NARRATIVE IMMEDIACY AND FIRST-PERSON VOICE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NOVELS

A Dissertation

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Amy Faulds Sandefur
B.A., LaGrange College, 1993
M.A., State University of West Georgia, 1995
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Abstract

This study of first-person fictive narration analyzes a selection of contemporary American novels so as to understand and describe more fully a literary effect I call immediacy. I employ the term immediacy to define narrative situations in which little durational gap exists between experience and narration and in which little ideological and emotional distance is communicated between the narrating persona and the subject self. The following chapters provide a close examination of narrative techniques employed by writers in the creation of immediacy and argues that both the tone of the novels and their themes of maturation and self-identity are attributable to strategies of narration. The novelists studied here use these strategies to reflect the complex, dichotomous nature of self-identity and to re-envision modes of self-representative writing such as autobiography and Bildungsroman.

Each of the texts considered features a narrator-protagonist who faces and overcomes oppressive and restrictive circumstances. As in previous scholarship, this work argues that the act of self-narration is constitutive of a character’s achievement of self-actualization. More specifically, I argue that the narrator’s close proximity to experiences, an aspect of fiction often overlooked, contributes significantly to the impact effected by the narrative voice. By composing a narration that occurs seemingly in conjunction with experience, the writers studied here depict the changing process of identity development rather than a narrator’s reconstruction of it through reflection. Through the fluidity that results, writers develop protagonists who defy conventional definitions. Thus the immediacy characterizing the narration of these works signifies
agency achieved by the marginalized protagonists. Additionally, the flexibility of the
form aids novelists in achieving the dual purposes of portraying an authentic-seeming
individual voice and conveying social commentary.

The concluding chapter examines the salience of narrative immediacy in novels in
which a substantial temporal gap exists between narration and experience. This
broadening of the study illustrates that narrator proximity is indeed worth study, not only
for extending the parameters of narrative theory, but also for enhancing our
understanding of the intricate ways in which narrative voice interacts with theme and
cultural context.
Introduction

The subject of this dissertation is a selection of contemporary American novels that employ “immediate” first-person narrators and develop themes of maturation or “coming of age.” The primary works selected for analysis are Kaye Gibbons’s *Ellen Foster* (1987), Ken Wells’s *Meely LaBauve* (2000), Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), and Lee Smith’s *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988). I employ the term immediate narration to identify situations in which little gap exists (or is communicated to the reader) between the protagonist and the narrator. For example, the Ellen Foster who narrates the novel is close in age and emotional maturity to the youthful protagonist Ellen. A familiar example from the nineteenth century is Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*.

To have a protagonist narrate his or her own coming of age seemingly in conjunction with experiencing it is an infrequently created narrative situation. Not surprisingly, then, the vast majority of literary critics who consider novels modeled after life writing have focused on those characterized by reflective or retrospective narration and have yet to grapple with the implications particular to immediate narration. In this work, I shall embark on such grappling with the goal of extending the critical discussion regarding intricate issues such as narrative truth, narrative identity, and narrative authority. The directing focus of this work is the study of the narrative techniques used to create immediacy in these examples of a particular sub-genre of the novel—the coming of age story narrated in the first-person point of view. I shall examine how such techniques work to reflect the complex, dichotomous nature of self-actualization and how they are used in the re-envisioning of the modes of self-representational writing. A more far-reaching purpose is to present scholarship that contributes to a fuller understanding of the flexibility and nuances of first-person voice.
Without question, point of view is a principal element of narrative. Indeed, some claim that it is the central one.\(^1\) It is not surprising, then, that point of view has been cited as “the most frequently discussed aspect of narrative method” (Martin 133).\(^2\) Because literary perspective is a slippery notion, the task of studying it can certainly become “formidable in scope” (Lanser 14). Susan Sniader Lanser concludes that “despite substantial attention to narrative point of view by critics of this century, the concept remains elusive and its boundaries unclear” (13). Nonetheless (as Lanser also acknowledges), this critical attention has proven fruitful, if not fully satisfying. One of the most influential contributions is Gerard Genette’s distinction between the focalizer (the one who sees) and the narrator (the one who speaks). Wayne Booth’s schema of narrators and types of narration, along with his concept of the implied author, has likewise had a substantial impact on narrative studies.\(^3\) Additionally, the studies by Bertil Romberg and F.K. Stanzel provide particularly thorough explanations of numerous narrative situations. Especially relevant to my purposes is Romberg’s work, the only book-length study of first-person narration. These scholars have clearly made valuable contributions, but as Lanser observes, point of view criticism is characterized by an “isolation of narrative perspective from its function within the specific literary text” (19). As in Lanser’s work, this study also seeks (although through somewhat different means than Lanser’s\(^4\)) to elucidate the “complex links between ideology and technique” (18). Lanser works to overcome the detachment of literary text from its social context. Similarly, this work examines connections between narrative and cultural imperatives.

In the existing critical work on narrative voice, some conclude that first-person narration is restrictive in scope because writers are limited to the information available to
only one character. Wayne Booth finds that "the choice of the first person is sometimes unduly limiting; if the ‘I’ has inadequate access to necessary information, the author may be led into improbabilities" (150). Although a writer enters the mind of a single person, it does not necessarily follow that the narrative will be characterized by narrowness or singularity. I align myself with Joanne S. Frye, who in her study of narrative and the female experience contends that the first-person voice opens up possibilities for writers. Frye, in fact, finds the potential for restriction in the third-person voice: "The ‘she’ can easily lull us into complacent and conventional expectations; the ‘I’ keeps us conscious of possibility and change" (65). Asserting that literary conventions of representation can be limiting for women, Frye argues, “the narrating ‘I’ finds additional ways . . . to avoid narrative entrapment, new ways to subvert old stories” (8). She believes that it is possible both “to ‘represent’ and to redefine the premises of representation” (47). Frye concludes that it is through the use of the first person that women writers achieve the dual outcomes of femininity and authorship and create protagonists who are both female and autonomous. Each of the novels that Frye considers in her study is characterized by reflective narration, whether the plot is centered on childhood or adult events. Considering works in which the narrator is clearly distinguishable from the younger self (the protagonist), Frye focuses on the agency of the narrator. In examining novels with immediate narration, and focusing on the authority of the protagonist as well as the narrator (because the voices of the two are virtually indistinguishable), I shall show how narrative immediacy allows for effects similar to those described by Frye, but in narrative situations that she does not consider. I agree with Frye’s conclusions but offer that, when there is a gap between the narrator and the
protagonist, the narrator may gain agency, but the protagonist’s authority often becomes secondary.\

In the majority of first-person narrated novels, the writer creates an adult narrator who recalls earlier events so that a substantial time lapse is established between the experiences and their narration. Typically through this durational gap, a novelist constructs a narrating persona clearly distinguishable from experiencing subject, even though the two are the same person. Most often, writers communicate distinctions between the two entities by having the narrator provide interpretations of actions that he or she clearly would have as an adult with the benefit of hindsight and maturity rather than as a youthful protagonist in the midst of a life-alternating experience. An exemplary work here is *Black Boy* by Richard Wright. Although many classify Wright’s work as autobiography, the varying critical reactions to the text reveal its “generic ambiguity” (Adams 69). I find James Olney’s classification of the text as “life writing” to be an appropriate one. In contrasting *Black Boy* to works by Gertude Stein and Samuel Beckett, Olney claims, “Wright . . . shows no interest in offering the reader something that could be called, indifferently, either fiction or autobiography but that might best bear the designation life writing, understanding by that a form that entertains simultaneously the possibilities of autobiography and fiction” (241). With its elements of both fiction and autobiography, *Black Boy* proves useful in studies of both genres. In this study of novels, I shall treat Wright’s text as a fictional work, acknowledging that convincing evidence exists for defining the text as autobiography.

In Wright’s work are frequent reminders of the ideological distance between the narrator and his younger self. At times, Wright widens the gap when the adult “Richard” overtly points out his earlier lack of understanding, such as in the following: “I had not
realized the meaning of what I had said; its moral horror was unfelt by me, and her attack seemed without cause” (48). To the same end, when narrating early experiences, “Richard” openly admits that some of the provided insights came well after childhood. In an extensive parenthetical interlude found early in the novel the narrator explains, “After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes” (43). When the discrepancy of understanding is not directly stated, it is observable nonetheless: “Dread and distrust had already become a daily part of my being and my memory grew sharp, my senses more impressionable; I began to be aware of myself as a distinct personality striving against others” (35). Although the narrator’s focus is his boyhood thoughts and emotions, he articulates insight that he likely did not possess as a child. In narrative situations like these, in which an adult narrator imposes his or her present interpretations and judgments on past experiences, the narrative goal is to determine the significance of previous experiences for the adult rather than to portray accurately earlier events or even the earlier self.

Even when an author limits a narrator to his or her earlier thoughts, the language, when appropriate for the narrator but not the protagonist, works to differentiate the “experiencing I” from the “narrating I.” In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for instance, Harper Lee’s use of elevated language and an ironic, gently-mocking tone reminds the reader that the narrator is an adult. As an example, one may cite the narrator’s description of Scout’s reaction to being reprimanded by her first grade teacher for knowing how to read: “I mumbled that I was sorry and retired mediating upon my crime. I never deliberately learned to read, but somehow I had been wallowing illicitly in the daily papers” (22). The exaggeration in the tone suggests that the thoughts (although not the language) are the young
protagonist’s rather than the adult narrator’s.11 When the narrator goes on to say, “Until I feared I would lose it, I never loved to read. One does not love breathing” (22), she provides an insight that was likely achieved only in retrospect. There are additional instances—particularly when the narrator muses about the social culture of the town and the region of the South—in which Lee presents interpretative insights clearly belonging to the adult narrator. The degree of analytical intercession by the narrator is rather minimal in this novel as compared to Black Boy, but the novel’s ironic tone and adult language make for a clearly discernable gap between the experiencing self and the one who narrates. Even in novels like this one where the primary focus is the youthful protagonist, the authority of the protagonist is lessened by the overt and separate presence of the narrator.

The majority of writers utilize retrospective narration in first-person novels because reflection generally allows for greater interpretative power by the narrator, therefore seemingly reducing the limitations of first-person voice. The idea is that some distance of perspective is needed for analysis. More specifically, it is difficult for one to fully understand the significance of an experience when he or she is in the midst of it. While a gap between experience and narration is desirable because it allows for analysis, and by extension, agency, it also works to limit the authority of the protagonist because the reader’s perception of the subject self is shaped primarily by the narrator’s assessment and attitude.

Conversely, in the novels considered in this study, because little time and therefore little ideological difference separates the narrator and the protagonist, the protagonist’s agency is the focus, as it is presented seemingly without interference or mediation, even that which can come from retrospective self-analysis. In each of the novels I have selected, the author gives a marginalized, otherwise silenced narrator-protagonist a voice, and allows him
or her to achieve self-actualization in spite of restrictions. As a form that is characterized by flexibility, immediate first-person narration is fully appropriate for stories that relay the maturation of protagonists who exist in oppressive circumstances. Because thoughts are presented seemingly in close conjunction with their conception, the narrator does not present finite conclusions and generalizations about him or herself. This is not to say that the narrator-protagonist does not interpret what happens, but writers present the protagonist’s interpretations as they occur and change. In other words, these novelists re-create through immediate narration the process of identity development. The result is fluidity in the form and by extension in the characterization. This flexibility not only allows for the subversion of narrative conventions; it is also used by writers to develop protagonists who reject limiting societal expectations of behavior (those based on gender, class, race). For example, in Lee Smith’s *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Ivy Rowe expresses opinions that are quite contradictory. On some occasions she appears to be accepting of culturally-imposed conventions, and at others she expresses opinions in exact opposition to the norm. The fluidity of the narrative allows Smith to convincingly convey Ivy’s inconsistencies, which ultimately work to demonstrate her ability to avoid being overly constrained by external forces.

In addition to creating narrative circumstances in which the protagonist is afforded unmediated agency, the openness that characterizes narrative immediacy also allows writers to re-create the complexity inherent in both identity formation and in the act of capturing it in writing. While critics such as Frye are concerned with the dichotomous nature of women’s experience and writing, some claim that the process of identity formation for both genders is one that is characterized by duality. In the second chapter of *How Our Lives*
Become Stories: Making Selves, Paul John Eakin argues that the notion of self-determination is an illusion (43) and that “all selfhood . . . is relational despite differences that fall out along gender lines” (50). More relevant to my purposes here is Eakin’s claim that both relational and autonomous tendencies are “inextricably intertwined in a complex process of individuation” (52). 12

By evoking immediacy along with utilizing first-person narrators, the writers selected here create narration that reflects the duality characterizing the maturation process. I have already hinted at how narrative immediacy aids writers in establishing autonomy in their protagonists: the narration places primacy on the agency of the protagonist. Novelists construct protagonists who tell their stories without the interpretative influence of a distanced narrator, as often occurs in reflective first-person narration and third-person narration. The relational nature of identity formation is also furthered by the creation of narrative spontaneity, in that the writer establishes vulnerability and a resulting desire for affiliation in the young narrator, who is characterized by a lack of maturity and a minimal degree of understanding of the described experiences. The importance of affiliation is also reflected in the fact that the openness of the form calls for reader involvement, as the novels encourage a connection between the narrator-protagonist and the reader.

Kaye Gibbons’ Ellen Foster helps to demonstrate how both the relational and independent tendencies of development can be suggested through the use of immediate narration. Gibbons’ technique of shifting between past and present tense verbs is used to portray both Ellen’s self-reliance and her vulnerability. When Gibbons uses the past tense and highlights the elapsed time, she imparts to Ellen emotional distance from hurtful events and harmful people. In these areas of the narrative, Gibbons highlights Ellen’s autonomy
and resilience. On the other hand, because the durational gap between experience and narration is brief, Gibbons convincingly switches to the present tense, creating an impression of close proximity between experience and narration. In the present tense sections of the novel, Gibbons reveals vulnerability in Ellen’s character, as Ellen demonstrates confusion, sadness, and a definite desire for acceptance from others. By manipulating narrator-protagonist proximity but maintaining an overriding impression of immediacy, Gibbons portrays complexities in Ellen’s self-identity.

Indeed, all self-representational writing is characterized by dualities, both in the subject matter and techniques used. Because the selected novels have maturation themes and imitate autobiographical writing, this study shall consider the ways in which the novels utilize, work against, and expand upon the tenets of autobiography and its more specific, “fictional” manifestation, the Bildungsroman. Because of the close proximity between the narrator and protagonist, novels utilizing immediate first-person narration are in a significant way at odds with these two genres which are usually characterized as being reflective. James Olney claims that “autobiography is always retrospective, drawing past experience into the focal point of present consciousness, and this is what gives it its power of understanding” (“On Telling One’s Own Story” 46). As I illustrated in my brief discussion of Black Boy and To Kill a Mockingbird, first-person narrated “fictional” works created in the tradition of life writing very often involve an adult recalling his or her maturation experience. Even with the removal of the characteristic temporal gap, narrative immediacy serves well the needs of both autobiography and the Bildungsroman.

Here it will be helpful to outline the ways in which the study of immediate, first-person narration is useful in expanding the scope of the discussion of autobiography and the
Bildungsroman. However, because the contemporary viability of each of these genres has been called into question, it is first necessary to consider why these forms indeed do hold continuing relevance. One of the reasons for ambiguity regarding the longevity of these genres is the difficulty of definitively and narrowly defining them. Critics have been unable to agree on a definition of the Bildungsroman because of the problems in accurately translating the German term and because of differing opinions regarding the appropriate breadth of the genre. Some believe that a loose categorization in which any work that deals with maturation or self-identity as Bildungsroman is sufficient, while others feel that the term calls for more limiting demarcations.

