

Who is Nettie? and What is She Doing in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*?

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Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* has become justly famous not least for being a successful modern version of the epistolary novel and for bringing off the feat of letting an illiterate woman, born and bred in rural Georgia, tell most of the story in Black English. Apparently *The Color Purple* is unique in the African-American literary tradition as an epistolary novel.¹ The entire work consists of three series of letters: Miss Celie's letters addressed to God, often very brief but making up about three fifths of the total number of letters, the rest of the text being covered by Celie's and her sister Nettie's correspondence to—not with—each other.

Until mid-way into the book we are dependent on Celie's version for our knowledge of her world. Her many letters to God are more of a diary than letters designed for an addressee who is expected to reply in some form or other, and through them we acquire an intimate knowledge of Celie, her feelings and attitudes, her experiences and her vague hopes. We become involved in her life and her development, from an abused, downtrodden "slave" to an independent woman who is aware of her worth as a human being. Celie, and especially the friend and lover that she finds in the flamboyant blues singer Shug Avery, are the novel's heroines and bearers of its "philosophy," and their love for one another,

1 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 244.

which is both sisterly and sexual, has naturally been at the center of critical interest ever since the novel's appearance, tied as it is to Walker's "womanist" ideas, that is, her special variant of black feminism.

The relationship between the two biological sisters has, however, remained of marginal concern. With a few exceptions—notably Deborah E. McDowell who studies the female characters within an intertextual framework comparing them to earlier black protagonists—critics have paid Nettie little attention.² It seems as if most commentators have wished to have done with her as quickly as possible after some comments on the glaring contrasts between the sisters' epistolary language and style. Thus, in his authoritative study of African-American literature, Bernard W. Bell's only comment on the Nettie character concerns the failure of her letters to convey a truthful picture of the lives of African peoples.³ This lack of interest is in a way striking, for Shug is certainly right when she asserts that before Celie met her, Nettie was her only love object and the only one who really cared about her in return. And since sisterly love is one of the central themes of the novel, we would expect Nettie to be guaranteed a significant role in both plot and theme.

One reason for this comparative critical neglect of the Nettie figure may have been a baffled response to the author's portrait of her. What are we meant to make of Nettie with her cautious style and modest personality? Does the author use Nettie as a means to express criticism of certain traits in the black community, for example, the strivings of a black middle class? Is Nettie the letter-writer there "to provide some relief from Celie's language," as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., proposes?⁴ Does the author need her for important issues dramatized or argued in the novel? It is my intention in this essay to look more closely at the Nettie figure and try to determine who she is and what role she plays, and also to assess how successful the author has been in making this fictional character create the part of the novel's meaning that seems to be assigned to her.⁵

2 "'The Changing Same': Generational Connections and Black Women Novelists," in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian/Penguin, 1990).

3 *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. 266.

4 *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 251.

5 In her discussion of the novel Deborah E. McDowell pursues some of the questions I ask

We have to fit together the portrait of Nettie with the help of various pieces, the most clear-cut of them gathered from Celie's letters to God. Celie, who is open and genuine in her written record and commentary, is incapable of irony or other biasing devices of style in talking about her sister, and her view of Nettie is untarnished by doubts or reservations. Her picture of Nettie is therefore very positive. In one letter she sets down a nightly, intimate conversation with Shug Avery who asks her about her sister: "What she like?" "Where she at?" "Where she go?" "She tall or short?" "What kind of dress she like to wear?" "What her birthday?" "What her favorite color?" "Can she cook? Sew?" "What about hair?" We learn of Nettie's "smartness." "Rcad the newspapers when she was little more than talking. Did figures like they was nothing. Talked real well too," Celie tells Shug. We get no physical description of young Nettie apart from Celie's memory of the sweetness that was reflected in her sister's eyes: "There never was a sweeter girl.... Eyes just brimming over with it."⁶ The infatuation that the man who became Celie's husband felt for young Nettie is, however, an indication of her physical freshness and attraction. She was the one he had wanted for a wife, not the "ugly" Celie who was already sexually "spoiled" by having born two children, both of them taken from her at birth. And Celie's future husband is told that "ugly" Celie doesn't look like Nettie at all (18).

