of her autism; Sofia’s early attempts to get Celie to speak for herself fail because Celie has developed no concept of otherness. Celie needs not only someone who will tell her how to act and what to say but also someone who will show her. She needs a sympathetic mentor and friend, a relationship that Sharon Hymner calls a “narcissistic friendship.” In the earliest stage of such a friendship, the narcissistic friend serves as “the initiator of activities as well as the provider of a value system and lifestyle which the patient embraces as a germinating ego ideal” (433).⁷ Shug does initiate such activities for Celie, helping her through the mirror stage to a discovery of her own body, her capacity for speech, and her ability to love an other.

The early portions of the novel illustrate Celie’s arrested development. Many girls “regress” during adolescence, returning to preoedipal or pre-mirror stage fantasies of fusion with the mother; a close friend is often the key to helping them out of such regression (Dalsirner 25–26). But Celie, fourteen and friendless at the beginning of *The Color Purple*, seems trapped in this infantile stage throughout her teenage years.⁸ In Lacanian psychoanalysis, says Ragland-Sullivan, the pre-mirror stage is “a period in which an infant experiences its body as fragmented parts and images.” These images

include “castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body, and . . . have a formative function in composing the human subject of identity and perception” (Ragland-Sullivan 18–19). Because of male brutality, Celie defines herself in terms of such images: her symbolic castration taking the form of her premature hysterectomy; her mutilation evident in her fear of the scissors her stepfather brings to her room with him; her dislocation symbolized in her being forced to take her mother’s place; her feeling of dismemberment figured in the choking her father administers while raping her; the “bursting open of the body” imagined when Celie’s “stomach started moving and then that little baby come out [her] pussy chewing on it fist” (Walker 12). Celie’s fragmentation is most strongly reinforced by the way her stepfather presents her as less than a whole woman to her future husband, convincing him to marry her because “God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it” (18).

To make a desire for selfhood possible, Celie must take a new perspective on her own body. Rather than defining herself in terms of fragmentation or of lack, she must learn to define herself synecdochally, seeing *part* of her body, specifically her genitalia, as a sufficient symbol of herself as a whole. According to Ellen Forst Lowery, girls need a sublimation that “depends on the additional denial of the castrated state, or as some would protest, *their intuition of an equally valuable sex organ/identity*” (446; my emphasis). But such a radical reevaluation of the body is not likely for a woman living as Celie does. What she needs is the example of a woman who embodies sexual power; what she needs is Shug Avery.

Celie begins to fantasize about Shug before her own marriage. During the fantasy period Shug becomes Celie’s ego ideal, an ideal self that “is aggrandized and exalted in the subject’s mind” (Freud, “On Narcissism” 94), becoming “a model to which the subject attempts to conform” (Laplanche and Pontalis 144). Celie thinks of Shug while Albert rapes her on her wedding night, and, even though his lovemaking is as uncaring as her stepfather’s, Celie begins to imagine the sexual act with some affection: “I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him” (21). Even as an imaginary construct, Shug stirs Celie’s first erotic feelings. When the real Shug steps into Celie’s life, these feelings become activated.

Although Shug arrives ill and weak, she nonetheless exudes a sexual power that Celie has never before imagined in woman or man. Quickly, Celie reassesses Albert in light of Shug’s sexuality:

I look at his face. It tired and sad and I notice his chin weak. Not much chin there at all. I have more chin, I think. And his clothes dirty, dirty. When he pull them off, dust rise. (52)

Celie's three-sentence fixation on Albert's chin is revealing: by comparing her chin with his, Celie gets her first inkling of an anatomical superiority. Typical of "narcissistic friends," Celie and Shug take turns playing the supporting or, in this case, maternal role, and, interestingly enough, Celie goes first, nursing Shug through her illness. Here at last Celie is allowed the nursing role her stepfather deprived her of when he took away Celie's babies and left her with milk running from her breasts. During this nursing process Celie connects her feelings for Shug to her lost daughter and her mother: "I work on her like she a doll or like she Olivia—or like she mama" (57). The relation of the doll to the daughter and mother reflects a new development for Celie; as the psychoanalytic school of object relations would see it, the doll represents a transitional device that helps Celie come to grips with the complicated feelings of separation and ambivalence that characterize her thoughts of both Olivia and her mother. Celie, in other words, has begun to employ some typical mechanisms of psychic growth and development.