Critics have also struggled with defining what constitutes autobiography, the form that James Olney calls “the most elusive of literary documents” (Autobiography 3). One of the primary sources of this elusiveness is the blurring of distinctions between autobiography and fiction. The inclusion of more autobiographies by women and minorities, works that tend to defy conventions, has also contributed to the sense of ambiguity. Because of this lack of confidence regarding genre definitions, as Olney explains, there is a tendency on one end of the critical spectrum to conclude that “there is no such creature as autobiography” and, on the other, to decide that “all writing that aspires to be literature is autobiography and nothing else” (4). My contention is that while it may be argued that classical versions of a form have lost viability, such arguments do not serve as proof of the end of that genre itself. In fact, the reinvention and the subversion of genre conventions are necessary in the continuation, not indicative of the termination, of a literary form: “‘The fact that a work ‘disobeys’ its genre does not mean that the genre does not exist’ because the transgression requires a law—precisely the one to be violated’” (qtd. in Feng 12).
This ambiguity over the lines of demarcation in these self-representational forms is a fairly recent occurrence. As Janice Morgan and Colette T. Hall point out, for example, in eighteenth century writing and reading, not only was there a high level of comfort regarding the separateness of autobiographies and novels, there was “a confidence in the fixed, identifiable reality of the self. . . [and] a confidence in the referential power of language to name and hold that reality in a written text” (6). Of course, such assurances are no longer the reality thanks to modernism, the deconstruction of concepts such as self and author, and changing cultural consciousness regarding the presence and subjectivity of women and minorities both in life and in writing. In contrast to these current uncertainties, as Gunilla Theander Kester argues, “the classical Bildungsroman strives to inscribe the subject as a unified and singular identity” (7). The singularity that characterizes more traditional delineations of the classical Bildungsroman model is in large measure the reason that some claim the end of the genre in recent literature, at least for male writers. Esther K. Labovitz argues that the male Bildungsroman is “no longer a viable genre for a pluralistic and fragmented society” (8). Moreover, several critics have pointed out the limitations of models such as the one outlined by Jerome Buckley for women and minorities. As the editors of The Voyage In argue, “even the broadest definitions of the Bildungsroman presuppose a range of social options available only to men” (7).

While concluding that the male Bildungsroman has reached the end of its relevance, Labovitz and others claim that the female Bildungsroman continues to be viable. Elizabeth Abel, along with co-editors Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland, contends, “female versions of the genre still offer a vital form” (13). They continue, “Although the primary assumption underlying the Bildungsroman—the evolution of a coherent self—has come
under attack in modernist and avant-garde fiction, this assumption remains cogent for women writers who now for the first time find themselves in a world increasingly responsive to their needs” (13). While Abel and the other editors base their definition of Bildungsroman on a “belief in a coherent self (although not necessarily an autonomous one)” (14), I agree with Susan Fraiman, who posits that women tend not to consider notions of “‘progressive development’” and “‘coherent identity’” as “natural or inevitable” and that women are “more apt to treat them ironically, and must necessarily formulate the developmental process in other ways” (x). In other words, women find inventive and subversive ways to broach the subject of identity, but indeed, they continue to broach it.17

Likewise, men continue successfully to deal with themes related to the maturation process. I disagree, then, that the Bildungsroman has been played out for males, certainly not for those who occupy marginalized positions.18 For male figures who are denied subjectivity, the struggle for a sense of self continues to have validity. As Bonnie Hoover Braedlin writes, “Those who mourn the demise of the Bildungsroman and more generally, the ‘loss’ of the self in the twentieth century fail to look beyond the literary mainstream, beyond the patriarchal, white male system” (86). While the classical form of the Bildungsroman has indeed declined because of its reliance on singularity, variations of the form, which allow for grappling with the complexities and paradoxes of the self, are still viable. Utilizing narrative strategies that evoke immediacy is one means that writers have found for re-envisioning the Bildungsroman in this way and for successfully relaying the theme of Bildung for those typically in the “other” position. This type of fluid narrative format provides novelists with a way to negotiate successfully the narrative and rhetorical restrictions of first-person voice, as well as the thematic ambiguities that typically
characterize maturation novels, and to do so without denying the dualities that are inherent in the existence of the protagonist.

For accuracy’s sake, it must be noted that duality plays a role even in the structure of more traditional versions of the Bildungsroman. In her work on the Bildung in African American literature, Kester points to a number of scholars of the Bildungsroman who have noted the duality that characterizes the genre in its classical forms. While dichotomies such as those between “story (history) and mind (idea)” and “self and society” are present in classical versions, however, the form has ultimately emphasized compromise and closure (qtd. in Kester 10). Here is where more contemporary versions of the genre depart from more traditional ones, as writers of the former very frequently work to maintain plurality. The authors considered in the study utilize immediate narration, not to create compromise or closure, but instead to portray an acceptance of the dichotomous nature of identity: form and theme work in conjunction, as both are characterized by complexity.

Franco Moretti’s explanation of “the conflict between the ideal of self-determination and the equally imperious demands of socialization” (qtd. in Kester 10) found in classical Bildungsroman is equally applicable to the maturation novels considered in this study. To be more specific, the above tension is very similar to that which women have traditionally experienced because of the opposing demands of meeting the expectations of others, as they are socialized to do, and striving for independence. As writers, they experience tension between being women and being artists, roles that have traditionally been considered to be at odds. In classical versions of the genre, “the imagination of the mature subject can overcome the restrictions of the world” (Kester 10), but such harmony is not believable or even desirable in contemporary works. First, the modern fragmentation of the self
undermines confidence in the possibility of such closure. Second, achieving something that appears on the surface to be harmony between the self and society traditionally has meant for oppressed persons the sacrifice of their individuality and autonomy. The underlying assumption of the possibility of singularity and unity within the self and of cohesion between the self and society is indeed at odds with the experience of both women and minorities, experience which is undeniably characterized by duality.

As has occurred with the *Bildungsroman*, a decreased confidence in a unified, identifiable self has led some to tout the end of autobiography or to at least question its feasibility. Prompted by the waning of the perception that individuals are singularly distinctive along with theories by, among others, Foucault and Lacan, Michael Sprinker argues against the idea of autobiographer as originator: “the self can no more be author of its own discourse than any producer of a text can be called the author—that is the originator—of his writing” (325). Concluding that “no autobiography can take place except within the boundaries of a writing where concepts of subject, self, and author collapse in the act of producing a text” (342), Sprinker does not argue the literal end of autobiography. He does, however, deconstruct our traditional notions of the genre, demonstrating a lack of confidence in the feasibility of its successful production.

Just as critics have argued that the female *Bildungsroman* remains viable, others find continuing vitality for autobiography by women. For example, Morgan and Hall conclude that in autobiographical writing women have proven they are quite adept at handling the anxiety of the “‘massive deconstruction of subjectivity’” (qtd. in 7). They explain that the marginal position women have occupied “has necessitated alternate and, to some extent oppositional strategies of self-representation” (7). Paul John Eakin finds this assessment to
hold true not only for women but also generally for all marginalized groups. In support of his point that identity is relational, Eakin contends that self-determination is an illusion. Like Michael Sprinker, Eakin denies the existence of a unified, fully autonomous self; however, the recognition of the plurality within the self does not lead Eakin to a lack of faith in the autobiographical form. Choosing as illustrative examples autobiographies that are characterized by narrative innovations, Eakin is encouraged rather than discouraged by the genre’s many possibilities: “Fieldwork devoted to the nature of subjectivity is obviously a tricky business, but I think it’s worth the risks” (4). Eakin concludes that his inventive examples demonstrate that “the self is dynamic, changing, and plural” (98). Thus for Eakin, forms of autobiography that reflect (post)modern notions of the self, with all of the uncertainties therein, remain quite cogent. This study proposes that narrative immediacy imparts fluidity (both in form and theme), therefore allowing for the complexities that characterize self-development.

Not only are the modes of autobiography and the Bildungsroman both characterized by ambiguities in their subjects and themes; they also inflict oppositional demands on those who attempt to write them. In this work I shall consider how the creation of narrative immediacy alleviates much of this authorial tension while still allowing for the successful representation of the complexities and ambiguities inherent in the individuation process. It will be useful, then, to introduce here the conflicting demands faced by autobiographers and, by extension, authors of coming of age fiction.

Very often in contemporary Bildungsroman works, authors attempt opposing veins of expression. They wish not only to evoke a sense of agency in a protagonist but also to convey at least some degree of social-consciousness. Gunilla Theander Kester points to a
common double purpose held by black authors of works on the theme of Bildung: the “[vacillation] between writing a personal history and a representational history” (6). I contend that this duality is found in works by and about persons who are marginalized because of class and gender as well as race, for a member of any group that historically has been silenced may well feel the need to express the collective consciousness. In the chapters that follow, I show how writers utilize immediate narration both to create a narrator-protagonist who is afforded self-expression and to present social commentary. The novelists provide their protagonists with opportunities for self-expression by creating the impression that the text is the unfiltered, raw account of the narrator; the writer’s presence is not overtly projected in these works. Additionally, because so little time elapses between an experience and its narration, the reader has the sense that the narrator has not had the opportunity to edit him or herself but has instead been quite candid.

While presenting an individualized story, these novelists also provide works that are representative of a group and that serve as social commentary. Because the narrator-protagonist does not provide much finite analysis of his or her experiences, the reader is asked to play a considerable interpretative role. As a result, even when the narrator is not conscious of the broader implications of his or her personal experience, the writer succeeds in conveying such to the reader through vehicles such as irony. One of the best-known examples of this narrative effect occurs in Huckleberry Finn. When Huck believes that by choosing to help Jim he damns himself, the reader recognizes that Huck’s morality is superior to that of Christians who keep slaves. The reader comprehends Huck’s naïveté as well as the novel’s social commentary without the need of Twain’s providing such interpretations through the voice of a narrator, as generally happens in retrospective novels.
Particular to first-person novels with narrative immediacy is the writer’s achieving his or her own agenda without undervaluing the voice of the protagonist. In *Huckleberry Finn*, the message is Twain’s, but the voice is Huck’s.¹⁹

In more reflective works, as an adult narrator interprets earlier thoughts and behavior, authors often establish a discrepancy in the level of understanding of the adult and the younger self. Through this creation of irony, novelists may achieve socially conscious purposes, but often the agency of the protagonist is overshadowed by the narrator’s superior degree of understanding. Early in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, for example, the narrator admits, “When I was praised for my conduct I felt a guilt that in some way I was doing something that was really against the wishes of the white folks” (17). This revelation follows shortly after his explanation that “I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having at one time been slaves. I am only ashamed of myself for having at one time been ashamed” (15). In statements such as the above, in which the narrator distinguishes his current ideology from his earlier perceptions, both the voice and the message belong to the adult narrator. As a result, the presence of the narrating self—a more experienced, wiser persona—tends to overshadow that of the experiencing subject.

As in the *Bildungsroman*, inherent in the act of writing autobiography are a number of dichotomies. One of the primary tensions central to autobiographical writing involves the opposing purposes of self-examination and self-presentation. These two goals are in conflict primarily because the former requires an inward focus on the writer’s part, while the latter is influenced by external factors—namely an awareness of audience, which can inhibit intimate, candid self-examination. Diane Bjorklund examines in some depth the conflicting obligations autobiographers face because they are concerned with the judgments of their
eventual audience. Bjorklund cites three virtues that are typically expected in American autobiography but that also present oppositional demands for the writer: being modest, being honest, and presenting an interesting life (22-23). To demonstrate further, in attempting to be honest about his or her impressive accomplishments, an autobiographer runs the risk of being perceived as a braggart. Or to embellish one’s life in order to make it more interesting means the writer goes against expectations of honesty. Bjorklund concludes, “there must be a balance between interests of the readers and autobiographer’s aspirations to find personal meaning in their own stories” (20). I contend that the tensions cited by Bjorklund are lessened because of looser genre distinctions and more complex perceptions of concepts such as self and truth. Readers likely do not expect full honesty, for example, because they do not believe such honesty is possible (it is not knowable, and writing cannot capture it even if it were) or even desirable. Nonetheless, writing autobiography continues to require juggling of demands of the self and others, as an awareness of audience remains influential. In maturation novels characterized by immediacy, first-person narrators mimic autobiographers in that they are the subjects of their own stories. However, these narrators are less impeded by concerns of self-presentation than are autobiographers. This is not to say that the narrators have no awareness or concern for their audience, but they presumably have not yet achieved the perspective that comes with time and allows one an understanding of what should be edited or modified. This naiveté makes for a less self-conscious narration. Additionally, as one finds in The Color Purple and Fair and Tender Ladies, the intended audience may be a private one with whom the narrator feels comfortable disclosing intimate details.
Perhaps the most obvious dichotomy in autobiographical writing arises from the gap existing between the past, or the remembered self, and the present consciousness of the writer. A split occurs because there is likely a discrepancy between what is remembered and the “reality” of the actual experience. As Gullestad puts it, “an autobiographer . . . is always faced with the dual task of analyzing events both as they happen and as they appear in retrospect” (22). In undertaking this dual task, autobiographers inevitably impose their present consciousness on that of their earlier self. As Olney argues, the writer constructs rather than reconstructs his or her childhood (“On Telling One’s Own Story” 42). Of course, this dichotomy of purpose signifies the primary way in which coming of age novels with immediate narration depart from typical autobiography (other than the obvious difference that exists because in the novels the person named as the author does not present him/herself as the subject of the work). In the selected novels, because little distance separates the experiencing protagonist from the narrating persona, there is little conflict between the past and the present.

Contemporary autobiographies and Bildungroman novels are indeed characterized by a number of dualities, but this ambiguity is what accounts for the interest, as well as the difficulty, that both forms have presented to authors and readers alike. As James Olney writes, “The heart of the explanation for the special appeal of autobiography” is “a fascination with the self and its profound, its excellent mysteries and accompanying that fascination, an anxiety about the self, an anxiety about the dimness and vulnerability of that entity that no one has ever touched or tasted” (Autobiography 23). Additionally, the recognition of the complexities of identity and of life writing has led to more works by women and minorities (texts which tend to subvert conventions) to be considered. Likewise,
the creation of spontaneity in narration provides writers with a means for re-envisioning
genres that have otherwise proven too limiting. Although I have argued that immediate
narration creates ways in which writers can negotiate and even avoid some of the conflicting
demands of self-representational writing, by no means is the narrative technique
characterized by singularity. Instead, the form is fluid and flexible and therefore reflective
of the plurality found in both the individuation process and in the attempt to capture the
process in writing.

Overview of the Chapters

Kaye Gibbons’s *Ellen Foster*, the subject of Chapter One, and Ken Wells’s *Meely LaBauve*, the focus of Chapter Two, both have plots that span relatively short periods of
time. Neither of the protagonists has reached adulthood by the novel’s end. Both novels
also have in common their “speakerly” narration, a simulated orality, as well as their
narrators’ demonstration of having little consciousness about the implications of the act of
self-narration that they undertake. In other words, their narrative stance is at odds with that
of most autobiography, which is typically a reflective and highly conscious endeavor.