From Celie's early letters to God, begun when she is fourteen years old, we get snatches of information about her younger sister; they all stress what a good and clever pupil she is, how the teachers favor her, especially one Addie Beasley who becomes a role model for Nettie: an unmarried, ambitious, generous woman with a passion for schooling and racial uplift. Celie writes: "Nettie dote on Miss Beasley. Think nobody like her in the world"(19). Nettie is also from early on a quiet rebel. She opposes Pa, the stepfather whom both girls believe to be their biological father, and by great persistence she persuades him to listen to

about the function of Nettie's letters, but we arrive at very different evaluations of Walker's use of the Nettie figure. In *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) Elliott Butler-Evans comments interestingly on the relationship between Celie's and Nettie's letters, but since his overriding concern is the novel's feminist ideology, he does not take up the comprehensive questions I am raising.

⁶ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Pocket, 1983), pp. 112, 113.

what Miss Beasley has to say about schooling for Celie. Nettie insists that Celie, too, should be allowed to attend school. But when she discovers that Celie is pregnant (Pa being the unacknowledged father of the child), Miss Beasley gives up her attempt to do anything for her. Nettie shows initiative and spunk when she runs away from Pa's oppressive household and seeks refuge in Celie's home, and she encourages Celie not to let her husband's mean children tyrannize her. "You got to fight," she admonishes her (25). Celie's lecherous and bullying husband tries to ensnare the innocent girl, but she forcefully refuses his advances, whereupon he turns her out of the house. When Celie sends her sister off to the nearby town to ask for help from a black minister and his wife, this is the last act of direct communication between them until their happy reunion decades later.

Nettie's life after she parted from her sister is given to us piecemeal in the letters she has been sending to Celie. As he had threatened to do, Celie's husband—who is Mr.----- to her, but Albert to his ex-lover Shug—has seen to it that Celie never receives the letters, and it is thanks to Shug that they are finally discovered intact, hidden in Mr.-----'s trunk. Nettie is well aware that Mr.----- probably destroys or hides them out of spite, but a faint hope that her letters might evade his eyes among the plentiful Christmas and Easter mail makes her continue to send yearly greetings. During her first years away from home Nettie has a desperate need to maintain even an imaginary contact with her sister. Her correspondence functions as the same kind of therapy against loneliness that drives Celie to maintain her correspondence to God although he, as far as she can tell, never answers either by act or vision.

From her own letters we get the picture of Nettie as a kind and innocent girl who grows into a warm-hearted woman, rather conventional but still willing and able to learn from other peoples and cultures. After leaving Celie's home, she found work as a housewife's helper in the minister's family, and with her employers Samuel and Corrine she has gone to West Africa to help them in their missionary work. She is very good to their children Olivia and Adam, who respond by calling her Mama Nettie. (They are in fact Celie's children by Pa.) She still shows signs of being the quiet rebel she was as a youngster, although at times she may be so for questionable causes, such as when she is determined to have a window in her hut, surely an impractical arrangement considering the African rainy season. Her naiveté makes her blind to her own

feelings for Samuel and Corrine's reaction to the close friendship between him and Nettie. Without realizing how her unacknowledged longings may influence the way she perceives reality, she ingenuously describes her bed, covered by the obligatory mosquito net, as looking almost like "the bed of a bride" (146). Her conventionality reveals itself, for instance, in her prim response to a British woman missionary's contemptuous dismissal of marriage as a suitable career for a woman ("Really, she has the oddest ideas" [204]). Nettie's inability to enjoy this woman's endless stories about her long life as a very unconventional missionary in Africa points to a certain lack of imagination.

It is by her language and style that Nettie most significantly reveals herself in contrast to Celie, and an analysis of the extreme difference between their languages and styles should importantly fill out the portrait of Nettie and give us clues to her role in the novel.

