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# Read Me: The Emergence of Female Voice in American Epistolary Fiction

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READ ME: THE EMERGENCE OF FEMALE VOICE IN AMERICAN EPISTOLARY  
FICTION

by  
Allison Melissa Ramsey

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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*For Granny*

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## ABSTRACT

ALLISON MELISSA RAMSEY: *Read Me: The Emergence of Female Voice in American Epistolary Fiction*  
(Under the direction of Kathryn McKee)

The objective of the thesis was to study how the letter, as a narrative device provided by the epistolary genre, supplies unheard female characters with an avenue to “speak” when their worlds do not allow it. In the novels, the letters not only permit a female character to practice building a voice, but also provide a self-reflection and identification experience, which enables the woman to see where she is, rewrite her role, and control where she wants to go. Through reading Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette*, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Lee Smith’s *Fair and Tender Ladies*, and Maria Semple’s *Where’d You Go, Bernadette*, I argue that the letter grants female characters with the authority to discuss topics of desire, power, and gender expectations without restriction. Focusing on Walker’s Celie and Smith’s Ivy, the thesis explores how the epistle fundamentally nurtures their narrative voices, while Foster’s Eliza sets up the history of genre and Semple’s Bernadette challenges its future.

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DEAR READERS: Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*

Since beginning college four years ago, I check my mailbox every week. In it, I hope to find a letter written in that handwriting I know so well with the Brandon, Mississippi, return address in the top left hand corner. The stamps are always unique and the back of the envelope is sealed with a sticker—these identification markers reveal that the letter is from a special someone. Inside every envelope is a letter usually adorned with the image of a far away town that the sender has visited in past time, or even better, tattooed with the graphic of an unknown artist. Opening the letter, it becomes obvious the handwriting belongs to my seventy-six year old grandmother.

One may wonder why I wait expectantly for these letters from my grandmother, and more so, why we are sending letters in the first place when telephone calling, texting, private social messaging, and group posting is made readily available; the immediacy of the medium has the ultimate attraction. Modern rationality would expect us to believe that the quickest avenue is the best avenue, but that is not always the case, especially with my grandmother.

These letters are not simple “how-are-you-doing-I-miss-you” letters. Inside, my grandmother always shares about her life, mind, and advice. She makes every bit of the epistle intentional. For example, she once sent me a collection of letters with cover art from Russia. In each letter, she detailed an experience from her travels to



various Russian cities, what she ate, places she saw, and people she encountered. No letter is the same and I realized a trend throughout our epistolary exchange: I was learning so much about my grandmother through letters, more than I had absorbed from any verbal conversation.

My initial reaction was one of gratitude because she cared enough to write about her life before me, even before my mother, but soon after, I wondered: why tell me through the letter? We have spent so much time together in person, but I never feel as close to my grandmother as when we are physically apart; to be blunt, she never divulges much about herself through verbal conversation. Instead she always makes the conversation about others, asking how they are and what they have been doing. It was not until we began our correspondence that I discovered how much I had to learn about her, and truly, how much she had to share. The question continued to develop: why was my grandmother able to share more about herself through written letters than in other forms of communication? Was it because of comfort, due to pace of conversation—that is, she could formulate her own thoughts on her own time without interruption or pressure to immediately respond. Or, perhaps she wanted to create tangible conversations for the purpose of revisiting later. Perhaps our generational differences and expectations of social roles were to blame. Too many times did I try to satisfy the question with an answer that I could not find, but one thing remained obvious: my grandmother shares more about herself to me through her written voice than her verbal voice. This realization pressured me to answer why she preferred written instead of verbal.

To find an answer, I focused on American epistolary correspondence, specifically on novels written by women, about women. This distinction is important, for in early American culture, women's voices were limited, and the historical time frame might reveal why women relied on epistolary exchange, in turn creating an audience for the epistolary genre. Because epistolary fiction seemed to reflect the correspondence occurring in reality, I focused on fictional, American female characters in epistolary novels published from the mid-twentieth century forward to understand the period of my own exchange.

The quest began by reading Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*, focusing on the main character Eliza and why she relies on the letter to tell her story. Originally published in 1797, the novel introduces foundational problems between women and society. To get a better idea of the modern female's struggle, I read Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, published in 1982, and Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies*, written in 1988. The genre, up until recently, relied on the traditional epistle, but since we now live in period heavily reliant on the immediacy of technology, I read Maria Semple's 2012 novel, *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*, to study whether the electronic letter challenged the genre's strengths. After reading the novels, one connection was clear: unheard female characters were relying on letters to establish a voice.

Through studying these novels, I argue that epistolary exchange provided female characters with an avenue to talk when their worlds restricted their voices. Gender restrictions implemented by society hindered the female from assuming a self-defined character; she must always be labeled by the world and fulfill societal

expectations. This situation limits the female as a person, for it promotes submission and thwarts individualism. From my research, it appears female characters use letter correspondence to defy social rules, create individual personalities, and talk about whatever they want despite society's approval. In a sense, epistolary authors took realistic correspondence and replicated it into the genre to bring this situation into context. The women writing the genre sparked conversation and debate about women's limitations.

The novels' protagonists, specifically Walker's Celie, Smith's Ivy, and Semple's Bernadette, follow Eliza's initial example, and I speculate how their letters empower females to defy society's limitations through their narrative voice. These characters differ in time period—with Eliza living in the late eighteenth century to Bernadette in the twenty-first century—and by region, for Celie lives in the deep south and Ivy in the eastern mountains, but one can see more overlapping similarities than not. Topics of desire, marriage, education, age, self-awareness, pain, and defiance dominate the novels, but the letter creates a forum for women to talk about them without restriction.

Look at the fictional account of Eliza Wharton in *The Coquette*, specifically how she reacts to society's retribution for defying her appropriate gender role. Eliza Wharton is based on the true account of Elizabeth Whitman, who was an eighteenth century American woman of good intention and education. She acted on her desire to make her own rules, but this proved unfortunate for her. Whitman was betrothed to a man of her parents' choice, but she never quite loved him; fortunately for her, he passed away before their marriage. In the days after her fiancé's death, Miss

Whitman frolicked in the freedom that single women are afforded, and she split her time between two suitors: one a priest with a respected but predictable lifestyle, and the other a classic, nightlife charmer who seduced her heart and attention. After getting pregnant as an unmarried, single woman, she gave birth to a stillborn baby in a tavern and died alone, secluded from her friends and family (Davidson x-xiii). Her story is unfortunate, but the provocative content (i.e.- flirting with men, acting on desire, birthing child out of wedlock, etc.) creates a reason for Foster to use the epistolary genre. The context of Elizabeth's life, translated into the fictional account of Eliza, would have been openly looked down upon in the late eighteenth century and definitely not encouraged. But, based on Celie, Ivy, and Bernadette's letters, women continue relying on the letter to discuss topics of desire, individual exploration, and societal expectations leading into the twenty-first century.

By the time Foster published *The Coquette*, Whitman's story had swept across the nation. In Cathy Davidson's words, Eliza's story becomes "an object lesson on the dangers of female rights and female liberty" (ix). While the topic of women's place was developing in eighteenth century America, the country seemed more focused on re-defining her own role, not women's, leaving their place in society reliant on the past. Because women had long dominated the domestic sphere, both women and men struggled to envision women belonging in other industries. According to Davidson, women in positions outside of the home presented controversy—people struggled to define the political and legal rights of women when they had only seen them in the kitchen— because female authority outside the domestic sphere was considered non-existent. When Eliza Wharton and

other female forces challenged this “non-existence” by creating independence via their actions, society responded with reprimand, forcing females to believe that acting outside of their expected scope was self-destructive. For example, in acting on her desire as single women, Wharton becomes what Davidson calls “The Fallen Woman,” defined as a woman who loses her virginity, as well as reputation, before marriage. Obviously this title was not complimentary, and once labeled “fallen,” a young girl could kiss her reputation and marriage future goodbye. Foster has Eliza herself write at the end of the novel:

May my unhappy story serve as a beacon to warn the American fair of the dangerous tendency and destructive consequences of associating with men of your character, of destroying their time, and risking their reputation by the practice of coquetry. (159)

Eliza admits a wrongdoing, but only because society makes her believe she commits wrong. She confesses fault, recognizing that she is the danger Davidson mentions. Readers acknowledge society’s limitations on females through Eliza’s story, but her example summons a premise for the genre.

The “Fallen Woman’s” self-destruction goes hand-in-hand with the epistolary genre. When female characters act in “fallen” ways: two things happen. If fallen by force, like Celie from Walker’s *The Color Purple*, fear and shame overtake female voice, forcing them into the protection and privacy of the genre. If fallen by choice, exemplified by *Fair and Tender Ladies’* Ivy, the woman writes to challenge the mold, disfiguring the expected female roles into more liberal forms. Nevertheless, becoming “fallen” creates distance between the female and the rest of society, laying

the groundwork for the epistolary genre. The distance, supposed to serve as a consequence, ushers females to the letter, and here the woman assumes power to shape her voice and story when society wants to hide it. The paradox gives women a chance to write their own definition of self, whether accepted or not, and control their content. The letters deliver woman's voice when society will not allow the woman to openly do it herself.

One way the letter allows Eliza to control her story is through her narrative voice. Notice the difference when writing to separate genders. Letters to her female confidantes seem relaxed and comfortable. In letters to Lucy Freeman, her longtime friend and confidant, Eliza "write[s] the impulses of her mind;" her pen writes unrestricted and freely (8). Her letters to males are less lively and emotional than letters to her female friends. When writing to men, she first considers how she should appear, then allows the words to flow forth. Eliza writes to Reverend Boyer, "In regards to the particular subject of your's, I shall be silent. Ideas of that kind are better conveyed, on my part, by words, than by pen" (47). The "ideas of that kind" pertain to the topic of relationships, but she chooses not to comment in writing. Her silence represents an unexpected authority; through it, she controls how much she wants Reverend Boyer to know. Here, silence aids Eliza and the lack of words blankets her reputation, but Davidson offers a different stance on silence when she writes:

Eliza's silence also epitomizes an essential problem in the entire sentimental subgenre—a type of fiction written explicitly for women, often by women, but which does not in radical ways rewrite women's

position within society. How does one grant a voice to a woman who, given the society in which the novel is written and read, enjoys neither voice nor privilege? (xix)

Davidson's comment focuses on foundational questions: how does the letter grant voice to women who rely on silence to avoid society's backlash? First, the epistolary mode is more private and controlled than verbal speech. The letter writer usually chooses what to divulge and what to keep private, and only one person is expected to receive the enclosed information. Through epistolary exchange, the female crafts a voice for different recipients. This proves vital when formulating a response to the separate sexes, as seen through Eliza's letters to Lucy and Reverend Boyer.