I examine *Ellen Foster* as a reinvention of the *Bildungsroman*. Unlike the other
novels analyzed, Gibbons’ novel presents a first-person narrator who knows the outcome of
her story before she begins telling it: Ellen is living with her “new mama” when she
narrates her tale. Despite this fact, Gibbons creates immediacy in the narrative in a number
of ways. Although Gibbons establishes on the first page that Ellen’s father has died a year
earlier, she quickly switches to present tense verbs as Ellen describes scenes of her father’s
mistreatment of her sick mother. In fact, many of the earlier experiences are narrated in the
present tense so that one gains an overall impression of action immediately experienced
rather than recollected. This image is furthered by the fact that the Ellen who narrates is still a girl; she has not had years to reflect on her experiences before narrating them. In Chapter One, I explore in detail the number of ways that Gibbons successfully creates immediacy in the narration, focusing significant attention on the structure of the novel, which involves back and forth shifts between Ellen’s life at the foster home and her life before finding a secure, supportive environment. Employing this structure, Gibbons creates a young female protagonist who at once displays great strength and vulnerability, one whose experiences represent the dual tendencies of identity development. Finally, the chapter considers how the monologic structure of the narrative impacts Gibbons’ treatment of the theme of interracial friendship.

In Chapter Two I consider how *Meely LaBauve*, a novel written by a male writer about a male protagonist but that nonetheless shares qualities with the other novels considered, serves as evidence that the male *Bildungsroman* is still a viable form. Meely is shown to exist in a marginalized position; therefore, issues of identity and subjectivity are crucial ones in the novel, just as in women’s autobiography or the female *Bildungsroman*. The chapter considers the ways in which Wells’ novel works within and against the tradition of *Huckleberry Finn*, as Meely displays conflicting desires for connections with others and for autonomy. Because Meely’s experience and his narration are characterized by qualities traditionally associated with both masculinity and femininity, Wells’ portrayal reveals the often-arbitrary nature of gender demarcations. The novel is narrated entirely in the present tense, the only work considered in this study that does so. The resulting effect is the illusion of *no* gap existing between narration and experience, so that the text is as close as one can get to “pure” immediacy. Much emphasis, then, is placed on actions—on the re-creation of
experience—rather than on Meely’s reactions and interpretations. The chapter ultimately argues that Wells, through his particular evocation of immediacy, envisions a narrator-protagonist who is afforded both the freedom and autonomy of the wilderness and the support and community of domestic life.

Chapters Three and Four consider *The Color Purple* and *Fair and Tender Ladies*, two novels that show a number of similarities. Unlike Gibbons’ and Wells’ novels, these works span almost the entirety of the lives of their protagonists. In these two chapters, I explore how the novelists use the epistolary form to evoke, and more surprisingly, to sustain immediacy in order to re-create the dualities of the experiences and thoughts of a female narrator-protagonist. Inherent in classic and contemporary epistolary novels is the dichotomous theme of absence and presence. Connection is attempted, as the letter (a tangible object) acts as a substitute for the sender. Even so, the communication undertaken is uniquely characterized by disconnection: the recipient is absent during the conception of the message, and the sender is absent during its reception. This paradox is found in Walker’s novel as well as in Smith’s, and it is used in the development of the double tendencies of autonomy and affiliation that are at the heart of the characterization of both Celie and Ivy. In *The Color Purple* and *Fair and Tender Ladies*, one finds a greater degree of consciousness about self-narration than in *Meely LaBauve* and *Ellen Foster* (although there still is significantly less awareness than in autobiography). There is perhaps less consciousness on Celie’s part than Ivy’s, as Celie makes comparatively few references to the act of writing or to its significance. Still, through the use of the letter format, Walker draws the reader’s attention to the act of self-narration and its significance in Celie’s development. The letter format emphasizes Celie as the author of her story, and Walker uses the form to
re-create (not just to describe) the process of Celie’s individuation. Indeed, in both novels the authors successfully utilize the immediacy akin to the epistolary genre to demonstrate the formative value of self-narration.

In *The Color Purple* Alice Walker places high value on personal expression by giving Celie an authentic and individualized voice, and Walker also achieves the more far-reaching aim of portraying an African American woman with honesty and complexity. In Chapter Three, I demonstrate how the novel’s narrative immediacy plays an integral part in Walker’s successful achievement of this twofold accomplishment. The novel’s narrative flexibility (achieved because thoughts are seemingly recorded as they occur and change) allows for the presentation both of Celie’s passivity and her incredible strength. In other words, Walker’s narrative techniques work to capture the intricacies that make up the process of individuation, as it occurs uniquely for Celie. At the same time, the immediacy of the narrative allows Walker to make social commentary through the use of author-reader irony. Celie provides little analytical commentary on the significance of her experiences. The reader, however, plays an interpretive role similar to that of a reflective, first-person narrator, reading Celie’s often unemotional tone to understand the poignancy of her experiences as an individualistic, yet representative, black female in the South. Additionally, I consider how Walker’s inclusion of the intimate voices of women other than Celie signals Walker’s desire to construct work not only as a personal story but to as a collective one as well.

In reading *Fair and Tender Ladies*, I explore the ways in which Lee Smith, like Alice Walker, re-creates the self-actualization of a female protagonist despite oppressive circumstances. Unlike *The Color Purple*, *Fair and Tender Ladies* has only one narrator.
Although it is an epistolary novel, only letters from Ivy Rowe are included; others’ responses come to us through the filter of Ivy’s perspective. Smith is perhaps less concerned than Walker with writing a representative work. Still, through Ivy’s individualized narrative, Smith does provide commentary on the broader social issues of class and gender. As a number of critics of the novel have observed, Ivy faces the conflict between being a woman and being a writer. Some conclude that Ivy ultimately sacrifices being an artist to her responsibilities as a woman. However, finding significance in the shifting, seemingly contradictory opinions that Ivy presents over the course of the novel, I argue that Ivy actually succeeds in both roles. Through her paradoxical expressions, as Tanya Long Bennett argues, Ivy resists rigid definition by others and achieves individuation and independence in an otherwise oppressive existence. Augmenting Bennett’s commentary, I show that immediate narration plays a part here. Because Smith creates the perception that Ivy records her thoughts as they occur, it does not seem errant or suggest authorial carelessness when Ivy over the years expresses thoughts that are contradictory.

The conclusion serves to demonstrate the breadth of possibilities in the implementation of the first-person voice as well as the prevalence of narrative immediacy in first-person narrated works. This concluding chapter considers a number of novels in which there is a significant temporal gap between narration and experience and in which is found varying degrees of ideological and emotional separation. The first grouping of novels examined are Wally Lamb’s *She’s Come Undone* (1992), Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), and Jill McCorkle’s *Ferris Beach* (1990). These three works are characterized by a minimized narrator presence so that the protagonist is easily mistaken for the narrator. Conversely, in each of the other works considered—Richard Wright’s *Black
Boy (1944), William Kowalski’s Eddie’s Bastard (2000), and Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird (1960)—the writers highlight the gap existing between the “experiencing I” and the “narrating I.” In these texts, in which present consciousness informs the past, the reflective narrator directs the portrayal (and reader perception) of his or her younger self. In all of these works, however, regardless of the degree of marked narrator presence highlighting the passage of time, the writers demonstrate a desire to evoke immediacy in the narration.

Notes

1 Scholes and Kellogg argue that point of view controls “the reader’s impression of everything else,” that “in the relationship between the teller and the tale, and . . . between the teller and the audience, lies the essence of narrative art” (275, 240). Wallace Martin claims that “narrative point of view creates the interest, the conflicts, the suspense, and the plot itself in most modern narratives” (131).

2 In making this statement, Martin is referring specifically to the time period of 1945-1960.

3 As Wallace Martin explains, critics who came much earlier than Genette and Booth also made significant contributions. For example, referring to the work of Anna Barbauld in the early 19th century, Martin explains that “her conceptual distinctions survive in current criticism” (131).

4 Lanser cites speech act theory as the means for achieving a “context-oriented linguistic framework for analyzing point of view” (62).

5 Frye’s work is representative of the type of study that Lanser claims has been lacking, as Frye discovers strong connections between techniques of narration and issues related to gender, class, and race. Like Lanser, Frye also places importance in the role of the reader, in the perception of the text as a communicative act.

6 In A Theory of Narrative, F.K. Stanzel discusses at some length a variety of possible degrees of proximity between the narrating I and the experiencing I. Andrea Schwenke Wyile also examines this concept (as it is manifested in young adult literature).

7 See Chapter Four of Timothy Dow Adams’ Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography for a useful discussion of the generic uncertainty of Wright’s work. As Adams and others have shown, one finds evidence that Black Boy should be read as autobiography and support for its being aligned with the novel tradition. By reviewing the
many titles that were considered and rejected by Wright, Adams demonstrates Wright’s desire to allow for fictional and factual possibilities.

8 Leading up to his use of the label “life writing,” Olney highlights the fact that *Black Boy* is the only work of Wright’s in which he employs the “I” pronoun. Olney explains, “Had Wright chosen to cast *Native Son* or any of the stories of *Uncle Tom’s Children* in the first person, it would have had the effect of throwing interest back on the narrator, thus making the implied judgments of the fiction, as is sometimes said, ‘subjective.’ Curiously enough, adoption of the unwavering *I* in *Black Boy*—an *I* presented as possessing something approaching perfect recall, it is true—has the opposite effect, and this is an effect and sign of the difference in genre. It is as if the *I* provided warrant of the authenticity in *Black Boy*, which only *he* can provide in fiction” (241). Olney argues, therefore, that although *Black Boy* contains “fictional elements,” specifically experiences that did not happen to Wright, Wright’s particular use of the “I” claims for the narrator credibility and authenticity that typically attach to the autobiographical “I.”

9 I refer to *Black Boy* a number of times throughout this study and discuss it in more detail in the conclusion. Wright’s work is useful as an illustrative text for a number of reasons. Because the novels considered here have themes of maturation and self-identity and employ first-person narration, they share qualities with the autobiographical tradition. It is helpful to study these novels in relation to a work that demonstrates such an interesting intersection of fiction and autobiography. Additionally, as I discuss in the conclusion, Wright’s techniques of narration help one to understand the varying degrees of narrator proximity to experience.

10 The label “narrator” seems more appropriate than “author” for the voice in Wright’s work because the latter term does not allow for any distinction between Wright and the persona who relays the story.

11 Even though Harper Lee’s focus is on the perceptions of the protagonist, Scout, the exaggerated tone portrays an attitude of condescension, a characteristic that works to maintain an ideological gap between the narrator and the protagonist.

12 In making this claim, Eakin relies on the work of Jessica Benjamin in *The Bonds of Love* (1988).

13 James Olney’s recent work, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (1998), is demonstrative of the slippery nature of the concepts of both memory and identity. Olney carefully considers the work of Augustine, Rousseau, and Beckett, scholars who portray substantially different viewpoints on memory. In this study, I focus much attention on the complexities and ambiguities of self-identity as it is portrayed through narrative immediacy. Olney’s recent study demonstrates that retrospection by no means guarantees certainty regarding the concept of “self,” even when writers (or narrators) portray confidence in knowing and understanding their earlier selves.

14 In the introduction to his collection, *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*, James Hardin provides a succinct but fairly thorough overview of the evolution of the term
*Bildungsroman* (as well as other labels that have been chosen as substitutes) from its earliest uses in the seventeenth century to its more recent ones (the 1980’s). Hardin considers the difficulties in translating the term and explores a number of examples of what he sees as “imprecise [uses] of the word” (x), as well as those that represent “a restricted vision of the genre” (mostly from feminist criticism) (xxii). In addition to translation problems, Hardin cites the “slippery” nature of the term *Bildung* as it “is bound to our interpretation of cultural values” (xii). Finally, he considers how “the pervasive pessimism of modern literature” has contributed to the lack of consensus regarding genre demarcations (xx).

15 Pin-chia Feng’s study of the genre as it has been envisioned by ethnic women includes a definition that is representative of an attitude of broad inclusion: “I regard any writing about the identity formation of an ethnic woman, whether fictional or autobiographical in form, chronologically or retrospectively in plot, as a Bildungsroman” (15).

16 Hardin’s introduction is illustrative here, as he cites a number of critics who have attempted conciseness in defining and describing the genre (for example, the early, often cited definition by Wilhelm Dilthey). Hardin himself is bothered by what he sees as impreciseness in the use of the term, pointing to “needlessly cavalier application[s] of what, used with more care could be a useful literary term” (xviii). Citing agreement with Jeffrey L. Sammons, one of the contributors in the essay collection, Hardin argues for the following specificity regarding the genre: “the term *Bildungsroman* to mean anything. . . should have something to do with *Bildung*, ‘that is, with the early bourgeois, humanistic concept of the shaping of the individual self from its innate potentialities through acculturation and social experience’” (xxii-xxiii). Jerome Buckley, in his list of characteristics, demonstrates a fairly narrow application of the term *Bildungsroman*. As the editors of *The Voyage In* point out, his formula excludes women, as well as minorities, I would add.

17 Feng and Frye also argue that writers find innovative ways in which to resist the notions that maturation occurs in linear progression with unifying results.

18 I would offer that self-identity is a cogent concern for men even in more privileged positions, as the definitions of masculinity have become more ambiguous in the wake of feminism.

19 As will be discussed later in this work, the seeming spontaneity of Huck’s narration is undermined in some interesting ways. See R. J. Fertel’s essay “‘Free and Easy’? Spontaneity and the Quest for Maturity in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*” for a discussion of authorial presence in Twain’s novel. Fertel cites several ways in which Twain’s presence undermines the “prevailing assumption that *Huckleberry Finn* is an improvised creation” (158). Fertel’s argument is considered in relation to *Meely LaBauve* in Chapter Two of this study.
Chapter One: Temporal Fluctuations and Narrative Immediacy in Kaye Gibbons’ Ellen Foster

While some have argued the demise of the Bildungsroman genre, Kaye Gibbons’ Ellen Foster serves as proof of the form’s continuing viability. More accurately, the novel represents a contemporary author’s re-envisioning of the genre, as it both upholds and subverts literary conventions. Like classical versions of the Bildungsroman, the focus of the novel is the development of a single character who demonstrates a high degree of independence. Unlike writers of more traditional works, however, Gibbons creates a heroine (as opposed to a hero), who faces impediments to her survival, not just to her successful individuation. Young Ellen overcomes poverty, her mother’s suicide, the neglect, abuse and eventual death of her father, and the death of her cruel grandmother. After a number of unsatisfactory homes, Ellen actively seeks and finds a loving environment at a foster home and does so as a result of her own efforts. Thus, as one finds in more conventional Bildungsromane, self-reliance and individuation are valued characteristics in the protagonist of this novel. Unlike earlier versions of the genre, however, these qualities are not romanticized but serve as necessary survival tactics for Ellen. Independence is valued in the novel, but it does not supercede the importance of affiliation in identity formation. Gibbons upholds both aspects of the search for self.