Celie begins her first letter to God in the kind of Standard English she presumably was taught at school: "Dear God, I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (11). After the strain of writing as "a good girl," she immediately slips into her natural Black English, and she stays there during the rest of her correspondence. Her language does undergo changes, though, as she matures from a girl of fourteen to a woman in her forties. This first letter is marked by several features of Black English, for instance by omission of the third-person singular present tense -s ("she say"), omission of the -ed suffix to mark the past tense ("he grab"), zero copula ("he good to her"), use of uninflected be implying a habit ("every time I be the one to cook"), double negation ("I don't never"), omission of final -s from possessive nouns ("her sister doctor"), pronominal apposition ("My mama she fuss at me"), and hypercorrection ("I feels"). As for features of pronunciation we note, for example, loss of a final d-sound ("a kine word") and reduction of a consonant cluster ("chilren").⁷

Gradually Celie's syntax becomes less bare and monotonous, and her

7 For details on Black English I have consulted, among others, Sylvia Wallace Holton, *Down Home and Uptown: The Representation of Black Speech in American Fiction* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1984). Holton is greatly indebted to "Some Linguistic Features of Negro Dialect" (1970) by Ralph W. Fasold and Walter A. Wolfram, in R. W. Fasold and R. W. Shuy, *Teaching Standard English in the Inner City* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1970)

spelling suggests a pronunciation that is less heavily dialectal, for instance in words like "nothing" for earlier "nothin," and "children" for "chilren." But right up to her very last letter her language is her own kind of genuine Black English, with zero copulas, "us" for "we," double negations, omission of -s in verbs, "they" for "their," and so on. Along the way she had been encouraged to drop the "country give-away" of using "us" instead of "we" with the argument that talking like that makes colored people think you "a hick" and "white folks be amuse." But Celie thinks to herself that "only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind" (193, 194).

Other characters' discourse is rendered basically in *Celie's* language, although the reader can at times detect nuances in the Black English spoken. Thus, for instance, Celie's sisters-in-law, who are more urbanized than Celie and her closest family, seem to speak a slightly "modified" Black English. Sofia, the girlfriend of one of Mr.-----'s children, can speak Standard English when she wants to in order to create a specific effect. "Mrs.-----, I'd thank you for a glass of water before I go, if you don't mind," she says coolly to Celie after having been snubbed by her intended father-in-law (39). Shug Avery usually speaks Black English, but in an emotional scene her words, as rendered by Celie, fit into a Standard English pattern: "I won't leave, she say, until I know Albert won't even think about beating you" (77). Perhaps this solemn promise of support and protection requires a slightly "exalted" kind of English.

A passage in one of Celie's early letters illustrates well how skillfully—and confusingly—the author lets Celie slip in and out of rendering more or less faithfully other characters' speech and return almost unnoticeably to reporting in her own language. In this letter Celie tells about her and Nettie's vague plans for a life together in freedom. Preparation includes learning about American history out of Nettie's school-books. Celie writes:

The way you know who discover America, Nettie say, is think bout cucumbers. That what Columbus sound like. I learned all about Columbus in first grade, but look like he the first thing I forgot. She say Columbus come here in boats call the Neater, the Peter, and the Santomareater. Indians so nice to him he force a bunch of 'em back home with him to wait on the queen (19).

It seems likely that when she is talking to Celie, Nettie uses Black

English, slightly pruned by schooling and Miss Beasley. In this passage Celie takes over after interrupting Nettie's "speech" by her own memory of school, and by the end of the passage the language is more like Celie's Black English.

In another early letter to God written while Nettie is living in Celie's home, Nettie's language appears here and there as direct speech (no quotation marks occur in the novel). At times it sounds like colloquial Standard English, as when she tells Celie: "Don't let them [Mr.-----'s children] run over you.... You got to let them know who got the upper hand" (25). But also in this letter it is not possible to distinguish clearly between Celie's and Nettie's discourse. We may get a clue to a distinction in the way Celie uses the phrase "she say" when reporting dialogue. By subtly manipulating this phrase, the author manages to suggest a difference between direct and indirect speech. It seems that in sentences introduced by the phrase, without other devices that indicate direct discourse, such as capitalization, the speech reproduced is indirect discourse. When the letter-writer places the "she say" after the discourse reported on, it would seem to be direct discourse. Nettie's feelings of regret at having been turned out of Mr.-----'s house are expressed both as indirect discourse, more or less in Celie's Black English: "Say she hate to leave me is all. Us fall on each other neck when she say that," and as direct discourse rendered in Nettie's modified Black English: "I sure hate to leave you here with these rotten children, she say. Not to mention with Mr.-----. It's like seeing you buried, she say" (26). With capitalization, direct discourse can be preceded by the phrase. When Celie asks Nettie to write to her, Nettie reassures her: "She say, Nothing but death can keep me from it."