While the letters give Eliza freedom with her potential suitors, they reveal a protective dynamic in the female epistolary circle. Throughout the four novels considered in this thesis, female literary circles interfere for different reasons, but in Eliza's case, her female confidants protect society's expected values. Davidson labels this type of correspondence between females as "women talk," specifically meaning conversation revolves around stereotypical female behaviors, including, "confiding, advising, chiding, warning, disagreeing, misleading, confronting, and consoling others;" essentially guidance from one woman to the next (xiv). For example, Eliza's voice of desire is contrasted by Lucy's intended voice of reason, but how reasonable is Lucy's voice? From society's perspective, Lucy is tremendously reasonable, for she tries to save Eliza from social ruin, but this seems to work against everything Eliza wants. To showcase Lucy's guidance, look at her response to Eliza's appetite for Mr. Sanford. She offers a warning: "But I am persuaded, if you wish to lead down the

dance of life with regularity, you will not find a more excellent partner than Mr. Boyer" (26-27). Lucy is sincere in offering this warning, but it is ineffective simply because Eliza does not define "regularity" as something she desires. In fact, Eliza seems to run away from regularity because with it comes the prescribed role of how women should behave. Eliza wishes to embrace the freedom she finds with being single, and she finds herself in an unpopular position. She despises regularity, writing to Lucy, "Marriage is the tomb of friendship" in her twelfth letter (24). Her female friends are lost to her when they marry, and should she follow, she will likewise be lost to them. Eliza's directness is difficult to look past, but her female friends' "guidance" is more noticeable, even alarming.

The female epistolary circle appears to function as a support group; it utilizes letters to unite females outside of the familiar bond of marriage. Females relied on their female confidants' thoughts to shape their decisions, and as Nancy Cott explains, females "explore a new individuality in a world of true peers" through epistolary communication (qtd. in Wakabayashi 162). Celie and Nettie epitomize this support provided via letters, as do Ivy and Silvaney. But, the circle is not always united in its members, and as Wakabayashi reports, Eliza's circle instigates her fall instead of impeding it. He writes:

Women are patriarchy's finest spokesperson in *The Coquette*. The blame is, in this way, usually placed on the epistolary circle of women as they are thought to facilitate Eliza's isolation, sexual downfall, and death by their prejudices not to see Eliza's individualistic pursuit of



affluent marriage as anything but an unforgivable deviance from a rational path of women's lives. (165)

Wakabayashi makes a complicated point. His comment diagnoses Eliza's female friends as the enemies in the novel. When Eliza tries to escape society telling her what to do, she goes to her friends; however she is unable to differentiate that her friends, her female family members, are "society" itself. Readers sympathize with Eliza's inability to differentiate society's advice from friends' personal guidance, but because she trusts her circle to see the world as she does, she never realizes their motives. Her female friends are part of the issue, and they cannot be trusted to guide her. She medicates her problems with the problem itself, and Eliza never creates her own path because of society's disapproval.

Through Eliza's letters, *The Coquette* exposes the effects of America's eighteenth century patriarchal society and challenges the gender roles within it. Daniel Diez Couch suggests that Eliza's resistance to traditional female submission classifies her as rebellious, and through the act of resisting confinement, she exhibits traditional masculine qualities. He argues, "Eliza actively tries to regender herself by employing masculine behavior and language" (Couch 689). Couch uses the word "regender" to represent the challenging of expected gender roles in the eighteenth century, but the word appears to perpetuate the separation of gender qualities. Eliza's intentions are not to appear any less female or appear male. She revolts against society's limitations imposed upon females in hopes of broadening female power and encouraging individualism. Males and females in the eighteenth century adhered to rigid gender roles, and as Linda Kauffman mentions in her *Discourses of*

*Desire*, there are “stereotypical dichotomies associated with masculine and feminine: intellect versus emotion, head versus heart, hard versus soft, reason versus passion,” and these terms separate the sexes (171). These gender roles exist simply because society perpetuates them, but most humans are adept at feeling a range of emotions, developing desire, and can be both sensitive and aggressive—so why must we attach a label that continues to suggest quality separation? If both females and males have the ability to feel a range of emotions, Eliza is not “regendering”; instead she exercises qualities she already owns but has been told are reserved for men.

Late eighteenth century subordinates like Eliza appear as main plot heroines when women’s epistolary fiction emerges in the nineteenth century. Using letters, authors like Foster set up the framework for the genre beginning with the nineteenth century and forward. Eliza’s letters reveal her limitations; she cannot act sexually independent without consequences, and her subordination to patriarchal society fashions her demise. However, because of her letters and example, she encourages future daughters or granddaughters to further challenge society until the mold is broken, granting women with equal power as men.

The next three novels reflect the power struggles of the American female throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Hoping to grow from the submissive and domestic roles encouraged by society into more independent figures, the following chapters focus on the utility of the letter and how it grants female characters with power to expand their voices. Succeeding Eliza’s example, Alice Walker’s Celie in *The Color Purple*, Ivy in Lee Smith’s *Fair and Tender Ladies*,

and eventually Bernadette in Maria Semple's *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* reveal women finding a voice when the world does not want them to, all because of one narrative device: the letter.

### DON'T TELL NOBODY: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Celie, the main character from *The Color Purple*, is growing up in the rural, North American south during the early twentieth century, a period filled with racial tension and gender expectations; thus, Celie not only faces difficulties as a black person, but also as a black female. Through male belittlement, Celie is seen, not heard, ultimately refraining from questioning patriarchal power. The silence limits her, for not only does it blur Celie's conception of self, but it also robs her of a literal voice and a desire to create a future. The reader must explore how Celie faces this robbery of voice, which characters help her along the way, and how her discovery of voice is made possible through the instrument of the letter. This chapter focuses on the development of Celie's identity and written voice through her letters, specifically exploring how the epistolary form reveals Celie's current situation and encourages her to create a better one.

The novel opens with the command, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (1). Because what follows is the letter beginning with, "Dear God, I am fourteen years old," the reader understands the first command is not the voice of Celie (1). If Celie is the second voice introduced in the novel, to whom does the first belong? The reader soon learns the assertive, threatening voice belongs to Celie's father named Pa. His threat silences her before the story even

begins; however, it ironically also provides Celie with a hidden opportunity to build a voice.

While Pa's initial threat paralyzes Celie's voice from telling anyone about the rape, it forces her into the epistolary form that she uses. The encounter begins when Celie's mother goes to visit her sister in Macon. Before she leaves, Pa wants to satisfy his sexual hunger. Celie's mother refuses since she recently gave childbirth, so after she departs, Pa forces Celie into "doing what [her] mammy wouldn't" (1). Ashamed and afraid, Celie fears Pa and believes him when he says that if she tells anyone, it will "kill [her] mammy," so she exercises her only option: she tells her story to God through the device of the letter, establishing the novel as epistolary (1). Her physical voice is held captive, but her written voice is free, and through her initial letters, Celie begins to construct her narrative voice.

God is Celie's first epistolary recipient, and her written voice begins small. She writes in an informal, distant style, for even though Celie is "talking" to God, she introduces herself as if he does not know her. Part of this approach is attributed to her naiveté and lack of education, but the remainder is devoted to the fact that God is somewhat distant himself. His physical absence creates a situation where Celie feels she has to introduce herself, which is ironic considering she does not quite know who she is. According to Kathy Dunn Jackson, Celie's speech in her limited range of voice is similar to that of African-American slaves, who were "dominated by their masters and denied an education in order to keep them illiterate and powerless, as is Celie by her stepfather" (17). The emotional and physical damage inflicted onto Celie is especially horrific because the man she believes to be her

father carries it out. He neglects her, similar to some slave masters, in order to keep her powerless, which completely works against the paternal duty fathers should assume in order to protect and provide for their children. In taking her virginity through rape, Pa creates a string of unfortunate events. His apparent incest, also similar to some slave masters, robs Celie of the opportunity to discover sexuality on her own terms. The result of this robbery is a contorted definition of sex: instead of teaching Celie to protect her body and consider it sacred, Pa teaches that it is not hers to own. By objectifying her body for sexual pleasure, he ultimately takes away Celie's ability to assert herself as a woman. Thus, finding a voice becomes difficult for Celie when the body that the voice would have to come from allegedly does not belong to her.

When initially writing to God, Celie's letters seem to lack emotion. Even in the first letter to Him when she recounts her rape, her language and tone lack the necessary density to qualify as emotional. Rather, she writes about the rape as if she is first learning about it herself. Looking at Celie's first letter to God, she uses the word "then" in repetition to develop the line of events. Accompanying the word, she uses unembellished action verbs to describe what happens: he "put his thing up against my hip" and "sort of wiggle it around" (1). Celie does not write confidently, either because she is avoiding the actual horror or, worse, she does not understand the abnormality of the situation. Her words ring soft, not in a delicate sense, but as if they were floating rather than punching when describing. Following with her naïve description, Walker couples "grab" and "push" to finish describing the rape (1). Again, these action verbs only provide a partial description of the act. What is absent

from Celie's first letter is any emotional by-product resulting from the sexual assault. Nowhere in the first letter to God does Celie say, "I feel" in a reflective way; she only mentions that she "feels sick" when she cooks food, due to being pregnant (1). At no point in the letter does Celie mention that Pa makes her feel scared or that she feels sad for what happens. At best, Celie describes her reaction to the rape with "I cry," and although not effusive, the simple phrase seems to say a lot (1). Celie forfeits emotional language in her initial letters, and we should explore these reasons.

Just because she does not include feelings in her first letters to God does not mean that Celie doesn't have them or hold the ability to explore them. Maybe Celie avoids diving into an emotional account because the rape is too difficult to describe at great length. She would not have encountered any models for how to describe rape in words, and she cannot be blamed for her reaction. Rather, Pa should be blamed, first for the rape, but also for making Celie feel less than human. When Mr. \_\_\_ comes to Pa and requests to take Nettie with him, Pa instead provides Celie. In his argument for offering Celie, Pa says, "She ugly. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her" (8). He talks as if he is selling an animal, furthering his description with, "I got to get rid of her. She too old to be living here at home. She'd come with her own linen" (8). Pa offers Celie mainly because he does not want her, but also for what she can do for Mr. \_\_\_, just as one would do in trading goods or slaves. Neither Pa nor Mr. \_\_\_ recognizes the implications of commoditizing Celie, but she cannot ignore it. Because they treat her

as an object, she is predisposed to ignore her human emotions, which explains the initial absence of poignant reflection through her letters.