Like the novels considered in the chapters that follow, Ellen Foster is characterized by dualities that are both thematic and structural. Such complexity is not surprising given the ambiguities that accompany both adolescent development and self-representational writing in this narrative of a young girl’s search for selfhood and acceptance, a story narrated in her own youthful voice. The novel is thematically dichotomous in that Gibbons
has double purposes: the narrow focus of presenting the story of Ellen’s development in her voice and the more socially conscious purpose of portraying an interracial friendship in the South. Even without the latter intention, the depiction of Ellen’s development is complex, as she is motivated by the opposing forces of individuality and affiliation, or, put another way, the dichotomy between self-determination and socialization. Duality arises within the narrative structure through Gibbons’ technique of shifting back and forth, not just between Ellen’s life at the foster home and her experiences before living there, but between past and present tense narration as well. The fluidity of the form that Gibbons creates through these narrative shifts stands in contrast to the image of order, control, and self-reliance that Ellen often outwardly expresses. The result is that, despite the fact that the story is presented from the point of view of a single person, the perspective is characterized by complexities that are perhaps not apparent at first.¹

In Ellen Foster form and content work in tandem, as thematic ambiguities are furthered by the variability that Gibbons achieves in the structure of the novel. First-person narration is often considered narrow and constraining in comparison with third-person narration, because in the former, the reader has first-hand knowledge of the thoughts of only one character. While the novel is limited to Ellen’s point of view (what she witnesses), one must not overlook the fact that her perspective (her responses to what she witnesses) is characterized by plurality. Furthermore, the frequent shifts in the narrative belie the singularity suggested by the first-person voice. One way that such shifts occur is Gibbons’ alternations between descriptions of Ellen’s life with her foster family and her experiences that led up to it. To illustrate, Ellen’s descriptions of her mother’s suicide and funeral alternate with an account of a pony ride and picnic she takes while living with her “new
mama.” This contrasting of scenes allows Gibbons to establish the harshness of Ellen’s life prior to coming to the foster home while avoiding complaints by Ellen. Gibbons claims that she wants to “dispel the myth of the fainting Southern female” (Gretlund 144). By showing (rather than having her narrator Ellen telling) the difficulties that Ellen faces, Gibbons is able to portray Ellen’s strength while also establishing her need for a supportive community. Further, the scene shifting works to reveal how minimal are Ellen’s expectations of others. She appreciates such simple aspects of her new life as having a clean house and sufficient food. This characterization of Ellen offsets some of the self-centeredness that naturally comes along with the monologic form. Additionally, Ellen’s minimal expectations, along with an expressive naiveté that is heightened by the novel’s immediacy, tend to mediate the reader’s reaction to the unpopular sentiments that Ellen sometimes expresses.

Not only does Gibbons alternate between present scenes at the foster home and flashbacks of Ellen’s previous experiences, Gibbons also makes less noticeable shifts between present and past tense verbs, often utilizing the present tense in the narration of past experiences. An excellent example of Gibbons’ malleable treatment of time is found in Ellen’s description of her aunt Nadine and cousin Dora’s condescending reaction to the painting she makes for them as a Christmas gift. Although Ellen is narrating a singular event in the past, Gibbons makes a number of abrupt tense shifts: “But it is not cute and it is not a game I want to say. I wanted to scoop the cats and the colored frames up and burn them and forget I had tried to appeal to somebody and look at them now making fun of me” (109 emphasis added). Here and throughout the novel, Gibbons blurs distinction between past and present emotions and, by extension, those between the stance of the narrator and that of the protagonist. Thus, one finds another manifestation of the novel’s structural
duality: the narration is characterized by immediacy, but it also contains moments that are reminiscent of more reflective works. *Ellen Foster* differs from the other novels considered in later chapters in that Ellen relates the entirety of her story after the major conflict is resolved. When Ellen begins telling her story, she is living at a foster home, a loving and safe environment. Unlike Celie in *The Color Purple*, who writes many of her letters while still in the midst of abusive, uncertain circumstances, Ellen narrates her tale with the knowledge of her successful escape from the neglect and abuse of her family. This awareness contributes to Ellen’s ability to make confident expressions about herself and to express anger about her abusive father. Although this plot resolution may at first lead one to classify the narration as reflective, the *overriding* perception that Gibbons creates is that of immediacy. Typically with reflective narration, an adult narrator remembers experiences that happened many years before. In this novel, however, little time elapses between experience and narration, and consequently there is minimal emotional separation between the narrating persona and the protagonist.

A well-known precursor with a narrative structure similar to that found in *Ellen Foster* is Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*. Holden also begins telling his story after all of the narrated events have occurred, after his mental breakdown. Therefore, in Salinger’s work, a gap exists between experience and narration, but because the time lapse is brief (Holden is still in the hospital recovering when he shares his story), little ideological difference separates Holden, the narrator, from Holden, the protagonist. Although small, the durational gap between events and their narration is emphasized at the novel’s opening, which is reminiscent of the retrospective genre of autobiography: “You’ll probably want to know where I was born” (3). On the other hand, the genre is evoked only to be resisted, as Holden
rejects autobiographical convention when he refuses to tell of his birth and childhood and insists instead on describing only recent events: “I’m not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography” (3). Having some distance from the narrated events allows Holden to assert this authority over the narrative, but because the lapse is brief, Holden’s character demonstrates vulnerability, and Salinger evokes intimacy in the narration. Ultimately, Salinger relies both on reflection and immediacy, as we find Gibbons doing in her more contemporary work.

In a way similar to what we find in *Catcher in the Rye*, the shifting of narrative time allows Gibbons access to the advantages that come with reflective narration while still maintaining an overriding impression of spontaneity and intimacy in the narrative. Because some time has elapsed since the described events took place, Ellen is allowed a degree of emotional detachment from difficult memories. With such detachment comes a sense of power and confidence to make interpretative assertions about the self and others. Ellen’s description of the time she spent living with her grandmother, which is presented mostly in the past tense, is illustrative here. While residing with her grandmother, who holds her responsible for her mother’s death, Ellen has very little control in a difficult situation. After all, she is placed there by court order. She fearfully accepts mistreatment, believing she is guilty of that which her grandmother accuses her. Conversely, while occupying the safer, more distanced stance of a narrator, Ellen is imparted power, as she claims imperviousness to her grandmother’s mistreatment: “On work days [grandmother] left a plate of something for me on the stove. That might not sound social to you but it was perfect for me” (66). In relating her story, Ellen shares her previously secret thoughts of getting revenge on her grandmother, indicating that her compliance was a necessary but temporary role she played.
In referring to her grandmother as her “mama’s mama,” Ellen proactively establishes a
degree of distance from the woman who rejects her. Ellen keeps secret her relationship with
Mavis, the black servant. However, in the narrative, Ellen explains that she “could pass for
colored now” (66), associating herself with Mavis and the other workers, who display great
strength and compassion in contrast to her grandmother.

By portraying Ellen’s emotional separation, Gibbons affords her with agency.

However, because Ellen’s recollections are of relatively recent events and the emotions
associated with them still present, the detachment of the narrative voice is not maintained.
In fact, Gibbons frequently shifts to the present tense, revealing Ellen’s vulnerability shown
in her desire for acceptance and her continuing fears and uncertainties. By evoking
immediacy in the narration, Gibbons creates for Ellen an authentic-seeming, candid voice.

With the sense that there is little gap between experience and narration, and therefore, little
time for self-editing, comes the further impression that what is expressed is a raw, unfiltered
account. Reflection leads to a presentation of agency (self-awareness and self-acceptance),
and with immediacy often comes a sense of candor and honesty. Both results are achieved
in Gibbons’ portrayal of Ellen.

These dual effects created by Gibbons are evident from the first several pages of the
novel. Because Ellen’s narration is at first characterized by the use of past tense verbs and
unemotional interpretations of past hardships, Gibbons initially highlights Ellen’s self-
reliance and resilience. Very quickly, however, one notes a shift to a present tense re-
creation of Ellen’s mother’s death, revealing her continuing vulnerability. The novel’s
powerful opening line, “When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy” (1
emphasis added), establishes temporal distance between Ellen, the narrator, and Ellen, the
protagonist. Gibbons’ use of the past tense allows Ellen to reveal her father’s actual death with a seeming lack of emotion and guilt: “But I did not kill my daddy. He drank his own self to death the year after the County moved me out. . . . All I did was wish him dead real hard every now and then. And I can say for a fact that I am better off now than when he was alive” (1). Through this curt, almost flippant tone, Gibbons affords Ellen with a sense of empowerment over her once abusive father. As Ellen explains that she is in a suitable home now, she highlights her success at overcoming abuse at the hands of her family. Gibbons has Ellen, a survivor and an active participant in her own fate, position herself as one who is stronger than “the rest of [her] family [who] is either crazy or dead” (2). The reflective quality of the narrative established by the use of past tense verbs is furthered by Ellen’s matter-of-fact interpretative summaries of the difficulties she has overcome: “Everything was so wrong like somebody had knocked something loose and my family was shaking itself to death. Some wild ride broke and the one in charge strolled off and let us spin and shake and fly off the rail” (2). Ellen expresses an attitude toward her parents’ death that is quite philosophical: “And they both died tired of the wild crazy spinning and wore out and sick. Now you tell me if that is not a fine style to die in. She sick and he drunk with the moving” (2). The emotional distance suggested in the matter-of-fact tone is reminiscent of reflective narration by an adult; however, the wording—the analogy of the fair ride—suggests childlike innocence, reminding the reader of Ellen, the narrator’s, youth.

Though only hinted at before, Ellen’s vulnerability becomes quite apparent as Gibbons abruptly shifts to a present tense narration in a re-creation of Ellen’s mother’s death. It is not uncommon for writers to switch to present tense verbs when relaying a flashback. However, a flashback is typically established as a memory with a marker such as
“I remember” or some clear indicator that the author has changed the time frame. With no such transition, just the words “She comes home from the hospital sometimes” (3), Gibbons shifts to the present tense and reconstructs the day leading up to Ellen’s mother’s suicide, an event that has been established as having occurred in the narrative past. Gibbons further evokes intimacy by slowing the tempo to re-create the scene through the inclusion of very specific details and dialogue. This slowing down, along with the sudden temporal shifts, causes the reader to lose focus on the fact that the events described are past events. Gibbons removes the gap between experience and narration, and therefore between the emotions at the time of the event and those occurring at the time of narration. As Linda Watts observes, “The novel’s dual narrative, with its expertly situated flashbacks, makes the point that [the] past is very much a part of Ellen’s lived present” (225). Ellen’s relationship to her mother’s death is different from that to her father’s, and Gibbons shows this difference through the narrative technique. While the Ellen who narrates the story fears her father, she still misses her mother’s love and has lingering feelings of guilt about her death, and the immediacy of the narrative helps to reveal the power of these feelings.

In examining these complexities of the novel’s narration, one discovers that Gibbons’ dualistic narrative form plays a key part in the development of the novel’s themes. Perhaps what most drives the novel’s thematic dichotomies are the same conflicting motivations found in other contemporary Bildungsromane: those between creating a personal history and presenting a representational work. More specifically, the double goal of writing an authentic-seeming, individualized story of Ellen and putting forth a socially-conscious message through the story of a cross-racial friendship. To understand Gibbons’ twofold purpose, it will be helpful to consider the novel in relation to the work that is often
cited as a predecessor: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. As both novels are narrated in the first-person voice of a savvy and tough, young protagonist, it is not surprising that *Ellen Foster* has been compared to Twain’s work. While a number of critics of the novel concur that similarities are shared by Ellen and Huck, they do not agree on whether or not Gibbons, in writing about a *female* protagonist in a more contemporary setting, significantly revises Huck’s story. They have different opinions as to whether Ellen’s story is one of individualism or relationships.

Finding that “the motif of self-reliance so strong in Twain’s novel is clearly present in Gibbons’” (56-57), Sharon Monteith suggests that the goal of writing a personal history supercedes that of creating a representational history, as she concludes that “individualism overrides the friendship plot” (63). In an interview with Jan Nordby Gretlund, Gibbons’ own revelations support Monteith’s conclusion. Gibbons claims, “I do not write in order to make political comments on rural or urban life” (134). Although one could convincingly argue that Gibbons indeed does make political statements with her fiction, most would agree that such commentary is not of primary importance in her writing. Monteith does not dispute the importance of relationships in Ellen’s development, but she finds that in the conflict existing between the novel’s theme of friendship and its monologic structure as a first-person narrated *Bildungsromane*, the structure wins out. A close examination of Gibbons’ narrative strategies, however, reveals that the structure is more complex than Monteith suggests. Again, although only Ellen’s voice is presented, the perspective portrayed is not a unified one, as both autonomy and affiliation are stressed. Gibbons claim that she “[wants] more than anything to communicate that message of self-reliance” (144).

In contrast to Monteith’s position, the majority of critics make arguments similar to that
given by Veronica Makowsky, who does not dispute the significance of autonomy in the novel, but posits that “Gibbons redefines self-reliance, not as willed and threatened isolation, but as the maturity that enables an act of faith in others and, in turn, that allows a girl to contribute to, as well as receive from, the female tradition of community and nurturance” (107). Similarly, Kristina K. Groover, whose essay is centered on how Ellen’s quest represents a re-envisioning of Huck’s (and more broadly that of the American Adam), argues that “Gibbons revises the spiritual quest paradigm by suggesting that transcendent experience may be located not only in the uninhabited wilderness, but in the midst of family and community” (195). Indeed, Ellen’s journey, which has as its goal familial connection, is opposite of that which is undertaken by Huck, who even in the end of his adventures with Jim rejects the domestic realm.

Because Monteith’s primary concern is Ellen’s relationship with her black friend Starletta, she does not consider how Ellen’s search for a familial environment is a significant point of departure from Huck’s story and is indicative of the importance of affiliation in the novel. On the other hand, Makowsky and Groover do not consider the silencing of Starletta and how it undermines the theme of friendship. The fact is that the novel does not resolve all of the ambiguities of self-representational writing. Still, such resolution is neither believable nor desirable, as it requires a contrived singularity, which comes only from narrative restrictions.5

Monteith sees the first-person narrated Bildungsroman (even contemporary versions) as a “monologic form that silences other voices that may disrupt the monologue or deviate from its flow” (52). Admitting that Gibbons does succeed in disrupting some of the conventions of classical Bildungsroman by making the protagonist someone who is outside
of the bourgeoisie, she concludes that, in spite of this revision, “the Bildungsroman structure envelops the speaking protagonist in a kind of impermeable membrane and functions to divert the reader’s attention away from characters who are positioned on the outside” (52). Indeed, Gibbons does establish Ellen’s friendship with Starletta as integral to the novel and then renders Starletta mute. Monteith concludes that it is the structure that undermines the interracial friendship plot, but the novel’s monologic structure and the resulting silencing of other characters (even those who themselves are marginalized) is an inevitable result of Ellen’s oppressive circumstances. In other words, Ellen’s failure to hear Starletta may be an unfortunate but inevitable result of her attempts at resisting the dominant culture and finding her own voice, actions which require a degree of self-centeredness. In her psychological study of adolescent girls, Angela McRobbie speaks of the powerlessness of working class girls. The monologic nature of Gibbons’ novel is likely a reaction against this lack of power. Although the novel is not free of all the restraints that occur with the use of the first-person voice and with the Bildungsroman form, Gibbons’ characterization of Ellen is ultimately more multifarious than Monteith suggests. Rather than being impeded by the more traditional Bildungsroman, Gibbons manages a successful reinvention of the form.

In its classical manifestation, the Bildungsroman is characterized by singularity and linearity. In Ellen Foster, however, neither the characterization of Ellen nor the style of the narration is singular. A useful example of the novel’s duality is Ellen’s description of the months after her mother’s death, when at the age of ten Ellen becomes fully responsible for caring for herself. With minimal emotion or complaint, Ellen explains how she manages the little money she and her father have and how she tries to eat balanced meals: “I found the best deal was the plate froze with food already on it. A meat, two vegetables, and a dab of
dessert” (25). She even describes buying and wrapping her own Christmas presents. Again, Gibbons uses past tense narration and a matter-of-fact tone to establish Ellen’s emotional detachment and a resulting sense of control in opposition to earlier difficulties. As the reader recognizes that much of Ellen’s stoicism is likely a brave front rather than an internal reality, there is a noticeable distinction between narrator and protagonist in this and other sections of the novel. Yet, shortly following her calm, controlled explanations of her methods of caring for herself, is Ellen’s fearful description of her father’s attempt to sexually abuse her, when in a drunken state he confuses her with her dead mother. Here, the gap between Ellen, the narrator, and Ellen, the protagonist, is removed as the narration becomes very intimate and immediate: “Get away from me he does not listen to me but touches his hands harder on me. That is not me. Oh no that was her name. Do not oh you do not say her name to me. That was her name. You know that now stop no not my name. I am Ellen. I am Ellen” (38). Ellen periodically expresses a desire for order, cleanliness, and independence, all of which are indicative of singularity. However, the sections narrated in the present tense, which reveal Ellen’s vulnerability and lack of emotional control, subvert her expressed certainty. The novel’s alternations between the past and present tense, therefore, undermine the notions of coherence that characterize the Bildungsroman form as it exists in its classical manifestation.