The first two letters from Nettie to Celie were written and posted soon after she had been driven away from Mr.-----'s house. The language is a mixture of Standard English and Black English in which the main non-standard feature is the use of ungrammatical verb forms ("we was," "he do," "you is," "The lady ... is name Corrine," etc.) (119, 120). After these early messages sent from a nearby Georgia town, Nettie's letters are written in Standard English with only an occasional sub-standard phrase, like the common "he don't," reminding us that these letters replace speech. By the time Nettie arrives in Africa together with her missionary employers, her language has become thoroughly standardized. The bare language and style of the first three letters have

undergone a striking transformation. Her "African" letters are fairly long and written in an English that is still colloquial and simple, but without the typical Black English features. Her diligence in ploughing through any number of books, and the influence of Samuel and Corrine, who both have a certain amount of higher education behind them, account for the great changes in her written language. There may creep in a word or two which seem "borrowed," either from books or from some rhetorical source—a lecturer or a preacher—into the early letters from Africa. Writing of contemporary conditions Nettie notes, for example, that the people of Africa "are riddled by disease and sunk in spiritual and physical confusion" (129). And a word like "luminous" (131) hardly belongs in her sister Celie's vocabulary.

Apart from the difference in the use of English grammar, the most obvious contrast between the two sisters' letters lies in the style they use. Celie's style is immediate and graphic, often humorous and always without conventional restraints on topic or telling. Miss Beasley and the Missionary Society have apparently done a thorough job in distancing Nettie from her sister's vivid language. Celie's racy idioms have been washed out of Nettie's language. In her letters we find no expressions such as "the birds singing they little cans off" to suggest an inspiring spring day (164), or Celie's drastic way to explain the shock she got at the news of Shug's love for somebody else: "Well, I say, if words could kill, I'd be in the ambulance" (219).

Nettie's letters are on the whole colorless and humorless. On a rereading of the novel, when we know "what happened," one easily loses interest in Nettie and waits eagerly for Celie to take over again. Nettie lacks a genuine language and style to express strong emotion. The result is that when she needs to tell her sister about the passion she experienced with widower Samuel, she has to rely on a borrowed, romantic style: "I was transported by ecstasy in Samuel's arms" (211). Her lack of a distancing humor and a certain mental obtuseness in distinguishing between what is important or not and between the high and the low make for comical effects, at the expense of the type of serious person that she is. We note this when she sapiently writes that the downtrodden Africans, whom the missionaries wish to help, are "People who need Christ and good medical advice," placing Redemption and remedy in the same box; or when she lists the learning habits she has acquired from Miss Beasley's teaching: "to learn for myself, by reading

and studying and writing a clear hand." "And I study everything night and day," she solemnly declares. Her first letter from Africa ends on a slightly comical note. She justifiably uses the word "miracle" for the fortunate circumstance that made the childless Samuel and Corrine adopt Celie's children without knowing whose children they were, and for the equally unbelievable move on God's part to send their aunt (and as Nettie believes, their sister) "to watch over them, to protect and cherish them." As an anticlimax she adds: "But on the other hand, if you can believe I am in Africa, and I am, you can believe anything" (123, 124).

The author also makes slight fun of Nettie by showing us how she pedantically mentions even the most obvious things. Writing to Celie about her experiences in London visiting circles interested in African missionary work, Nettie itemizes what English "teas" involve: "Plenty of sandwiches and cookies and of course hot tea" (128).

So we have the portrait of a kind, hardworking, and slightly conventional person whose "storytelling" is far from enthralling and whose language and style are dangerously close to boring. What about her role in dramatizing the central themes of the novel? While Shug and Celie in their various capacities as, respectively, mentor and proselyte are the characters who most powerfully embody the theme of womanism, Nettie in her limited and cautious manner also contributes to privileging such attitudes and views. Her own struggle for independence is fought with the weapon of education, and she wishes to place this weapon into the hands of African girls whose lives are determined by a rigorously patriarchal tradition. The Olinka men's treatment of women reminds her of Pa, and the women's submissiveness is, she writes, "our own behavior around Pa" (149). The example of the missionaries may have a certain effect in the combatting of sexism in the Olinka society, but the main reason for the profound changes that are taking place in their society, with girls' admittance to the school as an important improvement, lies elsewhere. It has little to do with Nettie and the other missionaries; it is rather the collapse of the infrastructure of this mini-society, caused by European "developers," that is destroying the old patriarchal order. Nettie is certainly not a feminist. While she disapproves of the African puberty rites of facial scarification and female initiation, she is quite discreet in the mentioning of these forms of maiming, and she cannot prevent Celie's son Adam from getting himself scarred in solidarity with

his African bride-to-be. Celie's lesbian nature is something that Nettie of course will never understand, but she will no doubt accept it, because she loves her sister and because she is not a person who dwells on psychological questions.