The letters reveal a traumatizing fact: Pa and Mr.\_\_\_\_'s devaluation of Celie not only contorts her conception of self, but also of women generally. In instilling that physical attractiveness largely influences desirability, both Pa and Mr.\_\_\_\_ make it difficult for Celie to feel like a woman when saying, "She ugly" (8). When Shug Avery enters the picture, Celie believes she recognizes what "woman" should be; however, her recognition is solely based on appearance. Describing Shug Avery initially, Celie writes, "Shug Avery was a woman" (6). She follows with the description of Shug's appearance, writing, "[She] the most beautiful woman I ever saw. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail [sic]" (6). To be fair, Celie is only viewing a photograph of Shug instead of meeting her in person, but it is alarming that she defines "woman" without considering personality, intellect, or any qualities besides physical attractiveness. Although she has never been taught that female beauty should include character, her definition of woman is destructive. Celie compares her looks to the appearance of Shug, saying "She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me [sic]," resulting in Celie subordinating herself to Shug (6). Essentially, the definition makes Celie believe that she must look a certain way in order to achieve the meaning of "woman," and this belief prompts her to try to embody the definition.

The distorted term shapes the letters—they become the main avenue where Celie divulges her attempts to embody "woman," and soon after, reveal how she does become "woman." One scene is particularly important in disclosing these



attempts: when Celie dresses up in provocative clothing for Pa. After she notices that both Mr.\_\_\_\_ and Pa find Shug's photograph attractive, Celie tries to copy her look. To sexually impress Pa, Celie "duck[s] into my room wearing horsehair, feathers, and a pair of our new mammy high heel shoes. He beat me for dressing trampy but he do it to me anyway" (7). She dresses up for Pa to make herself desirable to him, yet he beats and forces himself on her. If looks are the foundation of desire, why does Pa beat Celie and not Shug when their clothes appear similar? Why is it that Shug can dress up and look pretty while Celie looks "trampy?" Shug seems to have another element that makes her more desirable, more of a "woman," than Celie, but what is it and why? I believe it boils down to power, specifically the power of a woman believing in her abilities. Shug's personality matches her outer appearance—sassy, bold, and colorful; she appears confident and beautiful because she believes herself to have these qualities. Celie does not feel human, which prevents her from thinking of herself in "woman" terms; therefore, when Celie dresses up for Pa, she seems to mimic her idea of "woman" that she has yet to become. However, it is important for Celie to be seen as a woman because if she looks attractive enough, as her definition of "woman" requires, maybe Pa will not rape her and Mr.\_\_\_\_ will take her home instead of Nettie. Celie's main motive is not to appear attractive to Pa, but solely to protect Nettie, and in offering to "fix [herself] up for him," she hopes he will take her rather than her sister (7). Likewise, if she looks really desirable, Celie hopes that Pa will be less sexually abusive. The entire letter makes the reader feel sympathetic for Celie, for the simple act of playing dress up should be innocent, but Celie's motives are deeply rooted in sadness,

fragmentation of self-worth, and fear. What Celie doesn't know is that her imitation of "woman" sparks the beginning of rewriting her self-definition.

As Celie dresses up for Pa, a performance emerges, showing how Celie plays to her gender expectations formed from the photograph of Shug. The performance seems to represent the subordinate mentality of women in the early American twentieth century. Celie is expected to look like Shug because it makes the male happy, just as women were expected to make a good home for the men. However, through the act of dressing up for Pa, the reader recognizes that Celie is fragmented; her outer and inner selves are not aligned. She is broken by what she is but tries to be, but this self-division prompts Celie to fix the crack. Her fragmentation supplies a motive for the letters, for as Celie mends her self-division, the letters document her changes as she considers how certain traits, qualities, and appearances classify gender for woman in the novel.

Part of Celie mending the divide between inner and outer self is considering how the letters let her investigate the terms of desire and sexuality, and how the power to control these terms plays into the definition of "woman." Control over one's sexuality shapes self-definition, and one letter in particular provides a most intimate experience of Celie discovering herself sexually, allowing her to reclaim what was stolen. Specifically, the letters fundamentally rebuild Celie's identity through showing how she retrieves taken parts of herself. Unlike previously when Celie attempts to embody "woman" with outside clothes and high heels, in the mirror scene with Shug, she discovers something she has, but has never known or felt to own. Celie, with Shug's help and a hand held mirror, discovers herself

sexually, writing, “ I lie back on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass down between my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then the inside looks like a wet rose” (78). The majority of Celie’s description of her own clitoris and vagina is negative, thinking the appearance is ugly because of the “hair” and “black lips,” once again harping on woman’s value based on outward looks. Celie’s vivid description of sexual-discovery represents her larger journey of self-identification made available through her letters—the negative response to the hair and blackness represents Celie’s view of herself externally, but the wet rose symbolizes Celie’s new beginnings. Daniel W. Ross comments on this description, suggesting that the hair, lips, and rose symbolize “an important aspect of Celie’s attitude toward her body, an attitude that must change if she is ever to be free from male brutality” (72). He suggests that the hair and black lips represent Celie’s “old attitude of self-revulsion, evident in her spontaneous ‘Ugh.’” The lips, on the other hand, represent Celie’s “new attitude, which includes not only love but also an entirely different attitude toward God and Creation” (Ross 72).

The discovery of her wet rose depicts the first instance where Celie defines her self-growth through letters. Unlike the beginning of the novel when Celie thinks of herself as a tree in order to avoid the pain of Mr.\_\_\_\_’s beatings, writing, “I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man,” she now uses the image of the wet rose to represent herself (22). Ross agrees, writing:

Rather than defining herself in terms of fragmentation or lack thereof, she must learn to define herself synecdochally, seeing part of her body, specifically her genitalia, as a sufficient symbol of herself as a whole. (75)

Ross suggests that Celie must learn to find identity herself as whole by one part rather than focus on her self-division. For example, in allowing the wet rose to represent Celie as a whole, she can build her identity from the image instead of continuing to consider herself as divided. Synecdochally viewing herself will profit her narrative voice, for as soon as Celie can think of herself as a whole, her narrative voice can gain power. However, in using the clitoris to identify Celie as a whole, her body risks falling prey to objectification. She must recognize that she is more than her body and recognize that reclaiming her clitoris is only part of retrieving her identity. Also, I believe the discovery of her wet rose recoups her body from male brutality. After touching herself, Celie writes, "It mine, I say," providing an assertion with her narrative voice (78). In so doing, she begins to rebuild her identity through her letters.

Shug Avery has a vital presence in the novel—only through her encouragement can Celie rewrite her identity and build a narrative voice. In fact, Shug Avery serves as her role model since she is everything representing "woman." The idea of sex as pleasurable has almost certainly never occurred to Celie, but because of Shug Avery, she learns how to enjoy it. At this point, the reader confirms that because of Celie's abusive relationships with Pa and Mr.\_\_\_\_, she has viewed sex as natural yet unpleasant—as though sex is all that she is made for. The negative

connotation she pairs with it forces her to suppress any feelings—both negative and positive, in order to protect herself—about sexual intercourse, which, once again, separates Celie’s soul from her body. Despite Celie’s fragmented self, Shug intervenes and offers advice on how to make sexual intercourse an emotional, intimate, and pleasurable experience. Celie writes that Shug says, “Listen, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gets really hot when you do you know what with somebody” (77). Here, we see Shug instructing Celie how to claim pleasure alone. Celie follows Shug’s encouragement to touch herself, and at this moment, Shug becomes the only other living person Celie trusts besides Nettie. Because of this trust, an intimate relationship forms between the two women—one in which both fundamentally depend on the other—and through it, Celie finds encouragement to build her voice.

Celie must reclaim desire in order to build herself and her voice, and the letters reveal how maternal thinking prompts her to do so. The focus is not that Celie must only develop sexual desire for the act of sexual intercourse, but rather to feel in control of her body. However, the process proves more difficult than expected. Celie has never felt sexual desire, so the concept of enjoying intercourse is difficult for her to understand until she connects maternal and sexual desire. In a sense, Celie channels the desire she felt for her babies to understand how to create a sexual hunger, and once understood, she practices with Shug. Charmaine Eddy writes that the sexual discoveries shared between the two females allow Celie to understand that she has a right to experience sexual desire, too. To explain how maternity operates through their relationship, Eddy writes, “Its rearticulation

allows maternity to function as an alternative economy of desire in the novel (...)[T]he maternal marking allows desire to begin to circulate for Celie for the first time, and it helps to reconfigure sexuality in terms of reciprocity and caring" (44). When Celie writes, "I haul up my dress and look at my titties. Think about my babies sucking them. Remember the little shiver I felt then too," the letter reveals the only corporal pleasure Celie has experienced is when she nursed her children that were soon after taken away from her (78). When Shug instructs Celie to look at her own breasts and touch her clitoris in order to feel pleasure, the only other satisfaction she has experienced with these parts of her body has been while she was mothering her children. The idea of feeling erotic pleasure is totally foreign to Celie; therefore, when she is instructed to connect enjoyment with intercourse or foreplay, she must first recall what pleasure she knows, which is through nursing her children, remembering how it made her feel, and applying that feeling to the action in order for this new sexual discovery to make sense to Celie. The maternal roles seem to switch—Shug becomes the mother and Celie the child—for only through Shug's teaching is Celie able to make the connection. The duty of nursing is transferred from Celie to Shug, and the role of being nursed moves from Celie's children to Celie herself.

The transfer of roles creates an opportunity for Celie to reframe her thoughts on desire, and the letters give space to write about the process without outside interference or judgment. Celie may take to epistles because she is originally embarrassed to talk about her newfound desire, but what she cannot say to Shug or anyone else, she writes in her letters, proving that they provide an avenue for Celie's

narrative voice which later inspires a verbal one. For example, when she sees Shug's bosom, Celie writes, "I feel my nipples harden under my dress. My little button sort of perk up, too. Shug, I say to her in my mind, Girl, you looks like a real good time, the Good Lord knows you do" (81). This subject matter seems potentially inappropriate for God, but the promiscuous content represents a shift in control and the letters' function. In the beginning of the novel, Celie's letters to God contain immoral content (i.e.- the rape, incest, emotional and physical abuse, etc.), but Celie does not commit any of these acts. She is a victim of Pa and Mr. \_\_\_'s immorality, therefore assuming a passive role. When she writes about her own sexual exploration, she takes control and actively leads herself in pleasure. The content is no less licentious, but the letter reveals a shift in control—one from the men to Celie. The letters no longer serve as avenues to recount her abuse; instead they gradually transition into utilities where Celie describes her self-reclamation. Since she addresses the letter to God, Celie does not share her internal thoughts with any other person; however in saying she "says to [Shug] in her mind," it seems as if Celie partially wants to speak out. The letter acts as a device to orchestrate a place for Celie to narrate her internal thoughts until she is ready to speak.