Monteith justifiably points out that “Gibbons has [Ellen] rationalize herself as an autonomous and coherent self” (53), but Gibbons’ narrative techniques subvert Ellen’s expressed rationalizations. Although Monteith cites and appreciates the openness of the ending of the novel, specifically, the uncertain future of Ellen and Starletta’s friendship, she does not recognize the ambiguities in Gibbons’ presentation of Ellen as self-reliant or as
having a consistent sense of self. The dichotomous nature of Ellen’s characterization leaves
room for, indeed requires, interpretation on the part of the reader. In fact, the insistent open-
endedness that is a distinguishing quality of all of the novels considered in this study reveals
a further departure from the classical *Bildungsroman*. As Joanne S. Frye discovers, the first-
person form is actually liberating rather than limiting for the female writer, and, by
extension, the female narrator: “In the work of contemporary novelists, the narrating ‘I’
finds additional ways, both thematic and structural, to avoid narrative entrapment, new ways
to subvert old stories” (8).

The fact that critics view Ellen’s development differently is not surprising, given the
fact that Ellen undertakes the opposing acts of self-understanding and self-presentation. The
act of creating autobiography, even fictional imitations of the form, calls for the opposing
tasks of introspection and presentation. Because the focus is the self, the writing is inwardly
directed; at the same time, however, one’s story is shared with an audience so that a
connection to others is sought. While these purposes seem to be at odds, much scholarship
on life writing by women and other minorities points to their mutually dependent nature.
For example, in *Women’s Life-Writing: Finding Voice/Building Community*, Linda S.
Coleman explains how the two purposes are undeniably linked for women in the act of life-
writing: “We discover a fundamental and common strategy for coming to a meaningful
understanding of the self and for establishing the needed authority and strength to negotiate
or even to subvert external or internalized norms that might silence that self. This strategy is
the construction of an empowering and sympathetic other, a community of readers” (1). In
other words, affiliation with others is viewed not as an impediment to agency but as an
instrument in its development.
A dichotomy related to that of self-examination versus self-presentation is the conflict found both in autobiography and the Bildungsroman between self-determination and socialization or between individualism and affiliation. Male development has traditionally been understood to have as its goal the separation from others in order to achieve individuality. Conversely, female development has generally been thought to involve relationships, the defining of oneself through association with others. Critics such as Paul John Eakin, who insists that “all identity is relational” (43), however, claim that both individualism and connection are part of identity formation for both genders. Not surprisingly, the tension that occurs as a result of these opposite tendencies is present in self-representational writing, whether in the form of autobiography or first-person narrated fiction. Frye, finding that “the ‘I’ effects an initial openness to multiplicity,” argues that “narration need not be defined by traits of nurturance or strength but can be instead an expressed capacity for both nurturance and agency, existing simultaneously” (74). The multiplicity of Gibbons’ narration allows for the possibility of both traits in Ellen, a developing young female.

In considering the second major thematic duality, the opposing forces that are at work in Ellen’s development, two psychological studies of girls prove helpful. Lyn Mickel Brown’s Raising Their Voices and, to a lesser extent, Angela McRobbie’s Feminism and Youth Culture serve to further elucidate our understanding both of Ellen and the novel’s narration. Working-class girls serve as the subject of both studies, McRobbie focusing on girls aged between 13 and 16 and Brown on girls at the “edge” of adolescence (ages 10-12). McRobbie bases her research on her observations at a youth club near Birmingham, England during the early 1970’s, and Brown compares middle and upper-middle class girls with
working class girls in the 1990’s. In her research, McRobbie finds that “although [the girls] opposed the authority and discipline of the school, they accepted unquestionably their traditional female roles within it” (53). Ultimately, Gibbons portrays Ellen as having a strong, independent mind as compared to what McRobbie observes in her subjects, and Ellen acts in ways that are rejections of traditional gender expectations. Even so, Ellen also demonstrates an acceptance of dominantly-held ideas regarding gender roles.

In a number of ways Ellen is comparable to the girls in McRobbie’s story. First, like McRobbie’s subjects, Ellen is “left without any real source of support or advice” (51) before she moves into the foster home. Secondly, McRobbie finds that girls gently undermine authority through their clothing and makeup (52), and Ellen’s attempts at resistance generally are subtle and fairly benign. At times, Ellen very overtly rejects authority, such as when she tells her school counselor that she “[does] not plan to discuss chickenshit with [him]” (89). More often, however, Ellen resists externally imposed restrictions by subtly asserting independence and by hiding her vulnerabilities, as when she insists on doing her own shopping when she must take money from her Aunt Nadine. Furthermore, it is usually in the narrative, not in her life, that Ellen freely expresses herself and succeeds in rejecting others’ dominance. For example, she shares with the reader her anger and disgust at her father, but when interacting with him, her fear causes her to hold her tongue. A third way that Ellen is similar to the girls’ in McRobbie’s study is that she demonstrates a valuing of family and domestic life and an acceptance of traditional roles, as is shown in her game “catalog:” “I picked out the little family first and then the house things and the clothes. . . . The man worked in the family and she was a receptionist” (26). Ellen’s attempts at self-mothering, at maintaining a loving domestic environment even in the midst of abandonment,
show that she longs for a traditional family. Eventually, of course, Ellen comes to redefine her notions of family. In the end, Gibbons’ narrative strategies both support and undermine McRobbie’s findings, proving the intricate nature of Ellen’s responses to culturally imposed gender expectations.

In contrast to McRobbie, Lyn Mickel Brown, finds that “girls actively resist dominant cultural notions of femininity, particularly at the edge of adolescence” (vii). The fact that the girls in Brown’s study are a few years younger than those in McRobbie’s is relevant because, as Brown recognizes, when girls move further into adolescence and as people react to them differently, resistance becomes more difficult. However, Brown’s significant finding (presented in an earlier study but repeated in the one cited here) is that working class girls are the more successful group at sustaining resistance: “Active resisters, girls who carried their voices of protest into middle adolescence, tended to be on the margins of their privileged, predominantly white girls’ school, owing to color or class” (vii). Brown explains that in contrast to the working class environment, the image of idealized femininity is commonly shared and shown to be attainable for middle class girls. As a result, for females in the middle class resistance is more difficult because “the distinction between their experiences and the cultural ideal is more difficult to discern.” (148).

So how do Brown’s findings help elucidate our understanding of Ellen? Being in the same age range as the girls in the study, Ellen is also “on the edge” of adolescence, the stage during which, according to Brown, girls demonstrate resistance to gender role expectations. Ellen attempts this resistance primarily by attributing to herself traditionally masculine qualities such as self-reliance, wisdom, and strength. Brown also finds that this age is a time when girls experience a shift in their previous reality and therefore struggle with how to
define reality (ix). Ellen certainly undergoes a number of alterations to her reality: losing both of her parents, being passed from home to home, facing changes in her perceptions of Starletta. Although Ellen probably lives in more impoverished circumstances than the girls in the study, her mother does come from a privileged background (a lifestyle her mother rejects when she marries Ellen’s father). Ellen experiences the same tension as the working class girls in the study as she is part of, yet kept outside of, the more privileged group. The time she spends living with her grandmother is illustrative here. Although she is the granddaughter, she is treated like one of the field hands. At first, Ellen hopes to be accepted by her grandmother, but eventually she gladly associates herself with Mavis and the others. As Giavanna Munafo observes, “Ellen inherits from her mother the impulse to transgress restrictive social codes” (44). From the black workers Ellen experiences acceptance, and with them she is under less pressure to conform to a feminine ideal. In fact, Ellen proudly announces, “By July I was like a boy. When I started out both of my hands were a red blister but then I toughened up good” (44).

An examination of Ellen’s narration of the time spent living with her Aunt Nadine and cousin Dora is particularly helpful in demonstrating her avoidance of repression and domination at the hands of others. At the same time, these areas of the novel reveal the ambiguities that accompany Ellen’s attempts to adapt her perceptions to her changing reality. Gibbon’s use of first-person voice, particularly in the more reflective sections, allows Ellen, as the narrator, control over her story and therefore the opportunity to claim authority and independence in situations where she was denied both. Ellen shares thoughts with the reader that she keeps from Nadine and Dora. The immediacy and intimacy of the narrative, which result in the blurring of distinctions between past and present selves, allow
Gibbons to portray the protagonist Ellen as having more strength and independence than she likely had at the time of the described experiences. While there are instances in which Ellen shows an acceptance of conventional expectations of feminine behavior, quite often one finds attempts at resistance on her part. Brown observes that girls in both of the groups in her study reacted to gender expectations by aligning themselves with behavior typically associated with males. According to Brown, the Acadia girls (those in the middle-class group) tended to “appropriate historically weighted conceptions of girls and women as superficial, false, and trite [in order] to distance themselves from other girls” (122). She continues, “Against this silly image, they insist, they are wise, grounded, strong, adventuresome, and smart, characteristics more often, in white middle-class culture at least, associated with boys and men” (149). Brown writes that the working-class girls tended to appropriate misogynic language or to display toughness in some other way in to order to “distance themselves from other girls and women on the basis of relational treachery, vulnerability, and dependence, which they see as signs of feminine weakness” (121). Similar to the more privileged girls in the study, Ellen distances herself from Nadine and Dora’s vanity and falsity, but like the working-class girls in the study, her stronger resentment is for the weakness, vulnerability, and dependence portrayed by her aunt and cousin. Ellen does not use misogynic language, but she does “talk tough” in a way that is closely aligned with what would typically be considered more masculine than feminine: she conveys a lack of emotion in response to the harshness of her life.

Ellen clearly associates negative feminine qualities with Nadine and Dora, and attempts to distinguish herself from them. In her narrative descriptions, Ellen frequently points to Nadine and Dora’s shallowness and naiveté: “So you have Nadine and Dora
making up lies with the way they carry on together like they are getting prettier every day and what does not come in a shiny package from town is not worth the trouble of opening. But I could tell them some things about what else can come in a box oh no not the shiny kind but the black one that fits down so cozy in a hole” (96). As Ellen describes Christmas with her aunt and cousin, she points to her own maturity as compared to Nora’s innocence: “I said to myself Dora let me tell you a thing or two. There is no Santa Claus. And you cannot always count on getting everything you want” (107). In her claim that Nadine and Dora would not appreciate one of her “brooding ocean” paintings but would prefer a picture of playful kittens, Ellen suggests that she has greater emotional depth than they. Ellen makes each of the above statements to the reader but not to Nadine or Dora; therefore, Ellen is able, through the act of self-narration, to present herself as superior to her aunt and cousin who reject her. The reader is of course privy to Ellen’s private longing to be accepted and loved, and therefore, recognizes that her attempts at distancing herself from others are a form of self-protection. Ellen rejects Nadine and Dora’s “feminine” weakness in an attempt to deny the same qualities within herself.

Another way that Ellen rejects vulnerability is by feigning independence, even in the midst of dependence. Again, in Ellen’s recollection of these experiences, Gibbons has her direct the focus of her story in a way that highlights self-reliance. For example, Ellen says, “Then it got my goat when I had to ask for somebody to help me get a new round of clothes” (96). In reaction to this necessary, but unwanted, sense of dependence, Ellen insists on going alone, using her own individualized and very practical method of shopping. Gibbons has Ellen proudly describe her system in detailed steps, using an authoritative, instructive tone. Ellen’s focus on the practicality of her approach to shopping and to her clothing
choices is an attempt to emphasize her competence rather than her reliance on her aunt. Additionally, the expressed pragmatism distances her from Nadine and Dora’s materialism. Through the act of narrating her story, then, Ellen rejects the frivolous and foolish; she resists dominant cultural expectations regarding femininity. With a tense shift shortly following Ellen’s self-assured explanation of her ability to take care of herself, however, Gibbons reveals Ellen’s awareness and even acceptance of social conventions about how a girl should dress: “I look like I am worth something today and she will notice the dress first and then me inside it and say to herself I sure would like to have a little girl like her” (98). Here, Gibbons shows the complexity of Ellen’s relationship to gender expectations, as well as her desire for acceptance.

Indeed, Gibbons exposes Ellen’s vulnerable feelings a number of times in the account of her stay with Nadine and Dora. Immediately after pointing out the silliness of Dora’s belief in Santa Claus, Ellen describes her own faith that her aunt Nadine will surprise her with Christmas presents, revealing her hope that her aunt does care for her. Ellen explains, “I bet she is racking her brain to come up with something else for me. . . And she was nice enough to ask me if I wanted anything in particular. Yes old Nadine has something up her sleeve. I just hope my present for them is good enough” (107-108). Gibbons’ use of the present tense here is significant, as it creates the impression that the narrator Ellen, as well as the protagonist Ellen, holds out hope that she will be loved and accepted. Ellen again tries to distance herself from her earlier demonstrations of weakness by explaining in the past tense, “I stayed all night unable to sleep with my anger and shame and the loudness of wanting to hear something landing on the roof” (109). Even here, though, is a sense of
lingering hurt feelings. Ultimately, Ellen’s more detached expressions are contrasted with and undermined by Gibbons’ abrupt shifts to a more vulnerable, present tense voice.

Brown argues that central both to girls’ acceptance of and their resistance to femininity is the process that Bakhtin terms “ventriloquation,” which is the act of speaking the words of others before they are fully appropriated or even sometimes before they are understood. To illustrate, Brown describes an incident involving a group of young boys who used hostile and misogynistic language in order to get a reaction from girls of a similar age. While the boys and girls did not fully comprehend the meaning of the words used, they demonstrated an understanding of the power the language carried. According to Brown, ventriloquation can signal acceptance of dominantly held gender expectations, as in the above example, but it can also be used as a means of resistance. As I have shown, by evoking immediacy in the narration while also maintaining a small degree of retrospection, Gibbons reveal the dualities of Ellen’s sense of herself and of the world around her. Gibbons re-creates the continuing process of Ellen’s coming of age, a process of ventriloquation that includes both complying with and rejecting dominant ideologies.

An example of Ellen’s ventriloquation as a means of resistance occurs when she pretends to have a boyfriend. In her study, Brown describes an instance in which four working-class girls progressed from initially demonstrating a desire to measure up to an unattainable feminine ideal to revealing their awareness of the absurdity of such an ideal. Brown explains, “By elevating it to the level of parody or farce, or by dramatically shifting from identity to identity, [the girls] allude to the instability of the [conventional feminine] ideal itself, attenuating its power to regulate or contain them” (140). Ellen puts on a similar performance for Nadine and Dora when she makes up a boyfriend with qualities they will
find impressive: one who is mysterious and who gives presents. Ellen “[says] everything they wanted to hear” (112) in order to exact revenge but also to disarm their power over her. She explains, “So if I could round me up a boyfriend and sport him around in front of Dora I could bring her down a notch or two and feel pretty good my own self” (111). Additionally, Ellen succeeds at rejecting Nadine and Dora’s compliance with conventional femininity, specifically, their vanity and falsity. Ellen takes on these qualities, playing a role in order to show her superior intellect. She claims that her microscope was a gift from her boyfriend, knowing it will ultimately expose Nadine and Dora’s ignorance of science.