Racism is not a prominent issue in this novel, but as in most writings by African-Americans it works as the indispensable warp also of Walker's narrative. In the African setting it takes the form of colonialism. Nettie registers, but does not speculate on, examples of racism in West African societies, above all the attitudes of the European developers who see themselves as representatives of a superior civilization and who rob the Olinka villagers of their land and their resources in the name of material progress. Nettie's reaction is sadness. Celie's examples of racism touch on acts that are directed at the individual, lynchings and the daily small hurts caused by the contemptuous treatment of white people.

By sending Nettie to Africa the author is able to dramatize other similarities and differences between two civilizations through the African-American's encounter with the ancestors' land. Nettie's decades-long stay in a British colony naturally works changes in her view of Africa and the Africans, from that of the curious but uncomprehending tourist who marvels at the Africans' splendidly white teeth, to that of a more enlightened but still alien observer. One example of her ignorance of things African before she came there was the enthusiastic way in which she commented on the many ancient art objects displayed in a London museum, objects that English missionaries and others had been bringing home over the years. She knew from books, surely, of the Europeans' part in the misfortunes that have befallen African peoples, but she failed to see that they have robbed the Africans of the work of their ancestors and thus of part of their history. When Nettie and her employers first arrive in the Olinka village, they are welcomed by dances that, in Nettie's words, "raised lots of dust" (141). Nettie and her employers had originally indulged the illusion that their black skin would make it so much easier for them to win the trust and affection of the villagers than for their white predecessors, but there is no evidence that they succeed better than the eccentric white missionary who had established herself further into the bush. The only asset in being a black foreigner in Africa seems to be that African-American Adam can win and marry an African girl without too many complications. Adam and his Tashi will be

welcomed by a loving family in America, but what will other blacks think about their "primitive" facial scars?

Nettie learns to respect the Olinka people's reverence for nature and their wise use of it for their survival. But she is Western enough to note with mild disapproval the African reliance on healers' brews instead of efficient Western medicine (152). She comes to appreciate the women's form of sisterhood which in their polygamous society shows itself in working together, as well as the hospitality and generosity that the Olinka show to any visitors. The greatest disappointment she experiences, apart from her inevitable outsider status, is the Africans' refusal to acknowledge any inherited responsibility for their ancestors' share in the slave trade.

The finest part of Nettie's discourse is her retelling of the roofleaf story. Here the author adds no irony to the style of the narrative. The roofleaf, an excellent roofing material for the huts, is a concrete example of the Olinka's worship of nature and their very practical kind of religion: the roofleaf is both a sacred object and one of the most useful products they bring forth in cooperation with nature. A Christian Olinka man explains, "We know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God?" (142). At first, when the newcomers are presented with roofs for their huts, Nettie is routinely condescending: "So there we sat, Celie, face to face with the Olinka God." But by the end of her learning process, she knows the immense value of this particular God: the developers, having ruined the roofleaf plantation, replace these old functional roofs with ugly, impractical corrugated tin. Nettie learns to respect the Olinka's nature rituals, their singing to the earth and the sky and the fields, and the place that nature has in the Africans' religion. When Corrine dies, Samuel and Nettie and the children follow the African custom, and dressed in white robes and with their faces painted white, they bury her under a large tree.

The greatest change that Nettie's African experience has had on her is in her view of religion. When she leaves Africa, her idea of God and the divine is no longer the orthodox one that the church at home had taught her. The Olinka have made her see the divine in many more forms than the one presented in the Bible and in Christian religious art. In one of her last letters to Celie she writes about this change, which has affected Samuel the missionary as well:

God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone—a roofleaf or Christ—but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us (227).