In housing Celie's internal thoughts, the letters also document the opening of her heart and her accepting love from someone else, which represents her growth as a woman. After Celie's male dominated sexual abuse, she closes herself off from feelings, but with Shug's encouragement, Celie slowly allows herself to feel worthy of admiration. Not only does she open her heart to feel love, but she also steadily accepts tokens of affection from Shug. After Shug tells Celie that she is loved by

some person and that person happens to be her, Celie writes, “And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth. *Um*, she say, like she surprise. I kiss her back, say, *um*, too” (113). The “um” shared between Celie and Shug suggests that neither was expecting the kissing to occur, even as if they are surprised by the desire itself. Celie continues with, “I don’t know nothing bout it, I say to Shug. I don’t know much, she say” (113). They appear to admit that they do not know much about having sexual feelings for another woman, but the more important focus is the fact that they defy society’s expectations of woman’s role. Instead of assuming subordination and waiting for the male to initiate sexual action, both Celie and Shug take control of it themselves, which places them in an interesting position—one that seems both vulnerable and powerful. Because of the kiss and admittance of “I don’t know,” both females are placed on equal levels of vulnerability for the first time. Previously, Celie appears weaker as she plays the part of child while Shug acts as mother, urging her to learn about her body and self. When Shug continues kissing her, Celie writes, “Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouths. Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too” (113). Celie considers she and Shug as “lost babies,” which is the first time the novel categorizes both females on the same level while also introducing a role that is helpless in nature. However, in the midst of being vulnerable, both women appear powerful for recognizing and acting on their desire—their freedom of acting on want solidifies their ability to control their sexuality.

While the letters track Celie’s self-growth in writing about desire, they also reveal Celie’s compartmentalization of speech based on gender. More than once



throughout the novel, Celie comments on conversation topics, but for some reason, she separates them into male and female subjects. Celie mentions that when Shug sees Sophia, Harpo's independent wife, show up at his juke joint one night after months of absence, she says, "Girl you look like a good time, you do. That when I notice how Shug talk and act sometimes like a man. Men say stuff like that to women, Girl, you look like a good time" (81). Celie attributes the words as something she would expect a man to say, probably because it comments on the appearance of a female. Further, Celie writes, "Women always talk bout hair and health. How many babies living or dead, or got teef. Not bout how some woman they hugging on look like a good time [sic]" (81). Celie appears to think conversation topics depend on gender. Her words suggest that males have the freedom to talk about desire, but women cannot. I do not believe that Celie supports separating conversation topics by gender; instead, she brings it up because it is all she has known. Celie simply regurgitates what patriarchal society enforces, and in so writing about it through her letters, brings attention to the unjustified split.

Like males, Shug externalizes her desire, as made evident through her comments regarding Sophia; however her "male-like" speech confuses Celie in a good way. For the longest time, Celie only speaks about certain topics if it is appropriate for females and if she is allowed to speak. As Shug inverts the system, Celie watches attentively. She may not originally notice how Shug's inversion shapes her narrative voice and self-identification, but by the end of the novel, she recognizes it as the pivotal influence on her narrative and verbal voices.

Through Shug's comments, the letters document gender role reversal. The turnaround encourages Celie to test gender barriers as she builds her narrative and verbal voices; however, the challenge does not reside in the words said, but more so in the power assumed to say them. One example of this is when Squeak tells Harpo her real name. Squeak is Harpo's girlfriend, described by Celie as "a nice girl, friendly and everything, but she like me. She do anything Harpo say. He give her a little nickname, too, call her Squeak" (82). In every aspect, Squeak appears subordinate to Harpo: she does whatever he wants, plus Harpo gives her a nickname. The name "Squeak" suggests she is small, high-strung, and insignificant, but her actions suggest much different. For example, after everyone discovers that Squeak is related to the white warden at the jail, they nominate her to confront him about Sophia's punishment. She returns with "a limp" and her "dress rip" because the encounter took a turn for the worst when he rapes her. After Squeak tells everyone that he told her to "undo her dress," she looks to Harpo and ask whether he really loves her, to which he responds, "I love you, Squeak." Celie interjects with her narrative voice in writing, "He kneel down and try to put his arms around her waist. She stand up. My name Mary Agnes, she say" (97). With Harpo falling to his knees and trying to lean on Mary Agnes, he literally appears subordinate, which Squeak used to be. The height difference places Squeak in command—while Harpo kneels, she stands—representing a shift in gender power. No longer is she confined to the nickname "Squeak," and she discloses her real name to invert male dominance and enlighten the power of the female.

In exploring the novel's gender role reversal, Celie's letters ultimately reveal that gender categories are not absolute, and in fact, power is more equalized between genders than previously thought. The reader notices this transition between Celie and Albert when she writes, "The first thing I notice about Mr.\_\_\_\_ is how clean he is. His skin shine. His hair brush back (...) He out there in the field from sunup to sundown. And clean that house just like a woman" (222). Thinking back to when Celie writes about appropriate conversation topics for women, she mentions that they "always talk about hair and health" (81). In combining Mr.\_\_\_\_'s looks with Celie's comment about popular female conversation topics, he does not appear as masculine, and if thinking about earlier gender categories, Mr.\_\_\_\_ almost appears feminized. Again, gender categories are not as fixed as readers or Celie think.

Tammie McKenzie puts it nicely in her "A Journey of Selfhood" when she writes:

The sexual distinctions have been broken down. Celie has gained the strength and independence of a man, while Albert has assumed certain duties that he had always relegated to the subservience of women. (57)

As McKenzie mentions, the adoption of opposite gender traits breaks down the barrier between the two sexes. In a way, the roles are traded to equalize things, and the fruit of equalization is apparent at the novel's end when Celie and Albert sit on the porch together. Sitting side-by-side sewing, Albert and Celie discuss their losses throughout life. At this point, the reader realizes that Albert and Celie are more on the same level than ever, due to their conversation, seating position, and task on the porch. Not only do they share the same view from the porch, which represents the

same opportunity each has to reflect on the past, but they both have also lost Shug. In talking about understanding loss, Albert says, "I think us here to wonder, myself. The more I wonder, he say, the more I love" (283). This confession is followed with Celie saying, "And people start to love you back, I bet" (283). Although this is not a straightforward acceptance of the past, this exchange of dialogue represents the peace that they find through sharing a common loss. By recognizing that they both lost Shug, Albert and Celie are more able than ever to sit satisfied sit-by-side. Without the letters, Celie would not had an avenue to discuss her past, but because of them and gender role equalization, she can move forward with her stronger more equal voice.

The letters shared between Celie and Nettie prove how a female epistolary circle threatens patriarchal power in totality. The female epistolary bond is made powerful simply because of the communication form: women are allowed to "speak" freely when writing. This medium provides a forum where woman can discuss topics that are gender expected, but also permits conversation typically not suitable for females. Celie and Nettie's communication is gender progressive—while Eliza Wharton's female epistolary circle encourages her to stay grounded and grow into the woman she should be, Celie and Nettie's correspondence encourages each other to become the women they can be.

Celie's decision to write to Nettie is critical, for the shift to write to a human recipient represents an immense change. When Celie writes to God, she is writing to the only recipient she knows she can write to, based on Pa's threat. Also, when writing to God, she has yet to identify herself enough to leave a signature; she

literally does not pen her name at the end of letters because she does not know who “Celie” is. Her written words to God prove that she is more than an object, but she still tries to mend her fragmentation between body and self in writing to Him. On the contrary, when writing to Nettie, she has mended the fragmented self; she believes the words she writes are hers, as made evident through the use of a signature at the end of her letters. We also understand Celie to be mended when she writes to Nettie saying, “I am a woman” (251). This phrase defines Celie’s self-growth and represents her mature narrative voice. No longer does she feel that Shug only defines “woman;” as Celie recognizes her abilities, she creates her own definition of “woman” based on herself. The letter’s power as a narrative device becomes obvious from Celie’s statement, ultimately documenting Celie’s before and after growth.

The letters tell how people come and go, situations change, even Celie matures through sexual growth and identity reclamation, but her cultural language remains, which exposes how the letter allows Celie to embrace her environment instead of forever falling victim to it. In so doing, Celie proves that her voice is strong enough to withstand certain influences, such as male dominance and white influence; Celie has the power to control what and who shapes her voice in her letters. Lindsey Tucker comments of this control in saying, “Although urged to become ‘educated,’ to learn to talk as the books do, [Celie] refuses to change her speech patterns by submitting to white language” (qtd. in Proudfit 32). In retaining language shaped by the rural south and African American heritage, her resistance exemplifies power and represents her unyielding effort to write her identity

through her narrative voice. The letter empowers females by providing a private medium for conversation, and Celie capitalizes on her voice with this opportunity.

Not only does the letter permit Celie to control language, but it also allows her to manage the readers of her information. As mentioned, before writing to Nettie, God is Celie's only letter recipient, and she assumes he is male. Celie writes to Nettie:

The God I been praying to and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful, and lowdown (...) All my life I never care what people thought bout nothing I did, I say. But deep in my heart I care about God. What he going to think. And come to find out, he don't think. Just sit up there glorying and being deaf, I reckon [sic]. (192-3)

Celie believes God is male because of his lacks—his lack of listening, presence, and care for her—all traits Celie believes men universally behold. Past traumas with males force Celie to immediately assume all men share the same traits. In response to this assumption, she switches the letters' address to Nettie, which reflects Celie's dissatisfaction with men. It is as if switching the intended recipient represents a quiet rebellion against the patriarchal system. When she decides to write to Nettie instead of God, Celie sends the message that she chooses not to interact with males because she cannot depend on them. However, Shug enters as a voice of comfort, telling Celie:

God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And

sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know  
what you are looking for (...) God ain't a he or a she, but a It. (195)

After Shug offers that God is not classified by gender, Celie writes, "Still, it is like Shug say, You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall" (197). Once Celie takes Shug's advice and removes "man" from her eyes, she experiences a self-enlightenment—she frees her mind from the subordination of men. The letters thus document a shift in Celie's voice from passive to active. For example, when Mr.\_\_\_\_ says to Celie, "You ugly. You skinny. You shaped funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people," Celie does not take it; instead she replies, "I curse you (...) until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble" (205-6). The phrase initiates Celie's power of self—no longer will she accept Mr.\_\_\_\_'s remarks because Shug's statement encourages her to stand up for herself. This speaks to the power of the female bond expressed by the epistolary form, for even though they do not exchange letters, Shug's guidance encourages Celie to guard her identity with her voice.

The physical separation between Celie and her recipients is the key element that allows the epistolary form to work while supplying power for the written voice. Kathy Dunn Jackson writes, "The early epistolary novels presented a testing or defining of character. The main characters, placed in isolation and alienated from others, were forced to look inward" (13). In fact, Carolyn Williams suggests, "Isolation is the precondition of Celie's correspondence with God" (275). With separation, communication through writing is forced; this method nurtures an avenue for self-review, as made evident through Celie's growth as an individual.