In the intimate act of telling her story, Ellen is able to re-create her performance with even greater success at undermining her aunt and cousin because she shares with the reader what she does not tell Nadine and Dora at the time. For example, Ellen reveals that she heard that “[Dora] promised a couple of boys she would let them feel of her. Then when she chickened out I imagine the boys were plenty hot. They say at school Dora is all flirt” (111). By suggesting that Dora is a sexual tease, Ellen rejects not only Dora but also traditional notions of feminine purity. As Brown finds, girls’ reactions to gender definitions are complex. For example, the “dismissal of... [conventional] categories of girls. . . does not interrupt the classifications themselves” (114) and “put-downs of other girls and women [can] also signal... momentary alignment with dominant views of women” (119). By placing Ellen’s ability to accurately assess Dora and Nadine against her own insecurities, Gibbons successfully portrays the ambiguities of the youthful female’s coming of age.

When studying the novel’s narration closely, one finds that Ellen’s relationship with Starletta and her general attitude toward black persons can also be viewed as ventriloquation. The friendship shared by Starletta and Ellen is reminiscent of that between
Huck and Jim. Both Huck and Ellen display racist attitudes that are troubling to the reader. However, they also make choices that are oppositional to the majority opinion regarding race, proving that the derogatory sentiments they express are reiterations of what they have heard from others. In other words, the racism displayed by these protagonists is a type of ventriloquation.

Ellen certainly hears racist sentiments and witnesses racist behavior from others around her, from her Aunt Nadine’s unlocking the car door in relief when they leave “colored town” to her grandmother’s calling her father a “nigger” and treating Mavis and her other servants like slaves. While Ellen expresses discomforting sentiments regarding Starletta, she is obviously also drawn to her black friend. At her mother’s funeral, she wishes she were sitting with Starletta’s family rather than her own. Gibbons shifts abruptly from Ellen’s wish to sit with Starletta to her denigration of Starletta for eating dirt. The single line: “Starletta has orange teeth and she will plait my hair if I ask her right” (20) embodies the paradoxical nature of Ellen’s perception of her black friend. Ellen’s attitude toward Starletta and her family comprises a mixture of racist stereotyping, condescension, attraction, and even envy. Ellen is understandably perplexed by the fact that she receives more acceptance from Starletta’s and Mavis’ family than her own: “All I wonder is why I do not hate Starletta” (110). Ellen has not fully internalized the racist sentiments behind the derogatory comments she makes; she makes them primarily because they give her a sense of power in her otherwise powerless existence. As Giavanna Munafo points out, “Whiteness constitutes [Ellen’s] one saving grace, the privilege that makes her better than nothing and separates her from her friend Starletta’s brand of marginality” (39). Ellen’s grandmother associates her father and her with “niggers” as a way of rejecting them. Influenced by such
views, Ellen feels a need (more out of self-protection than malice) to separate herself from Starletta and Starletta’s parents.

Even Ellen’s more sensitive expressions toward Starletta can be seen as a type of ventriloquation because, by the end of the novel, Ellen is still in the process of negotiating her conflicting thoughts and feelings toward her friend. As Monteith persuasively argues, even though Ellen makes progress in her perception of Starletta, she still fails to see the value of listening to her friend. Gibbons’ use of present tense verbs in the narration of past experiences is instrumental in her portrayal of how the Ellen who narrates has not yet fully come to accept Starletta as an equal. To demonstrate, Ellen describes the memory of the Christmas she spent with Starletta in the present tense. Although Ellen later explains that she realizes she was wrong to worry about getting germs from Starletta’s family (85), when telling the story she does not put her feelings in the past: “As fond as I am of all three of them I do not think I could drink after them” (29 emphasis added). No distinction is made here between the Ellen who is narrating and the one who lived the experience. The resulting impression is that Ellen has not fully abandoned the prejudicial judgments that have been instilled in her.

Similarly, by the time Ellen tells her story, she has not completely escaped her fear of her father. Gibbons’ blurring of distinctions between narrator and protagonist demonstrates that Ellen’s achievement of a sense of self, as it must occur in spite of the negative influence of others, is a continuing and complex process. The section of the novel in which Ellen describes learning of her father’s death reveals Ellen’s lingering fears and insecurities. With each change in verb tense, Gibbons suggests a different mental state occupied by Ellen. Gibbons presents each of the following varying sentiments in the course
of only three pages of the narrative. First, Ellen recalls how in response to the “sucking
power” of her “mama’s mama” she felt “like a old monster zombie who was a girl” (68).
Gibbons’ use of past tense verbs here suggests that Ellen has overcome this feeling of self-
loss. This perception is furthered by the present tense assertion, “But I got my fire back in
me now” and a past tense one, “I decided I would jump off the bridge if I was different from
my old self” (68). In both of these statements, Ellen asserts strength of mind and
independence. Still, she admits the difficulty of maintaining such confidence: “So many
folks thinking and wanting you to be somebody else will confuse you if you are not very
careful” (69). Here she is almost philosophical and instructive, much like statements that
typify reflective narration. Then, very shortly after the above revelations, as Ellen recalls her
father’s death, her words and thought ramble: “They put her in a box too and him in a box
oh shut the lid down hard on this one and nail it nail it with the strongest nails. Do all you
can to keep it shut and him in it always. Time would make him meaner to me if he could get
out and grab me again” (70). Here, Gibbons creates a sense of immediacy, poignantly
revealing Ellen’s continuing fear of her father and her sadness over her mother. Gibbons not
only uses present tense verbs, but also furthers the narrative intimacy by shifting briefly to a
style reminiscent of stream-of-consciousness, an approach that stands in contrast to the
controlled manner of Ellen’s earlier assertions. Again, there is no transition between this
and earlier perspectives. It is as if the thoughts recorded are those that occur at the moment
of narration.

Ultimately, then, Gibbons portrays the act of narrating the self as a form of
ventriloquation because it allows Ellen to claim authority seemingly while she still has
insecurities and uncertainties to overcome. Ventriloquation, after all, is the act of
verbalizing sentiments not yet internalized. Lyn Mikel Brown’s argument is that while pre-adolescent girls are outspoken, they gradually learn to be silent and subordinate. What makes continued resistance possible, according to Brown, is a girl’s ability to express herself. Even as Ellen admits the difficulty she has communicating her feelings, the narrative provides her with an outlet for self-expression and resistance. As the process of Ellen’s search for identity involves progressions and regressions, Gibbons’ narrative style is appropriately fluid. Further demonstrating the complexity of Gibbons’ techniques is that the effects created by her shifts in verb tense cannot be categorized simply.

As I have shown, Gibbons’ use of present tense verbs in the descriptions of past events often reveals Ellen’s vulnerability in spite of her outward assertions of strength; however, there are also instances in which Gibbons uses narrative immediacy to portray Ellen’s achievements in self-actualization. For example, in describing how she cared for her dying grandmother, and how, when she could not save her, she decorated her body with flowers, Ellen proclaims, “I am not guilty today” (92 emphasis added). Gibbons provides Ellen’s thoughts on the day of her grandmother’s death, but the use of the present tense conveys a strength of conviction in Ellen, the narrator, as well as Ellen, the protagonist. It is as if Ellen absolves herself of guilt a second time in telling about the experience. Ellen’s prayer to God, which follows this conviction, is also presented with immediacy. In her prayer, Ellen asks Jesus to take her grandmother’s “prettied up” body in exchange for the debt she owes for not saving her mother, showing both her pragmatism and her vulnerability. Again, because of the apparent spontaneity of the narrative, these dual qualities are associated with the narrating self as well as the experiencing one. Near the very end of the novel, the narration is particularly reminiscent of more reflective works, as Ellen
makes insightful, summative statements about her experiences. Often, retrospection in self-representational writing conveys a sense of authority and autonomy. For Ellen, however, these reflective moments allow her to recognize her reliance on others: “Now I can turn out to be different too. I could have been a hobo. If my new mama and her girls had been on a vacation there is no telling where old Ellen might have turned up” (120). With the help of creative techniques of narration, Gibbons succeeds at re-envisioning the concept of self-reliance in the novel, as it does not require isolation or the rejection of a supportive environment. Additionally, in her portrayal of the complexities of Ellen’s development, a portrayal that because of the fluidity of the narrative avoids forcing unity and finality on the coming of age experience, Gibbons manages to write a successful contemporary Bildungsroman.

Notes

1 See Susan Lanser’s discussion of the dual meaning of point of view. Lanser observes that point of view can refer both to “the position from which something is observed” and “one’s manner of viewing things; attitude” (16). While the former is singular in Gibbons’ novel, the latter is characterized by duality.

2 It is not unusual in fiction for writers to attempt to bring past actions into the present. Wallace Martin describes ways in which “fiction is rife with aberrant use of adverbs and other strange combinations of time and tense” (136). Martin focuses, however, primarily on unconventional uses in fiction of “deitics,” or relational adverbs such as “here,” “now,” and “then.” He describes how writers combine these descriptors with the past tense with the result being a shifting of “the whole tense-system. . . forward in time” (137) so that the past tense comes to indicate the present. Gibbons, however, uses the present tense verbs in describing past actions. (Prior to Martin, Seymour Chatman, in the second chapter of Story and Discourse, discusses the unique tense-system utilized in literature.)

3 By marker I mean something similar to what Chatman labels a “tag” in his discussion of direct and indirect forms (199).

4 Monteith describes the structure of the novel as monologic because it is a first person novel and particularly because Starletta is rendered mute in the work. While I, too, employ the term, one could argue that the novel is dialogic because dual perspectives are presented through Ellen’s single voice. Lanser writes, “Even a single narrating subject can be
expected to engage in simultaneous multi-leveled relationships with various textual characters, events, and addressees” (14).

As I discuss in the introductory chapter, some critics claim that the modernist deconstruction of the concept of a unified self has meant the demise of the Bildungsroman form. However, others convincingly argue that the form is still viable, particularly for marginalized persons, for whom the search for self and for understanding of how that self fits into the rest of society is still a relevant one. The difference between classical and contemporary versions of the genre is that the former perpetuates a belief that tensions such as those between the self and society can be overcome, and the latter portrays a belief that such closure is not possible.
Chapter Two:

The Male Bildungsroman in the New Millennium:
Ken Wells’ Meely LaBauve

Ken Wells’ recently published novel, *Meely LaBauve*, shares a number of similarities with Gibbons’ *Ellen Foster*, both in terms of narrative voice and thematic focus. Both of the novels are characterized by immediate narration, and both have plots limited to childhood and adolescence. Additionally, they each feature the maturation of a narrator-protagonist who faces circumstances that contrast with those of a conventional *Bildungsroman* tale.1 Finally, both Gibbons and Wells utilize strategies of narration to blur demarcations based on gender, race, and class.

Wells’ novel gives the first-person account of the title character, Meely, a resourceful and self-sufficient young man despite his young age of fifteen and despite his tenuous circumstances. Meely lives essentially in poverty, usually alone in an “ugly and fallin’ apart” house, “way down on the lonesome end of Catahoula Bayou” (3). His mother has died eight years earlier, and his father, who ekes out a living hunting ‘gators, has seemingly never gotten over his wife’s death. While Logan LaBauve (Meely’s father) loves his son and has good intentions, he is in the habit of either disappearing for days in the swamps or spending his time in a local saloon. He is usually in some type of trouble with the law. Although Meely generally expresses a pragmatic acceptance of his life and underplays the difficulties he faces, Wells reveals his protagonist’s desire for a secure familial environment.

Meely’s story involves both exciting adventures, such as witnessing his father wrestle a ten-foot ‘gator, but it also includes some of the more typical experiences of coming of age. We read of Meely’s encounters with the school bully, Junior Guidry, and of his first
sexually experienced. Wells also portrays Meely’s friendship with two very different boys: Chickie Naquin, a boy who is poor like Meely and who “don’t always wash and he’s fat” and Joey Hebert, the son of a wealthy plantation owner and sugarcane farmer. Chickie is the friend with whom Meely talks about “heaven,” Chickie’s name for what a girl has “under her drawers” (23). Joey, who has more material privilege than anyone else in town, envies Meely’s life: “He says I’m lucky ‘cause I git to do just what I want. . . . He says I’m lucky I don’t have a momma ‘cause he has a momma and she gits on him everyday for this or that” (6). The climax of Meely’s tale occurs when he finds himself, along with his black friend, Chilly, being threatened by Junior’s uncle, an angry and crooked local law officer. Meely’s father rescues the boys and their escape culminates in a police chase and a car crash. When Logan LaBauve leaves town to avoid jail, Meely opts to stay, as he has a broken leg and wants to tell their side of the story. The novel concludes with Meely’s being cleared at trial and avoiding the orphanage when his teacher “Miz Lirette” takes him in.

Not surprisingly, Meely LaBauve (like Ellen Foster) has been compared with Huckleberry Finn. As a coming-of-age novel that is vividly narrated by a young male protagonist, Wells’ novel indeed shares characteristics with Twain’s classic. In addition to the colorful quality of Meely’s narration, Wells includes exciting “Huck-like” plot elements such as flying alligators and exploding dead cows. Additionally, as is true of Huck, Meely’s naïve morality functions as social critique. Nonetheless, in some significant ways, Meely’s journey is opposite from that undertaken by Huck. Twain’s novel ends with Huck’s “lighting out for the territory” in order to escape being “sivilized.” From beginning to end, Huck seeks freedom from societal imperatives regarding proper behavior for a boy. Meely LaBauve, on the other hand, has such “freedom” at the beginning of the novel: “I live pretty
well by myself and I don’t go to school unless I want to. Daddy, him, he won’t make me. He says I’m pretty near growed and got his hound dog ways and Momma’s brains” (4). In comparison to Twain, Wells directs more attention to the isolation and loneliness that come with the independence Meely enjoys.² Unlike Huck, when Meely moves in with Miss Lirette he finds that he enjoys school and that he “[doesn’t] mind” that Miss Lirette “worries about me a bit” (226).

Given Meely’s desire for familial connection, his journey could be classified as being “anti-heroic” because its goal is affiliation with others rather than achievements that separate him as an individual. As Kristina K. Groover points out, Huck is on a journey like the one described by R.W.B. Lewis in *The American Adam*. Huck’s quest is one that takes him into the wilderness, a movement that represents the rejection of societal restrictions. Mealy starts his quest literally in the wilderness with minimal external pressure to conform; he spends much time in the swamps and woods, and he lives quite a few miles from town. Of course in the American Adam quest, the wilderness is sought because it represents escape and separation from the restraints of family and community. The journey is a lone one, and self-reliance is lauded. Mealy, who has experienced isolation from others without leaving home, desires connections with others. Along with being “anti-heroic,” Meely’s story is also in significant ways an “anti-bildungsroman.” While the quest of the American Adam involves a journey into the wilderness, the quest of the protagonist of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, as it is described by Jerome Buckley, is one that takes him (a “her” is not considered) out of the country or small town and into the city. Although Meely does in the end move to town, the process of determining “the sort of accommodation to the modern world he can honestly make” (Buckley 17) does not require that he leave his rural existence.
According to Buckley’s model, the country represents innocence. Although Meely often demonstrates innocence, his surroundings (physical as well as social) are more appropriately classified as difficult, at times even unforgiving, than as innocuous.