After Shug's recovery the roles shift, with Shug becoming Celie's nurse. Celie's illness, however, is not physical but psychological: Celie lacks an identity. Shug awakens Celie's desire for identity most explicitly when she sings a song she has written just for Celie. As Celie gratefully notes, "first time somebody made something and name it after me" (75). The act of naming something after Celie assures the integrity of Celie herself; she must be somebody to be a subject of a song. This act is also Celie's first clue that language need not come under the jurisdiction of male authority.

This is the background Walker gives to prepare us for the mirror scene and, after that, the first lovemaking scene between Celie and Shug. The mirror scene takes on particular meaning because the desire for ego-formation has already been sparked. From the Celie who thinks of her body as fragmented and who tries to make herself as unfeeling as a tree, Walker has taken us to a Celie whose passions allow her to begin to think about her body differently and to conceive of a relationship beyond the self, with an other. The mirror scene expedites Celie's development through the stage of primary narcissism, in which two love-objects exist—the self and the mother (Freud, "On Narcissism" 88–89)—to the onset of secondary narcissism, the stage in which self-love is "displaced onto an-other" (Ragland-Sullivan 37). In the scene, Shug teaches Celie first to perceive her genitals as whole and beautiful and then to masturbate.⁹ That Celie and Shug act like children during this scene, giggling and running off to Celie's room "like two little prankish girls" (79), emphasizes the fact that they are engaged in an essentially juvenile drama that must be played through in order for Celie to reach a more mature stage of development.

This juvenile drama helps change Celie's perception of herself and her body. Celie's new appreciation for one part of her body allows her to revise her view of her entire body: to view her genitalia synecdochally rather than as a

fragment. Celie's new synecdochal conception of her body allows her to regard her genitalia as "normal" symbols, appreciating the beauty of the part as symbol of the whole without allowing it to replace the whole completely (Laplanche 36–37). Celie's acceptance of her genitals ("It mine" [80]) clearly indicates that she no longer perceives her body as something to deny or annihilate but as a source of pleasure. Even if, as Lacan believes, the post-mirror stage forces the individual to confront again the fragmentation of the body and the self, this synecdochal process helps Celie adapt to that threat to her totality.

As part of the mirror-stage experience, the child should identify its unified image of self with the mother's body; this identification foregrounds the child's, especially the girl's, acceptance or nonacceptance of its sexual organs (Ragland-Sullivan 277–278). At the end of the mirror stage the father intervenes in the mother-child relationship, preventing total identification or fusion with the mother and thus establishing boundaries necessary to the child's individuation (Ragland-Sullivan 42, 55). This process seems clearly to have been aborted in Celie's childhood, leaving an important gap in her development that Shug Avery fills. Shug, then, not only plays the role of Celie's "narcissistic friend," but first and foremost she represents a mother-surrogate or, in Lacanian terms, a (m)Other. Under this formulation "a subject first becomes aware of itself by identification with a person (object), usually the mother," although the figure may be "any constant nurturer" (Ragland-Sullivan 16).

As (m)Other, Shug also plays a crucial role in resolving Celie's Oedipal conflict. All such conflicts are grounded in ambivalence, Celie's especially so, as Nettie's narrative of their early life reveals (160–162). Celie's father was hanged when she was two and her mother's health ruined. Celie's stepfather (whom she assumes to be her real "pa") married her mother when Celie was three to four years old, the age when the Oedipal phase begins. Every year thereafter, Celie's mother was pregnant, and her mental state gradually deteriorated. Celie's stepfather turned his lust on her when she had just passed puberty, at a time when the Oedipal drama is "internally staged for a second time," its outcome crucial in determining "adult sexuality and other vital activities and functions in later existence" (Marcus 313). Thus, Celie's early life proves to be a perverse rewriting of the Oedipal script, with Celie aware of her mother's ambivalence about yielding her wifely role to her daughter: "My mama fuss at me an look at me. She happy, cause he good to her now" (11). Celie's guilt is augmented by her mother's questioning her pregnancy and her cursing Celie on her deathbed. Given the profound guilt and confusion that Celie must have felt about replacing her mother, in addition to the disruption of her own psychic growth and the continued brutalization to follow, it is little wonder that Celie would seek to annihilate self. But the intervention of Shug as (m)Other and of Nettie's revelation that "pa is not our pa!" (162) allows Celie to reimagine the possibilities of selfhood. By taking her back to