The most dramatic result of this change, however, is that Samuel and Nettie are not going to keep this new view of God to themselves, in private; they may even found a new church when they return to America, a church "that has no idols in it whatsoever, in which each person's spirit is encouraged to seek God directly...." In this Quaker-like church the role of the founders will only be as examples of individuals who have found this personal God.

Celie will not be shocked at this new way to perceive God, for Shug has already presented her with a very similar revision of her childhood's idea of God and the church. Being taught that God cares about you and listens to your prayers, she had been addressing her words to him, for many years, but when she learns of the brutal death of her father at the hands of envious racists and the tragic fate of her mother, she stops writing to the Christian God. In bitterness at an absent God she turns from him. "What God do for me?" she asks (175). And she throws herself into a diatribe against God: "... he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again." And to top it all, the God she has been writing to is a man who "act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown." Shug tries to talk Celie out of her blasphemous mood. Surely God gave Celie the essential things: life, health, and "a good woman that love you to death." Shug does not find God in church; there you are apt to find the white man's God, "the one that's in the white folks' white bible" (177). Shug's God is like Nettie's new God in that this deity is strictly personal and not restricted as to time, place, and form: you can perceive divinity in any place, in any shape, by immersing yourself in nature as well as in relations with other people.

Shug, this ideal although not perfect woman who serves as the author's mouthpiece, formulates a set of religious beliefs that may correspond to Walker's own idea of religion. In a letter to Nettie, Celie renders Shug's little sermon. "God is inside you and inside everybody else," Shug says. We are brought into the world with God, but only those who search for "it" inside themselves, find "it." "It" because "God ain't a he or a she, but a It" (177). Shug's God—like Nettie's new

God—is a kind of Pantheist's divinity.⁸ Shug's development, like Nettie's, was from "the old white man" to nature—trees, air, birds (178). Her conversion, or epiphany, came to her in a downcast moment: it was a "feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all." Her sermon ends with an apotheosis of the love principle which embodies itself in a myriad of forms—in uncorrupted nature, in love between people, in sex—above all in sex—and in the color purple in a field of flowers.

Behind Shug's sermon I, as a reader, very strongly perceive Alice Walker as author and believer. In an interview Walker has testified to her preoccupation with religious questions, and she formulates her belief thus: "Certainly I don't believe there is a God beyond nature. The world is God. Man is God. So is a leaf or a snake...."⁹ Her concern with an unorthodox, personal and human religion has manifested itself in other works, for instance in the novel *Meridian*, where the main character finds inspiration and guidance in a black church that stresses solidarity with the suffering individual in untraditional, political forms. And it is here that Walker in my view missed the chance of truly justifying the inclusion of the Nettie figure in her novel, that is, by placing the light firmly and persistently on Nettie's contribution to the envisaging of a new kind of religion, a religion that can be adapted to the culture of the Olinka people as well as to outrageous Shug, rebellious Celie, and quietly independent Nettie. This would have strengthened the religious dimension of a remarkable novel, a dimension providing that sense of mystery which the author herself seeks in life as in art.¹⁰ In the form we have it, the novel may be felt to overplay the womanist ideology, and the reader may find it difficult to go along with the transformation of Mr. --- who turns into Celie's completely domesticated colleague in her pants-sewing enterprise. Nettie is not really needed for the most central message—the need for women to lovingly support one another in the struggle for autonomy and dignity; Celie, Shug and the other women in their midst embody this theme fully and convincingly. It is true, as has been pointed out, that Nettie's exposure of male chauvinism in the

8 Bernard W. Bell labels Shug's religion "animistic"; see *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, p. 264.

9 *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt, 1983), p. 265.

10 *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, p. 252.

African village testifies to the universality of patriarchal domination,¹¹ but this evidence works only as a footnote to Celie's overwhelming documentation of homegrown oppression. For readers who find Nettie's letters dull, her correspondence does not work as welcome variations of the epistolary structure. And if the author intended Nettie as a means of expressing criticism of a certain kind of black bourgeois mentality, her picture of Nettie seems to me half-hearted and blurry. Nor can I perceive Nettie as a worthy foil and complement to the Celie figure. As reader I am baffled, but what is worse: while I delight in Celie and Shug, decent Nettie bores me, and by the very ambiguity in the portrait of this character the author has made me feel guilty about my boredom.

11 For instance in Keith E. Byerman, *Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction* (Athens: U of Georgia Press, 1985), p. 165.