When viewed in this way, Meely’s journey can be aligned with that of Ellen’s. Groover argues that “Gibbons revises the spiritual quest paradigm by suggesting that transcendent experience may be located not only in uninhabited wilderness, but in the midst of family and community” (195). Certainly, Meely overcomes hardships by becoming part of a supportive “family.” Additionally, while in *Huck Finn* “domestic concerns move quickly to the margins of the quest story,” such concerns remain at the center of the plot and the narrative for both Ellen and Meely. While *Ellen Foster* is centered completely in the domestic sphere, and in *Huck Finn* the wilderness is clearly favored, *Meely LaBauve* succeeds at representing transcendence in both realms.

Important similarities exist among the experiences of Huck, Ellen, and Meely, who are each products of “domestic life gone wrong” (Groover 189). As a result of this disadvantage, self-actualization for each of them requires not only separation from their traditional families but also rejection of certain beliefs commonly held by society, even though restraints are defined differently for each of them. For example, all of the three must reject racism in order to achieve maturation. Aside from this significant similarity, an important distinction separates Huck’s journey from that experienced by Ellen and Meely. No middle ground between affiliation and autonomy is made possible for Huck, as there is for Ellen and Meely. For Huck, any version of “sivilization,” which for him is simultaneous with domestication, must be rejected along with destructive societal norms. For Ellen and Meely resistance to restrictive, harmful outside influences does not require complete
isolation from others. In *Ellen Foster* and *Meely LaBauve*, supportive, healthy connections are conveyed as being essential to the maturation, to spiritual quest of the protagonists. One might conclude, then, that as Ellen’s story represents a redefinition of “quest” for females, Meely’s story is a re-envisioning of the male quest. Wells does not fully reject conventional stories and notions of boyhood and masculinity. Ultimately, then, Wells portrays a complex envisioning of male maturation. The fluidity created by a seemingly spontaneous narration allows Wells to present masculinity with ambiguity.

Without question, Wells’ novel demands attention in a study of narrative immediacy. Beginning with the first line, “Daddy’s gone off again to hunt gators,” and continuing throughout the narrative, is a present tense voice. Calling upon the reader to suspend awareness of the author, Wells effectively creates the perception that the narrative is an unfiltered account given by a fifteen-year-old boy growing up on the bayou. Other novels are found to have sections narrated in the present tense to add a dramatic or mimetic quality, or as in *The Color Purple*, to re-create the vernacular of the narrator. As discussed in the previous chapter, Gibbons fluctuates between the present and the past tense in order to blur distinctions between the narrator and the protagonist. In the other novels considered in this study, including *Ellen Foster*, an apparent span of time, even if very short, is shown to have elapsed between the experience and the narration. The sustained use of present tense in Wells’ novel, which provides no indicator of elapsed time, suggests simultaneity of experience and narration. Wells creates the impression that Meely has had no time to reflect on, and therefore no time to edit the narration of, his experiences. Like the other novels considered, Wells utilizes a narrative voice characterized by immediacy to convey the complexities of self-identity. It is significant that the often ambiguous theme of maturation
is the focus of a work with a male narrator-protagonist because a number of critics have claimed that the male Bildungsroman is no longer a viable genre.\textsuperscript{5}

In addition to the use of the present tense, Wells strengthens the effect of mimetic immediacy by focusing the plot on a relatively brief time: the entire action of the novel occurs in just a few weeks. The result of the short time frame is that one finds few instances of summary of elapsed time. Such time compression tends to call attention to the manipulation of the narrative by the narrator or the author. In Meely’s narration, narrating time and experiencing time seem to be coincident, as no gap is perceivable between “utterance” (the time of the narrating) and “statement” (a narrated time).\textsuperscript{6} The inclusion of detailed, seemingly minute plot elements (Meely describes minor actions such as going to the bathroom and brushing his teeth) also helps to slow the narrated time. These details further the sense that the experiences are being shared in their raw state, that Meely is not editing his story. In short, they contribute to the narrative’s spontaneous quality.\textsuperscript{7}

As one finds in many contemporary (and even modern) novels, Wells provides no explanation of the circumstances (the how and why) under which Meely comes to share his story. Perhaps this question is purposely left unanswered, as attempts to clarify these issues would draw attention to the artifice of fiction, or to the fact that Meely and his story are the creation of a writer. Although not clearly indicated, there are suggestions in the text that Meely’s story is presented orally. As one finds in works with “speakerly” narration, the oral quality adds a sense of intimacy and immediacy. Along with the colorful nature of Meely’s language, suggesting orality are the deviations from standard usage present in the text. Although Meely is a self-proclaimed bad speller (“I write good even though I don’t spell right”), the misspellings included are limited to those that re-create speech. For example,
Wells drops the final “g” in words ending in “ing,” as in “huntn’” and “goin’.” If Meely were to write his story, his writing would likely include a number of deviations based on his attempts to spell phonetically, and it would not follow the conventions for indicating spoken language, such as using an apostrophe to indicate a missing letter.8

In addition to evoking a seemingly spontaneous oral narration, Wells’ techniques are closely tied to two major thematic purposes. First, because of the narrative fluidity that results from a close proximity between experience and narration, Wells demonstrates the tension existing for Meely between an external pressure to be self-reliant and unemotional but also, because of his unstable circumstances, a need for the security that comes with supportive relationships. As a maturation story, the novel suggests that ultimate self-awareness and security require that Meely find a balance between autonomy and affiliation, that he not abandon either goal entirely. Meely LaBauve, therefore, represents an extension of the argument made by Joanne S. Frye in her work on women’s fiction. If Frye claims that certain writers succeed in creating protagonists who achieve the dichotomous goals of being both female and autonomous, in his novel Wells creates a protagonist who is both male and vulnerable.9

The second major purpose that Wells achieves through the use of immediate narration is to portray Meely as a naïve hero in order to explore the complexities of certain social and cultural practices.10 Just as Huck’s innocence exposes the injustices of slavery and the hypocrisy of the “shore,” Meely’s broad acceptance of others shows the absurdity of biases based on class, race, and gender. Through Meely, Wells exposes the contrived nature of demarcations often upheld by the dominant culture.
One may assess Meely’s narration as being colorful but fairly uncomplicated, and Wells likely intended such a portrayal. Indeed, the plot of Meely’s tale is clear and fairly simple. Upon close examination of narrative technique, however, one finds greater depth and complexity in the narration than may at first be evident. Two main techniques characterize Meely’s narration: 1. emotional distance coupled with close attention to details, specifically actions 2. qualified statements and innuendo, which provide glimpses into Meely’s private feelings. Both techniques are used to evoke narrative immediacy and both work to relay duality in Meely’s experience (and perhaps even reveal tension within Wells’ own perceptions of male maturation).

Throughout the novel, Wells portrays Meely as a keen observer of detail. As one might expect, Wells’ highly descriptive writing, especially when coupled with a present tense voice, brings to life Meely’s exciting experiences. The reader conjures clear images, feeling that he or she is experiencing the moment with Meely. An excellent example of Meely’s colorful description is Chickie’s jabbing a stick into the carcass of a drowned, bloated cow. Meely explains how the cow “explodes like a hundered mules fartin’ green clover. . . . ‘I’ve never seen such a mess of a human being. He’s half sittin’ up in swamp goo and his face, hair, and shirt are covered with cow blow and white squirmy things” (16).

The above memorable scene warrants close description, but Wells has Meely narrate in detail even particulars that, if not for Meely’s careful attention, would seem insignificant. In describing having breakfast with his father’s girlfriend Velma, for example, Meely notes each action she takes: “Velma goes to the stove and stirs the grits once more, then turns off the fire. She brings the pot to the table and dishes out the grits, some for me and some for her. They’re done just right. She puts the pot back on the stove and brings the coffee...
and puts it down on a towel she’s folded up on the table. She pours for both of us and then sits down” (40-41). Meely’s attention to detail in such moments suggests, without his saying, his desire for the familial connections lacking in his life. Velma, who makes only a brief appearance in the novel, does not serve as a mother figure for Meely, but she does on this morning show kindness and a small degree of nurturing toward him. She not only cooks breakfast for him, she also shows an interest in his life, asking if he gets lonely and inquiring about his mother. Because affection (as well as food) is lacking in his life, Meely has a keen awareness of and appreciation for Velma’s minimal gestures. Meely’s “Huck-like” experiences on the bayou such as hunting and fishing, those that are conventionally “male” and associated with the Romantic practice of elevating nature, are set against comparatively mundane aspects of domestic life. As Wells uses the fluidity of narrative immediacy to deconstruct conventional definitions of both the natural and the domestic realms, he underplays the oppositional relationship between them portrayed in *Huckleberry Finn*.

Wells’ mimetic re-creation of scenes through detailed description works to demonstrate (to show rather than tell) the difficulties in Meely’s life without the need for placing him in the vulnerable position of complaining or showing a large degree of emotion. An additional result of this attention to detail, as it is coupled with Meely’s close proximity to his experiences, is enhanced credibility. Without the passage of time, which tends to blur memory, the authenticity of Meely’s descriptions is likely not questioned. Meely is quite open when sharing the specifics of what happens to him, but he is less straightforward about his emotions and his reactions to experiences. In his essay “The Masculine Mode,” Peter Schwenger offers that such a scenario is not uncommon in writing by male writers. While considering the work of Yukio Mishima and Ernest Hemingway, Schwenger observes that if
the two writers “are reserved in style, they are less reserved in subject matter as they freely incorporate into their works many of the most intimate elements of their life” (105). Schwenger adds that such description can be applied to “many works of the masculine mode,” and one finds that it fits Wells’ novel as well.

The following passage, in which Meely relays the steps he takes one morning to get himself ready for school, illustrates a number of the narrative strategies Wells employs.

I git up early and go down to the bayou and take a swim. I usually swim stedda takin’ baths. . . . The bayou’s dark and cool and if it hasn’t been muddied by rain for several days you can see pretty near six feet down. We’ve got a rickety dock which Daddy built years ago. It ain’t much but it’s good enough to git in and out of the water without gettin’ all muddy.

Back up at the house, I dry myself off with my favorite green-and-blue striped towel—one that come out of the last soap box—and put on my school clothes. I got one pair of blue jeans that’s okay, no holes or rips. And a shirt Daddy brought home that he says he won in a raffle at a saloon. He calls it a golf shirt and I guess it must be ‘cause there’s a tiny man with a golf club sewed on it. The golfer is red, the shirt is white. It don’t fit exactly but it’s all right. (65)

Through descriptions such as this, which of course contribute to an impression of immediacy, the reader observes not only the sparse nature of Meely’s material possessions, but in Meely’s response to his circumstances, Wells conveys the coupling of innocence and resilience that make his protagonist an enduring character. As Meely focuses on his actions, he attempts an objective stance. Wells avoids a melodramatic treatment of Meely’s circumstances. Wells is likely prompted here by a desire to present a respectful—rather than condescending or patronizing—portrayal of Cajun life.

Additionally, in his portrayal of tone, Wells indicates the complexities that characterize male emotion. Recent works on masculinity (literary, cultural, and psychological studies) have considered the varied effects created by cultural expectations that men deny their emotions. Berthold Schoene-Harwood claims that the “unsexing” of
men that critics such as Judith Butler claim is the result of the patriarchal system works not only to empower men but also to “[deprive] them of adequate means to give voice to their intrinsic emotional complexity” (ix). The immediacy of Meely’s narrative situation, which makes for minimized self-consciousness, lessens some of the strain of male emotional expression. As further discussed below, Meely demonstrates some trepidation in his self-expression as he hints at his emotional state but does not dwell on it. In the introduction of their book-length study on emotion and masculinity, Milette Shamir and Jennifer Travis draw a distinction between emotion and sentiment, the former being perceived as “‘natural’ and ‘authentic,’” and the latter as “crafted, self-conscious, conventionally stylized emotion” (3). In his creation of tone, Wells achieves emotion while avoiding sentiment.12

In comparing Meely’s time in the wilderness with his time at home, one finds intriguing subversions of the expected model for male behavior. An example is found in Meely’s description of a late night alone in the woods “bulleye’in” rabbits. Meely claims that he has no fear being in the woods, even in the graveyard, at night. Meely’s ease in this scene cannot be simply attributed to the traditionally masculine trait of bravery, however. Instead, Wells suggests that Meely enjoys the wilderness because he does not feel alone there. Again, Wells avoids extended introspection in Meely’s descriptions; nonetheless, in the selection of details, he suggests to the reader clues to Meely’s emotions. Regarding the graveyard, Meely claims that seeing a ghost would not scare him “‘cause maybe it means I could see Momma, too” (33). Meely also alludes to finding company in the stars, saying, “I find it comfortin’ that the sky is so crowded with stars” (33). Further complicating conventional gender expectations is Meely’s associating the woods with spending time with his dad: “Daddy’s taught me all about the night woods. Used to, we’d hunt coons a lot
together but we don’t much lately” (32). Thus, Meely’s time in the woods is associated more with a longing for his mother and his father than a desire to escape an oppressive society.

Meely’s descriptions of his time in the wilderness are often vivid, at times poetic, and in contrast, his descriptions of his time spent at home tend to be straightforward, even bland renderings of mundane actions. Furthermore, Wells clearly celebrates the natural setting of the novel. At first consideration, one might conclude that these factors suggest an advocation of the separation from domestic, civilized life. When close attention is paid to the strategies of narration, however, one discovers that Wells suggests that what is troubling for Meely about home is not that it is confining but that it represents isolation. Wells uses Meely’s detached descriptions of his times at home, particularly the quiet moments at night in the empty house, to convey his loneliness.

After the above-mentioned scene in the graveyard, Meely returns to find that his father has come back from his most recent absence with Velma, a woman whom Meely has never met. After a brief conversation with Meely, Logan and Velma disappear into the bedroom. Meely describes in detail his actions as he readies himself for bed: “I wash my hands and face at the sink. I go to the bathroom and pee and then go to my little room and shut the door. I don’t bother takin’ off my clothes. I flop on the bed and listen to Daddy and Velma carryin’ on in the bedroom” (36). As Meely wonders “if Daddy’s gonna git to heaven tonight” (36), Wells gives no indication that he is traumatized by the thought of a woman sharing a bed with his father. In the description of Meely’s routine behavior while alone in his room, however, Wells suggests his protagonist’s isolation. Because the present tense verbs suggest that experience and narration are simultaneous, one has the impression
that Meely focuses on his actions as a way of filling the gap of omitted thoughts and emotions, that Meely tells of his outward actions as a means of avoiding telling emotions.

At times, Wells avoids any admission by Meely of his emotional state, but most frequently he employs qualified statements that suggest Meely’s vulnerability, such as are found in the following examples: “I don’t mind girls, though I guess I might be scared of ‘em” (24) and “I wouldn’t mind it, actually, if Daddy bought groceries now and then” (4). Often, Wells chooses to have Meely underplay the gravity of what happens to him. Meely usually fails to attach to events and emotions the same degree of significance that the reader likely does. A good example of his “under-reaction” is his description of his father fighting the giant ’gator: “I’m countin’ slow to a hunderd. I figger if I git to a hunderd, he won’t be comin’ up, least not for a few days” (123). In his measured explanation, there is a suggestion of Meely’s sense of calm, even his humor, given the circumstances of his father’s potential fate. Even in the midst of the terrifying moment, Meely shows an attitude that would seem flip if there was not other evidence of Meely’s love for his father.

Several reasons for Meely’s almost stoic attitude can be cited. First, Meely is accustomed to difficulty in his life, so he places less significance on certain experiences than he might if he were more privileged. Likewise, Meely is shown to be pragmatic and accepting of the realities of his situation: “I’d complain to Daddy if I thought it would do any good” (31). Second, he has been conditioned to avoid showing any worry or sadness that he does feel. Third, because Meely is seemingly in the midst of the circumstances that he describes, he does not have the distanced, broad perspective needed to appreciate the extent of the harshness of his surroundings. Ultimately, Wells utilizes Meely’s matter-of-fact or understated tone, to show the duality of his character. Through the use of this
narrative technique, Wells imparts to Meely a degree of independence and strength that the reader would deem “realistic” for a character in his situation while still revealing his undeniable desire for a closeness with someone else.