REMEMBER ME: Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies*

Transitioning from Celie and her self-actualization journey afforded by female confidants and the epistolary text, meet Ivy Rowe from Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies*. Hailing from rural Virginia, Ivy uses letters to document her past and conserve memories, always fearing that she may forget them. Ivy, just like Celie, shares her story through a series of decade-long epistles, mainly addressed to a female confidant. She relies on the letter to build a voice and individual power, proving the epistolary genre allows female characters to reclaim their voices through letters when their outer world prevents them from speaking. Nancy C. Parrish expresses the process best in her article, "Rescue From Oblivion:"

Writing [letters] moves us precisely because it "speaks" so directly to us. This "talking writing" challenges convention because through it Ivy takes advantage of the only place she can speak"—and so "speaks" herself into existence and into understanding. (116)

Parrish's comment suggests the letter empowers females, and in analyzing the context of dialect, fantasy, and motherhood in Ivy's letters, we explore how the device specifically works for her.



Ivy's written voice is unique to her character, identifiable by her spelling and spirit exuded in her word choice. Age, education, and region fundamentally shape her writing style; however, the epistolary genre molds her voice the most, simply because it affords an uninterrupted avenue for Ivy to "talk." The novel introduces Ivy as a young girl of only twelve, and she seems to know herself as much as a twelve year old can. Her dialect is inevitably shaped by a lack of maturity and education, which is noticeable when she uses words such as "seed" instead of "seen" and "growed" instead of "grew" (11). The reader understands Ivy to be young or uneducated, for she misspells common words, such as "thogh" instead of "though" and creates her own version of them, as made evident through the use of "storeboghten" rather than "store bought" (11). The small, mountain region in Virginia that Ivy comes from further influences her language. Named Sugar Fork, the town Ivy calls home falls at Blue Star Mountain's feet and hollows between the Appalachian Mountains; it is secluded and specific. The region uses words such as "nare" instead of "never" and "usuns" rather than "us," and young Ivy frequently relies on these words to begin telling her story. In fact, the majority of her early letters are saturated with Appalachian terms and grammatical errors only a lack of education creates, but this is no surprise—*The Color Purple's* Celie also writes in words that sound specific to her Southern region.

Writing in dialect is vital for the epistolary genre, specifically so the reader can identify the main voice and follow its transition throughout the novel. Essentially, dialect strengthens first person narrative voice by further explaining the character's essence and mentality. Geographic location and culture highly influence

Ivy's voice, and dialect explains what contextual description cannot. She writes specifically about rural Virginia, her daily chores, even what Star Mountain looks like, but all the descriptions only represent the location, while the dialect reveals the location's influence on Ivy. Dialect adds another dimension to Ivy's persona, which aids the reader in perceiving her character.

Some critics have noted that Ivy's illiteracy, stemming both from the naiveté of youth and regional influences, challenges epistolary fiction because the domain of letter writing belonged to the intellectual elite. Even earlier than twentieth century America, formally educated society utilized the letter as a communication device because they could read; letter writing was used in a technical sense for communication. Although the first person speaker in dialect has a long history in American literature (i.e. Huck Finn), informally educated people, like Ivy's family, representing regions where a work ethic was more necessary than perfect grammar, depended on oral communication since many could not read or write. Both the formally and informally educated utilized the method of communication most accessible to them in order to fulfill the purpose of exchanging information. In the epistolary genre, letter exchanges are created to mimic real ones occurring in American society, but this presents a problem. Critics ask how the genre can include epistles from the lower educated, borderline illiterate, class if they cannot read or write. If the genre mimics reality, illiterate people would more likely share information orally rather than in writing. However, the genre functions largely to give these types of characters, those who are not always heard, a first person voice.

The art of literature, with epistolary fiction included, builds off of society's barriers, and with the genre representing underrepresented people, literature diversifies; expanding the pool of "letter writers" allows the genre to better represent Americans. With this opportunity comes a challenge, for authors of epistolary fiction must maintain the authentic voice of their "illiterate" main characters in order to challenge the cultural norm, as well as to understand the influence of region and education in creating a character's voice. For example, Lee Smith must emphasize Ivy's youth and "illiteracy" throughout *Fair and Tender Ladies* in order for us to understand the influences on Ivy's voice, and even to comprehend her desire to leave Sugar Fork.

Critics have also questioned whether inclusion of unrefined dialect limits the first person speaker's voice—if the language appears basic and unsophisticated, does it hinder the character from discussing deep topics? Dorothy Dodge Robbins, author of "Personal and Cultural Transformation: Letter Writing in Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies*," responds to this thought by mentioning, "The oral traditions and 'illiteracy' of the region are not replaced or corrected by Ivy's words, but become the essence of her art" (137). Ivy's dialect not only functions to tell her story, but also to represent her individual voice apart from her culture. The grammatical flaws align with the region's speech patterns, and the culture provides Ivy with a story; therefore, in removing the "flaws" of Ivy's voice, the author risks removing all aspects of Ivy as a character. In fact, all we really have of her is the written voice; no outside descriptions or perspectives are provided about Ivy except from her own

words. The genre wholly relies on the authentic voice of the letter writer, and if modified, the author risks depreciating characters.

The grammatical flaws not only represent the voices of Ivy and of Appalachian culture, but they also function to explain how culture shapes the context of Ivy's letters. In her first letter to Hanneke, Ivy's pen pal, she unfolds the entire history of her family from her perspective. She begins by telling Hanneke how her parents met when they were young in order to establish the location of her family. She also provides the love story of her parents' youth in order to suggest a realistic image of her life, one that is not necessarily happy. Ivy mentions, "Now I am glad I have set this all down for I can see my Momma and Daddy as young, and laughing. This is not how they are today" (14). She must describe how they once were in order to display their current situation. She continues by telling Hanneke that her father has a bad heart problem and that her mother has to help with manual labor, which reflects the conditions of the culture. Ivy writes, "My momma was young and so pretty (...) now, she looks awful, like her face is hanted, she has had too much on her [sic]" to contrast the appearance of her mother as life developed (15). But if this novel is about life from Ivy's perspective, why does she begin with the story of her parents? Ivy must provide this information for the reader to fully understand why she takes the pen-pal assignment so seriously, and even why she continues writing letters after the assignment is complete. The difficulties of life, first beginning with her parents' fairytale but not happily-ever-after love story, makes Ivy feel lonely. The dissatisfaction with her situation encourages Ivy to

dream of far-away places and write to a distant friend, one with no connection to her ordinary life.

Writing letters becomes a simple remedy in dealing with her loneliness and dissatisfaction. In her third letter to Hanneke, Ivy writes, “I do not have a Pen Friend or any friend in the world, I have only Silvaney who lags and lags [sic],” showing that Ivy understands her loneliness and attempts to grapple it through writing to a pen pal (25). The reader learns she does not send this letter to Hanneke, but nevertheless, writing down her feelings and thoughts helps Ivy understand who she is. Ivy continues writing letters to Silvaney throughout the novel, in the end admitting, “[t]he 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” (313). The writing of the letter proves therapeutic in dealing with her problems, and in turn, the letters capture Ivy’s coming-of-age tale.

The reader should notice the theme of fantasy occurring throughout Ivy’s letters and the novel. This nature of fantasy is understandable at the beginning because Ivy is a young girl. She revels in the idea of a life that is not her own, and since she has not yet discovered how to change her life, she imagines a different one through the lives of others. The whole idea of exchanging lifestyles through letters encourages Ivy’s fantastical view on epistolary exchange, as made evident when Ivy breaks apart the letter delivery process and writes to Hanneke:

The store is at Majestic P.O. too. This is where Mrs. Brown will take my letter to you, then Bill Waldrop will put it in his saddlebag and

carry it over the mountain, a ship will carry it over the sea. Does this seem magical to you? It seems so to me" (16).

Ivy's excitement over the letter to Hanneke is fundamentally built on this fantastical unknown, first in the sense of learning about someone foreign to her own culture, but also to see if the friend will reciprocate Ivy's feeling of excitement.

The first letter to Hanneke is full of life and emotion, and she uses certain literary devices to paint different segments of her life, altogether complimenting the art form of the epistolary novel. Ivy almost expertly uses imagery in all of her letters, educating the letter's recipient and the novel's reader with how Ivy's world looked. When recounting a night snow, Ivy hums, "Ice just shining on each and evry limb of evry tree and isickles thick as our arm hanging down offen the house. It was like I looked out on the whole world and I culd see for miles, off down the mountain here, but it was new [sic]" (26). Grammatical errors and all, Ivy provides an image of her world that the reader can imagine, which is needed in order to understand how Ivy views the world. Likewise, Ivy plays with similes, noting that the sun rising over Hell Mountain looked "like a white hot firy ball rising up from the fog that always hangs on the mountaintop of an evening" (13). Ivy's initial letters as a young girl embed these literary devices, specifically in her first letter to Hanneke. The repetition of simile and imagery, to name a few, suggests that one does not need an education in order to write in an artistic way. Instead, Ivy's literary intelligence allows her words to become an instrument in the novel. She truly has a craft of creating images with her words, her mouth functioning as the artist's hand and the words the pencil, shading and shading the outline until the image relates to an object, which

represents her life. The reader experiences this “shading” through her recounting the mountain walk with her father in her edited letter to Hanneke. This letter is separate from the first; Mrs. Brown tells Ivy that her original letter is “too long and not appropriate,” so she writes a new one that is significantly shorter. She begins the edited letter in a controlled manner, almost threatening to sound robotic. However, remembering the experience catapults Ivy’s writing in a creative direction. For example, she sacrifices an entire paragraph to explain how her surroundings looked, with the grass “like a carpet in the spring,” instead of portraying what she and her dad actually did (22). Her words begin to cascade, as if her brain works faster than her hand in remembering the situation, ultimately forming a tangent that sidetracks Ivy from the intent of the assignment. While this poses a barrier in meeting the expectations of Mrs. Brown, it collectively delivers her story in highly detailed, wanderlust manner. Ultimately, if Ivy has a more fantastical outlook than others in her family, she perhaps explains elements of her culture in a largely creative way compared to her peers.

While Ivy’s fantastical outlook on life predominantly shapes her written voice, the eyes that read her letters heavily influence her written voice as well. Beginning with Mrs. Brown, Ivy learns to tailor her voice to meet other’s expectations if instructed to do so. For example, Ivy allows her authentic voice to permeate her initial letter to Hanneke. She treats the letter seriously, which is evident through the intimate content she shares with her. Her written voice appears fluid; Ivy writes as if she were speaking to Hanneke face-to-face. She begins the first letter, “My dear Hanneke, Your name is not much common here, I think it is so

pretty too. I say it now and agin it tastes sweet in my mouth like honey or cane or how I picture the fotched-on candy from Mrs. Brown's book about France [sic]" (11). Her introduction sounds conversational, which makes it appear that Ivy feels comfortable and excited to write to Hanneke. Based on the sheer length of her first letter, Ivy obviously invests time and energy to create a representative letter of her life as she sees it. However, once Mrs. Brown intervenes and chides her, Ivy rewrites the initial letter. She begins the revised copy, "My dear Hanneke, I am a girl of 12 years old very pretty I have very long hair and eight brothers and sisters and my Mother and my Father, he is ill" (21). Here, Ivy compacts pages worth of information from her initial draft into one, run-on sentence. Ivy's written voice appears rigid in the revision, which may occur because she is writing in a voice that is not natural to her, and it instigates a vivid comparison to Celie's early letters in Walker's *The Color Purple*. When Mrs. Brown asks Ivy to revise her letters, she really asks Ivy to amend her written voice and who she is; however, in so doing, Ivy risks losing authentic aspects of identity. On the other hand, Celie's problem is that she does not have a voice to begin tailoring, for she has difficulty imagining herself as human enough to have something to say and even someone to listen to it. It is clear outward expectations complicate both Ivy and Celie's fight for authentic voice; however, the narrative device of the letter provides a "safe zone" to develop it.

While Ivy's written voice alters depending on recipient, it largely develops as she ages. Her spelling and grammar improve with time, which parallels nicely with Ivy coming to understand her circumstances as she writes. When younger, Ivy blindly talks about her situation without comprehension; when she desires a



change, she truly cannot explain why she wants something different, except in assuming something different is better than her current situation. When she explains how her parents were once happy at the beginning of the novel but “now” they are not, she is not able to fully process why they no longer feel the same. She has to experience growing up in order to fill the gap between “first they were happy and now they are not,” simply by maturing herself. Because Ivy takes to her letters to reflect and analyze the past, the genre allows for the filling-in of these narrative gaps. This reflection is one of the genre’s strengths and the reader gets to experience the filling-in firsthand.

In regards to the content of her letters, Ivy uses the language of a child to discuss adult topics. She processes the world’s conflicts in her own childlike way, which differs from Celie who does not consider the depth of her problems until later in life. Ivy allows her emotions to seep into her personal writing because she does not want to alarm anyone by acting out on them in real life. This consciousness of self seems indefinitely mature, but it contrasts to her naïve topics, such as talking about Molly’s clothes, going to school with nuns, and how they marry Jesus. When she does talk about hard topics, such as her father’s death, she does so with a grace only a child can speak—a grace that reveals Ivy’s resilience. For example in remembering how her father taught her to appreciate the spring, she writes, “He used to take us way up on the mountainside in the wee early spring to tap a birch and get the sap...I recall he said to me one time Now Ivy, this is how spring tastes. This is the taste of spring” (42). Ivy’s father loved nature, and instead of dwelling on

his passing, she remembers the happy moments spent with him—moments that fundamentally shaped Ivy's own personality.

A byproduct of Ivy writing her own story through letters is the power to say what she desires because the letter constitutes a safe place to "speak." The way she frames her life provides understanding of it, and one way she presents her life is through objects of possession. The reader quickly recognizes that Ivy correlates power with ownership, which raises a problem when she does not feel like she has owned anything. Several instances of Ivy asserting her possessions in the letters come to mind, allowing the reader to discover a similar pattern: in order to possess what she wants, she must sacrifice something that she has, most times a sacrifice by desire. The cycle begins with her room in Geneva Hunt's Majestic, Virginia, boardinghouse. She describes the room's décor in a detailed letter to Silvaney, her intellectually challenged sister who is incapable of communicating with words, summing up the description with, "It is mine," which is exactly what Celie from Walker's *The Color Purple* writes about her clitoris when she is discovering herself sexually (88). And Ivy is correct: the room is hers, until she brings Lonnie Rash inside, literally. Lonnie is young Ivy's first boyfriend, and also the first boy with whom she experiences sexual intercourse. In order to act out on her sexual desires, she must first give her body to Lonnie. One place that she and Lonnie can find total privacy is her own room in the boardinghouse; in a roundabout way, a transaction occurs: she must give up her body and her room in order to gain sexual satisfaction with Lonnie. The cost of one thing bears the gift of another, but as we find out later in the novel, not all gifts produce an easy future.

Ivy's sexual desire obviously encourages this type of transaction, but the letters provide her with an avenue to discuss the topic in private. She confides in Silvaney, through their letters, sexual tensions and experiences that she encounters. The first is when Ivy writes regarding men at the boardinghouse: "I see them starring at me sometimes it makes me feel funny and bad (...) it is like ther eyes are touching my body underneath my dress [sic]" (86). A couple of letters later, she again writes to Silvaney about Lonnie: "He stars at me all the time it is like he is touching me under my cloths, his eyes follow me wherever I go [sic]" (103). Twice, Ivy mentions males starring at her body in a lustful way, responding that their stares are so intense that it feels like they are physically touching her. The potency of their gazes creates a sexual revolution for the virgin Ivy, which she seems to only discuss through her letters to Silvaney. Ironically, at a time when she is more surrounded by people than usual, why does she only discuss sexual situations with Silvaney?

More than likely, Ivy writes about them to her because her sister is a vault; Ivy knows that Silvaney cannot understand. Perhaps Ivy explains it best when she writes, "I can talk to [Silvaney] for [she does] not understand, I can write this letter too and tell [her] all the deep things, the things in my hart (...) I can tell [her] things I would not tell another sole [sic]" (102). The "firey hand" of sexual desire makes Ivy feel like she is "bad," meaning that she feels as if she is doing things she should not be doing as a young girl (102-103). In committing bad acts, such as sneaking off with Lonnie in the shed behind the boardinghouse, Ivy feels guilty, and because of the guilt, she cannot tell anyone else out of fear of judgment. Although not much of a

religious person, Ivy, like Celie, understands she cannot hide her sins from God; she cannot avoid His judgment. Through the use of her letters, she can monitor her scandalous behavior within her social circle, opting to conceal the truth from most. But why tell anyone about her sexual indulgences at all? A contradiction exists, and Ivy writes it well herself when she says, “Oh Silvaney, I know this is bad but it feels so good” (104). She loves how wonderful being “bad” feels, which makes her want to talk about it, but only with someone that she trusts and who will not judge her, which is Silvaney. Ivy finds power in doing something “bad” in secret, for it shakes up her ordinary life, and the letters are instrumental in releasing the secret accomplishment to her chosen audience.

As Ivy writes to Silvaney about her relationship with Miss Torrington, the letters once again provide an avenue for her to share confidential information, revealing more sexual transactions of possession. The sacrifice is obvious: Miss Torrington offers Ivy the opportunity to go with her Boston in order to further her education, saying that she is “a girl so remarkable talented,” but in order to move, Ivy must leave behind her family and Lonnie (105). The price of gaining an education means leaving behind her social circle. Embedded within the cost of moving is the cost of self-control, for Miss Torrington assumes a dominating role over Ivy in approaching the subject. Sadly, Ivy does not realize she negotiates her freedom when agreeing to follow her tutor to Boston, but in reviewing the relationship described in the letters to Silvaney, the reader can easily see how Miss Torrington forces Ivy into going. She threatens her, saying that she feels “it is a sin (...) if we do not use our talents that God has given us (...) in some ways it might be

the greatest sin of all," in which Ivy responds an agreeable "Amen" (105). Miss Torrington's guilt trip captures Ivy's free voice; in fact, Ivy herself writes, "it was like she owned me" in describing her tutor to Silvaney (109).

Miss Torrington's intense guidance gives Ivy the chance to escape her ordinary world, but her control attempts to sabotage Ivy's sexual freedom. In sharing the uncensored story of Miss Torrington with Silvaney, an unlikely relationship becomes obvious. It is sexual in nature and inappropriate altogether, but the letters allow Ivy to discuss the dynamics of the relationship without judgment from the outside world. Ivy provides an early and alarming description of Miss Torrington to Silvaney, writing that "her voice is real high and grates on your nerves" and that "she stands too stiff and pushes too close to you when she talks...she is strate as a poker and stars into your eyes too hard [sic]" (100-101). The description paints Miss Torrington as harsh and dominating, and in saying that she can "give [Ivy] the world," she seems to court Ivy, as if she is competing with Lonnie for her. This dominance almost appears masculine, and when Miss Torrington kisses her on the neck, the reader questions whether she is sexually attracted to Ivy or rather just lonesome. Arguably, her deviation from her traditional role as tutor causes everything to go awry, for after Miss Torrington expends Ivy's trust by overstepping her boundaries, Ivy feels as if she must regain her sexual freedom and heterosexuality, doing so by taking Lonnie "in my room for the first time and closed the door behind us and took off all my clothes and layed down on the bed and let him do it to me [sic]," both exercising power and relinquishing it (111). Here, Ivy makes a sexual transaction: to overwrite Miss Torrington's sexual intrusion, she

allows Lonnie to have sexual intercourse with her. With the letters, the reader can piece together the real story, which may not be provided if Ivy was not writing to Silvaney. The transaction allows Ivy to regain control of her choices and sexual freedom; however, ironically, the moment she regains freedom is the same moment she loses it. Ivy becomes pregnant, and from this moment forward, the letters transform, exploring how the self is limited after assuming the role as mother. Through Ivy's voice, the letters reveal the struggle to retain a sense of autonomy after having children.

The fight to remain autonomous showers Ivy with feelings of discontent and she airs out her emotions through letters, suggesting the root of her dissatisfaction is attached to motherhood. Post childbirth, motherhood rewrites a woman's identity, but Ivy struggles with this process, specifically in dealing with isolation from the outside world and filling the demands of the role. She struggles with the emotion of loneliness, which is somewhat ironic because she is with her children, but still feels cut off from the world. Ivy perpetuates this feeling by writing to Silvaney. When writing to her, Ivy begins most letters with a testament stating she cannot tell anyone else except her, as she does when writing, "Oh Silvaney! So much has happened! and there is so much I can not tell to a living soul, I will write to you instead" and "I feel I am bursting with news but I can not tell it to a sole, I have no one to talk to [sic]" (102 and 164). But why is Silvaney the only person Ivy opens up to? She attempts to mend this loneliness by venting issues to Silvaney, but how is this method ever supposed to work as intended? Silvaney cannot reply to Ivy's letters, so how is she able to comfort Ivy during these difficult times?

The answer is that Silvaney comforts Ivy because she cannot reply. For Ivy, the epistolary exchange does not need to work as intended; that is, she does not need a response in order to feel better. Ivy writes about her sister, “it is like we are the same sometimes it is like we are one” (17). They share such a special sister bond that it is like they are the same person. If this is the case, why should Ivy even write letters to her at all instead of just keep a diary? Maybe writing a letter to Silvaney, even though she will not receive a response, helps Ivy feel less lonely, as if someone else will listen to her story other than herself. But more so, perhaps Ivy writes letters to Silvaney because she *is* part of her; writing a diary would not suffice since part of Ivy is with Silvaney. She sees, or rather wants to see, fragments of herself within Silvaney’s character—that which Silvaney is, Ivy is not, and vice versa, but the combination of the two seems to vaguely satisfy Ivy’s discontent with life. She needs to grow into herself and reflect on the woman that she is becoming, but the only way she can accomplish this is through writing to Silvaney.

Ivy also struggles with the sacrifice of self that motherhood requires. Nancy Barrineau touches on this sacrifice when she writes about Ivy:

As she describes her daily household routine, she reflects that she never dreams, never goes out and leaves the children, has no interest in reading, the kind of activities that reflect a self-actualizing person. (61)

After Ivy has children, she spends most of her time taking care of them and it becomes difficult for her to focus on herself. As ironic as it may be, the act of giving life to another human being takes away an aspect of individual life from the mother.

Ivy experiences a certain loss of self, simply because her focus is divided, which prompts her to feel limited in a sense of self-identification. Before she has children, Ivy has the freedom to define herself through her education, looks, and desires. After children, Ivy is first classified as a mother, broadening her abilities to influence someone but at the same time limiting her future roles. In a sense, the birth of her children allows her to grow in terms of a “mother,” but it challenges her freedom to develop simply as a woman. Ivy writes, “I have spent half of my life wanting and the other half grieving, and most often I have been wanting and grieving the same thing. There has been precious in-between” (275). Younger Ivy feels barren from possession, as if she has never owned anything, but the birth of Joli should have fixed this feeling. However, after Joli’s birth, Ivy wishes for her youth, as if she traded it for her daughter. Ivy clearly wants what she cannot have, and she unfolds the struggle of compromising her desires through her letters.

The birth of Joli changes the quality of Ivy’s narrating voice, marking the maturity of her as a woman. When she was younger and independent, Ivy focused on creating memories. She saw the world through colorful lenses, as made evident in her descriptions of landscape and fondness of folk stories, yet she also yearned for a different world. She found happiness in the “sky just as blue as a piece of cloth in Stoney Branhams store,” happiness that distracted her from being discontent with a handed-down life (42). Ivy spent most of her time fantasizing about a “better” world, writing that Boston with Miss Torrington would be the “chance of a lifetime” (100). Altogether, younger Ivy’s voice appeared zealous and determined about the possibilities of creating a life. After she gives birth to Joli, the role of mother confines



Ivy, and her voice begins sounding exasperated, almost desperate, with passing time. Shortly after giving birth to Joli, Ivy pens, “This is important, I want to remember this, it is all so important, this is happening to me” (149). The repetition of the word “important” presents her voice as hyperaware of the moment’s significance, even panicked, for she fears that she will forget it; the similar phrasing emphasizes Ivy’s want to retain this memory even though time pressures it to be forgotten. Most importantly, after becoming a mother, Ivy’s focus shifts from dreaming of new opportunities to preserving the memories she has already created. She writes to Silvaney about Joli’s birth:

I want to tell you how it was when she was born. I will write it down plain for I want to remember it always, and I can tell I am forgetting it already, the way I am afraid I am forgetting some things about Sugar Fork and even Majestic. (147)

It is as if motherhood challenges Ivy enough to open her eyes: while she has difficulty adjusting to its restrictions, motherhood forces her to realize that life moves quickly and she should focus on documenting all her special moments. At this point, the letters assume a strong purpose, both for the reader and Ivy. For Ivy, the epistles preserve her memories and stop time, made evident when she writes, “I think this is one reason I write so many letters to you, Silvaney, to hold onto what is passing” (147). Simultaneously, the letters continue to deliver Ivy’s story to the reader, granting purpose to the epistolary genre.

Since Ivy cannot avoid the isolation motherhood involves, she challenges the role’s constraints by rewriting them; that is, she rebels against female social

expectations and creates her own, made available through the letters she writes. In so doing, she builds her own transformation as a woman. To build her own conversion, she uses what Elisabeth Heroin-Sarafidis calls “an instrument with whose aid...she seeks actively to reclaim herself” (115). None other than Honey Breeding is the instrument. From the moment he arrives, Ivy is nothing short of enthralled by Honey’s presence. Even his name sounds sweet and irresistible. She describes him to Silvaney with, “When I passed close by him, it was like a current jumped from him to me—or me to him and back, maybe (...) Or it was like we both had it in us, and it just leaped out when we met” (214). The attraction shared between Ivy and Honey urges her to literally leave her life behind on Star Mountain, and she follows Honey to the top of Blue Star Mountain. However immoral it may appear, Ivy’s decision to indefinitely leave her family to be with Honey on the mountain redistributes power; Ivy assumes the power to pave her own life. At this climatic moment, she no longer exists to fulfill the duties of mother, daughter, sister, and wife, but she lives to satisfy her inner voice, that same voice that controlled her thoughts as a child, which encourages her to defy her responsibilities and fill the void that has left her discontent. She writes:

I felt again like I had as a girl, light-headed, light-footed, running all over town. When I thought of my babies, I could see them real plain in my mind, their bright little faces like flowers, but it seemed to me that they were somebody else’s babies, not mine. I was too young to have them. (224-225)

Being with Honey puts her in an earlier place of youth, when Ivy had the freedom to be selfish without consequences. She is not very old, but Honey is the instrument that returns her to a youthful mindset. In feeling “like [she] had as a girl,” Ivy does not even feel like herself as a mother, a feeling that produces mixed effects (224). In feeling “like a girl again,” Ivy abandons her reality of being a mother and a wife, one again introducing a transaction of possession. She sacrifices the time to be with Oakley and her children to frolic with Honey—a mistake that causes her to miss the death of her daughter, Lulda, while she is gone—but the desperate decision to follow Honey produces a “life-giving” experience (Parrish 116). Ironically, as Ivy abandons her role as “life-giver,” she “engage[s] in an act of life-giving (...) defying convention and social responsibility” (Parrish 116). Her attention shifts from providing for her children to focusing on herself so that she may discover her own personal responsibilities.

After Ivy returns from her escapade with Honey, she writes to Silvaney, “And I am different now. I am changed in some way. It does not have a thing to do with Oakley...it only has to do with me” (247). Her change is internal, realizing that she is different because she has reclaimed a part of Ivy that was overwritten by her various roles. She now feels like she belongs to herself, understanding that she has the power to enjoy her life, writing, “Life goes on, and I reckon now that I’ve got to live it” (248). The last bit of the bit of the quote—“I’ve got to live it”—becomes Ivy’s mantra, but some readers criticize her as self-indulgent, as if claiming a self was Ivy’s most important accomplishment. Her self-reclamation is important, but we must not forget that Ivy sacrifices irretrievable moments in going on the mountain

with Honey. Perhaps most poignant is the fact that she misses the death of LuIda while she is gone. Obviously sad because she deserts her role as mother and misses the passing of her child, but even so because she abandons her commitment as a wife. Ivy leaves the burden with Oakley and disowns the promise of “in sickness and in health,” making Ivy appear heartless. With this piece of information, we question what Ivy considers her most important achievement and whether escaping to the mountain was worth missing significant moments at home.

The last few letters display a shift in Ivy’s narrative voice. Instead of sounding naïve and hopeful, her voice sounds more assertive and confident, probably due to experience. It is as if Ivy accepts that which she cannot change and, instead, embraces her remaining time. We specifically see this exercised after Oakley’s death. Ivy is now an older woman, her children have grown and left home, and her husband is dead. No longer is she in demand as a mother and a wife because the intensity of her domestic roles has ceased; this liberation from duty invigorates Ivy. She writes to Silvaney, “I can make up my own life now whichever way I want to, and it is like I am a girl again, for I am not beholden to any soul,” sounding like an echo of the language with Honey (277). Once again, we see the importance of possession in the novel, but this time the outcome works in her favor: instead of something being taken from Ivy, she is gifted possession of her life. Ivy continues with, “I can get up in the morning and eat a hot dog, which I did yesterday. I don’t know what I might do tomorrow,” displaying the excitement she feels in writing her future (277). As she did when she was younger, Ivy focuses on best utilizing her

remaining time, for now she has the power and confidence to implement her dreams without fear of judgment.

Ivy's confident narrative voice is ultimately shaped by her liberation from domestic role, and the outside world definitely encourages her words throughout the remaining epistles. The last letters of the novel are written between the years of 1940 and 1970. Post World War II, America experienced revolutionary changes, responding with cultural and technological advancements that reshaped the lives of Americans. Culturally, women adopted traditionally male roles of working in factories, operating machinery, and earning an income while the men fought in war, all of which temporarily blurred gender roles. As gender culture blends to adapt with changing times, so does Ivy's outlook, just as Celie's does in *The Color Purple* when she opens her pants business, and the letters allow each to talk about progressive topics. Women were gaining power in everyday life, and Ivy's voice reflects this change when writing about divorce; in a sense, the letters allow Ivy to talk about her own flirtation with that possibility even though it was not completely proper to do so in conversation. She writes to Joli, "The divorce like the T.V. is the wave of the future it seems to me! And if people could of done it way back when (...) why there would be a lot of them divorced today" (277). She continues with, "You are not the first one to get a divorce nor will you be the last, a woman does not need to have a man around all the time anyway" (280). Ivy is adaptable to the idea of divorce, especially once Joli writes to her saying that she is seeking one. Not only does Ivy support her daughter's decision, she almost encourages it, hinting that she too may have executed that decision if it was made available to her earlier.

As a child sending letters to Hanneke, Ivy writes, "I am the Ice Queen" (26). This description embodies who young Ivy wants to be, and considers herself to be, until the roles of mother, lover, wife, and grandmother challenge her self-identification. However, in the novel's last letter, she quickly regurgitates childhood memories as if she does not have much time left on earth, ending with, "I walked in my body like a Queen" (316). Ivy, as an older woman on the brink of death, reverts to the fantastic identification of herself as if through reflecting on life, she realizes that she has always been who she wanted to be, despite any other title or role.

Her last sentence ends without a punctuation mark, and the reader can assume two things: Ivy's narrative voice ceases but could have continued, as if her story is not complete; but, she seems content with her life because she reclaims her identity. Throughout the novel, Ivy constantly tries to return to the time when she and Silvaney both were children, looking at the world through similar, sparkling eyes. Although she cannot go back in time, the letters allow her to work through her nostalgia and realize that she does not need to return to her childhood, for even in older age, Ivy still has the power to define herself with her narrative voice.

FUTURE LETTERS: Maria Semple's *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*

When reading novels of the epistolary genre with female protagonists, I questioned whether logistical conditions had to be similar in order for the genre to work. My research and readings support that a few similar characteristics must exist for the author to use the epistolary genre. Obviously, distance must exist between epistolary correspondents in order to simulate the exchange, but it is not necessarily confined to physical distance. The sender and the receiver can also share cognitive distance, such as a gap in understanding life, as made evident through Ivy's exchange with Silvaney and Celie's letters to God. The epistle's sender must also have a specific story to tell that the receiver does not yet know, a story that can include internal searching and outward world analysis that produces a learning experience for the sender. With these conditions, the letter becomes the solitary most powerful item in the story; yet, as communication methods change in response to America's cultural and technological progressions, is the genre still relevant when letter writing is not?

We live in a world that heavily relies on technology for communication, whether through electronic mail, texting, or instant messaging. It is only fitting that Maria Semple incorporate these forms of communication in her post-modern epistolary text, *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*. But, as the epistolary fiction genre

develops with present-day communication methods, what happens to the female's narrative voice? With technology's help, newer forms of communication deliver information immediately, contrasting with the traditional paper letter that may take days to deliver. Specifically for this project, does the electronic letter serve Bernadette the same way that traditional epistles serve Celie and Ivy?

Semple's novel makes the answer obvious: Bernadette's twenty-first century communication somewhat differs from her earlier female letter writers, but whether she realizes it or not, her methods are drastically complicated. Post-modern communication relies on an elaborate network of modern technology, implemented to ease the communication process, but instead, creates an avenue for problems. In Bernadette's case, modern technology fundamentally fails her, but when she tries to rely on the tradition epistle, it, too, disappoints. Because of the breach in privacy and miscommunication, both post-modern correspondence and the traditional epistle betray Bernadette.

Capitalizing on technological evolution makes Semple's novel different from the previous three texts; she mainly uses fax, e-mail, blog posts, and other secret documents to tell the story of Bee Fox and her runaway mother, Bernadette. Bee's mother is not like the other West Coast moms in her daughter's school. She is wired differently; instead of focusing on the type of cars people drive and interacting with the community, Bernadette hides in her house. Once a wonderful architect, Bernadette loses her sense of identity and passion when her huge Twenty Mile House project fails. To cope, she avoids the world, becoming a recluse and diagnosed agoraphobic, causing a problem when the family plans a vacation to



Antarctica to award Bee for her academic success. Her husband, Elgie, worries about Bernadette, urging her to see a doctor for depression and social anxiety, but she refuses to seek help. Feeling like he is left with no option, Elgie fashions a surprise intervention, full with doctors, the FBI and police. When Bernadette arrives, she is blindsided and left with no option but to go. But, when she sneaks to the restroom, Bernadette vanishes; she physically escapes leaving no note or clue to where she has gone.

Even before Bernadette escapes from her intervention, she was already creating her own rebellion against life through email correspondence with one character: Manjula Kapoor. Just as Celie and Ivy utilize letters to figuratively escape, Bernadette relies on emails between her and Manjula to ease her dissatisfaction with life, as if creating a relationship with someone that knows nothing about her is more satisfactory than communication with people in her direct social circle. She thinks Manjula is her long-distance, virtual assistant from India, handling everything from scheduling dental appointments to ordering yard signs. While Manjula provides immediate services and fulfills Bernadette's wishes, it serves Bernadette best by being an informational vault; she feels like her virtual secretary is a close alliance. Just as Celie uses God and Ivy utilizes Silvaney to unload secret information, Bernadette divulges information to Manjula that she never mentions to her family. Perhaps the most important information she shares with her virtual assistant is the plan to totally skip out on Antarctica. Bernadette originally plans to travel to the South Pole to reward Bee for her outstanding academic performance, but as she reveals only to Manjula, she does not want to go and tries to make excuses. For

example, she confides in Manjula and writes, “I can’t go to Antarctica. How I’ll ever extract myself, I’m not sure. But I have faith in us, Manjula. Together we can do anything” (89). What Bernadette cannot say to her family, she writes to Manjula, suggesting that the electronic letter provides an avenue for her unheard voice, as the letter does for Celie and Ivy. She thinks her secrets are safe with her email friend, but little does she know her privacy is at stake.

At the intervention, Bernadette learns that the FBI has been tracking her emails—nothing sent or received has remained private for one reason: “There is no Manjula” (204). Elgie explains:

Manjula is an alias for an identity-theft ring operating out of Russia.

They have been posing as Manjula as a way to capture all of our personal banking information. Not only that, they’re coming to Seattle to make their move while Bee and I are in Antarctica. (205)

Immediately, Bernadette discovers that the person she comes to trust does not exist. The private vault that Manjula was supposed to be turns out to be a fake; instead of protecting her information, it exploits her secrets. With this discovery, post-modern communication fails Bernadette. Not only has she trusted the fake Manjula with financial and personal information, but also she confides in it when she does not want to talk to anyone else. The email allows her to create a friendship with someone far off, just as Ivy desires with Hanneke through the traditional letter, but ultimately betrays her and negatively alters her narrative voice. After she escapes, the reader no longer witnesses Bernadette communicating via email; in fact, she no longer seems to communicate at all. After she leaves, Bernadette’s narrative voice is

non-existent, suggesting that when the epistolary genre sacrifices privacy, the letter seems to silence a female character's narrative voice instead of promoting it.

As made evident at Bernadette's intervention, electronic communication fundamentally changes privacy, which in turn betrays Bernadette and her narrative voice. Unlike Celie and Ivy whose narrative voices remain unheard except to the intended recipients, a plethora of people discover Bernadette's secret narrative voice because of electronic communication; her emails become accessible to the many. To name a few, Bee, FBI officials, Bee's roommate at boarding school, Bruce Jessup, and eventually Elgie all find out about Bernadette's undisclosed correspondence. Realistically, the wrong recipient could have read Celie and Ivy's letters, but not on the scale that modern technology allows. Anyone with login information and Wi-Fi connection can access electronic letters, not to mention the people that know how to gain unauthorized access through hacking systems, such as Manjula. Even further, the government can track electronic correspondence without one even knowing—in Bernadette's example the FBI tracked every avenue of communication flagged with her name.

While the breach of privacy forces Bernadette to abandon the system, the FBI documentation on Bernadette aids Bee when finding her mother. After tracking her, the FBI constructs a file of Bernadette's information and sends the file to Bee; inside she finds the necessary documents to locate her mother. The file includes, as told by Bruce Jessup, who is Bee's Dean of Admissions at Choate Boarding School, in his Tuesday, January 18<sup>th</sup> letter to Elgie, "FBI documents involving surveillance of your wife, emails between you and your administrator, handwritten notes between a

woman and her gardener (...) and correspondence between you and a psychiatrist” (224). Every bit of private communication is recorded. Ironically, the contents inside the FBI file are labeled “CONFIDENTIAL,” yet the information is anything but private, which poses a problem. Bernadette, like Celie and Ivy, takes to the epistle to protect her secrets, but because her information is disclosed to unintended recipients, electronic communication fails to keep it private. Although not the same, readers find a similar epistolary disloyalty in Walker’s *The Color Purple* when Pa keeps Nettie’s letters from Celie for years, suggesting that any type of communication can go awry, get diverted, or be read by the wrong people. It appears that when technology makes communication so accessible by the many, the genre’s ability to foster a generally private avenue for the female voice is weakened and almost lost.

When epistolary characters can get information anywhere, location no longer complicates the plot—electronic mail decreases the importance of geographic particularity. In contrast to Celie and Ivy, Bernadette and her recipients do not need to know location in order to communicate—but what exactly does the decreased importance of location do for the epistolary fiction genre? Epistolary fiction characters become more independent, which can be used for good and bad. When location does not matter any longer, the sender and receiver become more independent from geographic stipulations, stereotypes and complications. For example, unlike Ivy who relies on the Majestic post office to deliver her letter, or even Celie who depends on Pa to deliver Nettie’s letters to her, Bernadette does not need anyone but herself to send emails. This independence seems powerful, for the

sender and receiver are less dependent on their communities, but in retrospect, it also seems destructive, especially in Bernadette's example. Email communication separates Bernadette one more degree from her community; she does not have to rely on it to even deliver her letter. The separation only further disconnects Bernadette with her actual life, forcing her to feel more and more like an outsider due to the weak community connection. Likewise, the fake Manjula and Russian identity thefts simultaneously use the independence from location to their advantage, suggesting that the absence of location can encourage inauthentic and risky communication because of independence.

At the end of the novel, the reader learns that Bernadette did not silence her voice completely. Instead, when Bernadette decides electronic communication betrays her, she turns to the traditional epistle. Once Bee and Elgie have located Bernadette in Antarctica and reconnect, Bernadette asks:

"Why didn't you write?"

"I didn't know where you were!"

"My letter," [Bernadette] said.

"Your letter?"

"I sent it weeks ago."

"I never got your stupid letter," [Bee] said. (306-7)

When Bernadette asks why she never wrote, the reader learns that Bee never received her mother's epistle. In the letter, Bernadette reveals her exact location of escape and reason for leaving in the first place. She writes in the letter's first sentence, "Bee, I write to you from a shipping container in Antarctica (...) I know it

seems like I just took off, but here's the thing: I didn't" (312-313). She continues to explain the situation; all the information Bee needed to find her mom was in the letter. But somewhere in the process, the traditional letter goes missing; the system becomes unreliable and fails Bernadette, too. This problem is not new, for mailing malfunctions have occurred for years, but the problem still sheds light on the issue of miscommunication and even, how the miscommunication creates Semple's novel. If Bee would have received her mother's letter at the designated time of arrival, Semple could not have used Bee's search as plot, which would drastically change the story.

After all the emails, Bernadette relies on the traditional epistle to deliver the most needed information—why? Like Celie and Ivy, Bernadette is forced to the letter. In *The Color Purple*, Pa's opening threat drives Celie into the traditional genre, while *Fair and Tender Ladies'* Ivy is compelled to the letter because it provides the only avenue to share sensitive information with Silvaney. The failure of modern epistolary communication causes Bernadette to distrust email, altogether pushing her to the letter. Her movement suggests that the traditional epistle is more private than the email, which is a possibility that post-modernist characters might not want to believe.

Future epistolary novels using post-modern communication methods will continue to battle privacy problems as long as the option to infringe exists. The communication problems will complicate plots; therefore, the exact direction of the genre is hard to identify, but one thing remains certain: as the world continues to force characters' voices into positions of silence—due to electronic communication's

sacrifice of privacy or society's inflicted gender role expectations—the letter has a purpose and the genre has a future.

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