As mentioned above, exemplary of Meely’s understated tone is Wells’ frequent practice of having Meely qualify statements of potential vulnerability. For example, Meely at one point says, “I’m thinkin’ ‘bout goin’ to school again tomorrow. I guess sometimes I don’t mind the company” (36). In having Meely underplay his admission of loneliness with phrases like “don’t mind” and “I guess,” Wells exposes Meely’s desire for affiliation while also portraying his need to appear independent. The lack of certainty conveyed in these statements furthers the impression of a minimal amount of elapsed time.13 Significantly, Meely’s frequent use of qualifiers can be related to conventional expectations of both masculinity and femininity. The tone suggests Meely’s avoidance of emotion and vulnerability, a stance traditionally associated with masculinity. On the other hand, straightforwardness in style is associated with a masculine mode of expression so that the ambiguity suggested in Meely’s tone may be classified as feminine.

Thus, Meely’s understated tone cannot be easily or simply classified as avoidance. Furthermore, certain aspects of Meely’s life are genuinely enjoyable, and they also prove influential in the formation of his admirable characteristics. Wells is undoubtedly interested in portraying the benefits of Meely’s bayou experience, as well as in conveying the beauty, awe, and mystery of the landscape. Meely’s meager circumstances, which account for his need of food, prompt his harmonious relationship with this wilderness. Wells’ desire to be respectful in his portrayal of the Cajun culture likely accounts for the tone of Meely’s narration (which conveys his strength and resilience) and the complexity of his
characterization. Wells does not want readers to feel superiority, pitying, or condescending toward Meely’s class standing.

Meely’s seeming matter-of-fact attitude shows the influence of his father because Logan LaBauve certainly demonstrates understated, at times inappropriate, reactions to his circumstances. This aspect of Logan’s character is apparent in the way he decides he has “given up” on various necessities and responsibilities. As Meely explains, “Daddy won’t fix [our house]. He says he’s give up on houses and when this one falls down he won’t have another. He’ll go live in the woods. He don’t say what I’m s’posed to do” (3). Logan claims he is through with beds when Velma accidentally burns his mattress (37). Logan’s “giving up” on things is undoubtedly a means of avoidance, a way to avoid dealing with the death of his wife and dealing with responsibilities, including taking care of Meely. At the same time, taking this stance allows Logan to claim dignity in the midst of hardship: his circumstances are the result of a conscious choice to simplify, to lead an unfettered life. Meely projects similar autonomy by underplaying the difficulty of conditions and showing a refusal to dwell on hardships or to be defeated by them.

Through the immediacy of Meely’s voice, Wells portrays the complex nature of the father-son relationship. Meely does not express anger or resentment, but he also does not demonstrate ignorance of his father’s shortcomings. While Logan’s abandonment of his responsibility for Meely’s well being is troubling, he is not presented simply as a bad father. Through Meely’s candid but accepting attitude toward his father, Wells portrays Logan as caring for Meely, but as being inhibited by grief for his wife. Although in many ways an absent, disengaged parent, Logan LaBauve has some redeeming qualities and some valuable lessons to teach his son. Many of the qualities that the reader finds admirable or charming

70
in Meely are shown to be present in his father as well: much of his morality, his resourcefulness, and his self-protective instincts. While Meely’s father expects him to fend for himself, he also influences his son’s sensitivity and loyalty to others. Logan, who has such difficulty in nurturing Meely, influences his son’s kind treatment of Chickie, the boy whom others ostracize. Meely explains, “Daddy always says the measure of a big dog ain’t that he can bite the little ones” (241).

Meely’s practical sense of morality comes in large part from lessons his dad teaches. Unfortunately Logan’s rejection of social mores interferes with his ability to provide for and to protect his son. However, his self-directing behavior accounts for Meely’s own rejection of the societal norms that repress others. While Logan disobeys society’s laws, he is by no means amoral. He passes on to Meely credos such as “the woods and what’s in ‘em are free to a hungry man” (7). Such statements serve as justification for breaking hunting laws, but more importantly, they are reasonable given the LaBauves’ economic reality. While Logan refuses to follow certain hunting laws, he does have a respect for the natural world as seen in his rejection of the practice of cutting and selling cypress roots (29). This fact demonstrates that Meely’s father does not reject expectations simply for the sake of rebellion. On the other hand, the novel clearly indicates that for successful self-actualization to occur, Meely must not only physically separate from his father, but must also reject some of his father’s disengagement from others.

Because of the gap between Meely’s experiences and their narration, he displays naïveté as a narrator, and the result is a “a disparity of understanding” between the reader and Meely (Scholes and Kellogg 240). Scholes and Kellogg argue that “because we are not involved in the action represented, we always enjoy a certain superiority over the characters
who are. Simple irony in narrative is often just the exploitation of such irony” (241). In his
evocation of narrative immediacy and particularly his success at underplaying his authorial
presence, Wells creates a narrative situation that undercuts the typical reaction of reader
superiority. Certainly the reader enjoys the benefit of having greater knowledge and
understanding than Meely. One chuckles at Meely’s moments of comic misunderstanding
such as when he thinks he has killed Cassie after she reaches sexual climax (58) and when
he hears that “they’ve thrown that book at [daddy]” and decides that it must be “a pretty big
book—prob’ly the size of the Bible. New and Old Testament” (154). Indeed, there are
moments of irony like these created for comic effect.

Meely’s lack of understanding is less humorous, however, at times when another
character attempts to take advantage of his naiveté. An example of such a situation occurs
when Meely is in jail, and Sergeant Picou threatens to give a key to his cell to the “big fat
queer in the men’s cell just up the hall” (157). Meely admits to the reader, although not to
the sergeant, that he does not understand the exact nature of the danger suggested in the
threat. Meely is perceptive enough, however, to realize “I prob’ly wouldn’t be in favor of
it” (157). This scene in the novel is noteworthy because, while the reader understands the
situation more fully than Meely does, one witnesses his ability to hold his own with the
sergeant in spite of his lack of understanding. After all, the reason that Sergeant Picou
threatens Meely is that in defending his father he refuses to be intimidated, or at least to
show any intimidation. The reader feels sympathy, but not pity, for Meely.

In the instances in which Meely demonstrates innocence regarding restrictive social
values, the feelings of reader superiority are especially undermined. Meely’s naiveté leads
him to have a genuine acceptance of others, a tolerance greater than demonstrated by most
adults. A close look at Twain’s use of irony and satire in *Huckleberry Finn* is helpful in understanding Wells’ particular achievement; indeed, *Huckleberry Finn* can be seen as a forerunner of the particular sub-genre that encompasses all of the of the novels considered in this study. As R. J. Fertel observes, “the prevailing assumption [is] that *Huckleberry Finn* is an improvised creation” (158). Indeed, as Twain depicts both the dialect and the naïve but often insightful perceptions of his protagonist, he creates an impression of close proximity between narration and experience. Fertel further argues, however, that running counter to Twain’s attempts at spontaneity are indicators of artifice, that “behind the claim of greater naturalness and truth Twain stands grinning” (163). Citing the notice and the explanatory note that open the novel as well Huck’s reference to Twain as the author of *Tom Sawyer*, Fertel points to how Twain’s deliberate attempts to suggest immediacy reveal his presence as the author, and therefore, remind one of the deliberateness of the making of the work. The doubleness of voice (Huck’s and Twain’s) adds to the depth and complexity of the novel but also tends to lessen the illusion of immediacy.

Twain’s purposeful attempts to evoke spontaneity tend to encourage in the reader the sense of superiority that Scholes and Kellogg discuss. Because Twain is so deliberate in his portrayal of Huck’s rejection of society, he can be seen directing the reader’s response to his protagonist: “Twain draws the reader’s attention to the negative underside of [Huck’s] best characteristics” (Fertel 170). Fertel demonstrates how the undercurrent of authorial presence directs satire at Huck at the same time his naiveté satirizes others. Arguing that Twain’s portrayal of the Widow Douglas is “positive and sympathetic,” for example, Fertel observes how Huck, while decrying hypocrisy, is himself hypocritical in his naïve, injudicious assessments of the widow. More generally, the reader’s discomfort with Huck’s
often-irresponsible treatment of Jim is heightened because it is in opposition to his own rejection of the self-serving actions in others.

The particular tensions that Fertel cites are easily overlooked because Twain’s presence in the novel is subtly established, and the overriding impression is one of narrative spontaneity. Wells’ manipulations of Meely’s narration are even more inconspicuous. In Huck’s rejections of society, Twain’s voice is suggested. Meely’s more moderate position conveyed through the understated quality of the narration (his minimal interpretative or editorializing statements) lessens the discernable position of the author.

Exemplary of Wells’ achieving a satiric effect without implicating Meely as an object of satire is Meely’s conversation with Joey’s father, Mr. Hebert. Mr. Hebert offers Meely a ride to school, a considerate gesture that the reader learns is a pretense for Mr. Hebert’s desire to discourage the friendship between Meely and his son. Meely candidly and naively asks Mr. Hebert socially inappropriate questions such as, “Is it actually true that you got all the money in the world?” (74). As he does throughout the narrative, Wells evokes immediacy through present tense verbs and dialogue, having Meely describe the experience with minimal interpretative commentary. As a result, Meely’s openness is shown in contrast to Mr. Hebert’s condescension and self-importance, but the negative portrayal of Mr. Hebert is achieved without Meely’s consciously judging him. The less than flattering comments that Meely does make are repetitions of what he has heard from others. For example, in response to Mr. Hebert’s claim that he works hard for his money, Meely explains, “Joey says you don’t do no real work no more” (75). Meely says a number of things that would be considered improper, but he does so with respect and a lack of malice. Meely’s only observable negative reaction to Mr. Hebert occurs when he tells Meely he
would prefer that he stay away from Joey. Even at this point, Meely merely thinks to himself, “Maybe he is mean after all” (72 emphasis added). Understanding the weightiness of Meely’s daily challenges, the reader judges Mr. Hebert’s complaints about taxes and yellowing sugar cane to be narcissistic. Furthermore, Mr. Hebert’s expression of concern over Meely’s swimming in the bayou demonstrates his ignorance of the realities of Meely’s existence. When Mr. Hebert tells him he could get polio from the bayou, Meely shows ignorance of the disease. However, it is Mr. Hebert who looks the more foolish, as Meely responds pragmatically, “if I didn’t swim in that bayou I wouldn’t swim nowhere” (71). The typical reader reaction to a naïve first-person narrator is condescension. However, in this case, Meely’s innocence is coupled with self-deprecation and good-humor, and the reader judges Mr. Hebert’s ignorance more harshly than Meely’s.

Although ambiguity can be cited in Huck’s morality, the overriding impression is that in his naiveté he functions as a social satirist. Meely’s innocence, too, serves to expose the absurdity of dominant stereotypes as well as to show the complexities of dealing with them. Of course, Meely, as has already been shown, does not fit neatly into either the traditionally defined mode of behavior for male or female development, and, in fact, his role as a character and a narrator works against gender stereotypes.

Along with Huckleberry Finn, Richard Wright’s Black Boy, in which one finds a opposing use of the naïve hero, proves useful in further clarifying Wells’ portrayal of Meely as it relates to cultural commentary. John O. Hodges observes that although Black Boy is clearly a work relayed in the voice of a reflective adult, Wright makes use of a “naïve” hero in order to “call into question those injustices which blacks and whites, because of habit and custom, dismiss all [too] perfunctorily” (421). Hodges explains that because the young
Richard “is ignorant of Jim Crow, [he] is free of the bigotry and prejudice that hinder blacks and whites” and in his innocence, “exhibits a higher moral sense and a greater sensitivity than do the more mature individuals about him” (421). Certainly one finds a similar effect in Twain’s and Wells’ novels, as the narrators’ lack of knowledge prompts admirable morality. When Huck makes the choice not to turn Jim over as a runaway slave, he undoubtedly displays greater principles than the majority of adults. Both Twain and Wright, however, utilize narrative techniques that divert attention from their protagonists’ authority. As already discussed, Huck’s innocence is problematic because, while it saves Jim, it also leads Huck at times to be careless in his treatment of Jim. In these instances of ambivalent treatment of Huck’s naiveté, Twain is seen directing the satiric effect. In Black Boy, the young Richard’s naiveté is certainly not the controlling force of social critique. As Hodges concludes that the use of the naïve hero is valuable, he points to how it is used ultimately to convey the agenda of the author: “Since the protagonist speaks for the author, we are actually determining the author’s present attitude toward the past” (420). Furthermore, the adult narrator directs not only the portrayal of Richard’s story but also the message that is relayed regarding the sins of Southern white society. The authority of the adult narrator, who is shown to be superior in knowledge and understanding, takes precedence over that of the young, naïve version of the self.

In autobiographical works and retrospectively narrated fictional accounts, one experiences the dual presence of the adult narrator and the younger self, and as Twain’s novel illustrates, in works with a young narrator, the influence of the author can make for a similar doubling of voice. In his pervasive emphasis on immediacy, Wells, more so than most writers, seems to present a story exclusively from the perspective of a young
protagonist (instead of from that of a narrator). While Wright relays social commentary through the clarity and maturity of the adult perspective, Wells achieves it through innocence of a protagonist. Meely’s naiveté allows him to be accepting of others, and his lack of cynicism exposes the arbitrary nature of societal divisions. Wells’ choice to convey a moderate tone, however, aids him in avoiding an idealization of Meely’s perceptiveness.

Living in the pre-desegregation South, Meely’s environment is one in which strict codes regarding racial boundaries are maintained by the dominant culture. At the point in which he shares his story, Meely, as a child of parents who do not perpetuate racist attitudes, seems relatively unaffected by society’s rules. Meely’s naïve notions about his relationship with a black girl, Cassie, work to expose the ludicrousness of racial stereotyping, as well as to remind one of the very real restrictions it inflicts. Early in the novel, Meely asks Cassie if she wants to go fishing, not understanding the potential consequences they could face if seen together (28). Cassie laughs at Meely and says “You don’t know nothin’, do you Meely LaBauve?” Because Cassie “don’t say it bad,” Meely flirts with her a little, saying “maybe I know a coupla things” and goes on his way. Wells again highlights the lack of distance between the narration and the action of the plot when Meely does not reflect on or analyze the conversation with Cassie. Because Meely expresses a lack of racial bias in the seeming privacy of the narration as well as in his comparatively public interaction with Cassie, Wells portrays him as being genuine in his acceptance of Cassie. Meely’s earnestness exposes the artifice of segregating boundaries. In a later meeting when Cassie asks his opinion about desegregation of their schools, Meely responds, “It don’t matter to me as long as I don’t have to figger algebra” (53). Such a statement shows Meely’s youthful narcissism perhaps, but his lack of concern over the broader implications of desegregation
again indicates a genuine attitude of acceptance and reveals how refreshingly unaffected he is by the dominant culture’s racist attitudes.

Although Meely most often seems untouched by the dominant culture’s views of race, on a few occasions he indicates an awareness of racial stereotyping and expresses a rejection of it. Because these suggestions of resistance are brief, Wells maintains an impression of immediacy and avoids observable authorial interjection. An example occurs when Meely passes Mandalay Plantation on his way fishing and muses, “The coloreds do all the real work there is to be done in sugar, far as I can tell” (25). This statement shows Meely’s perceptiveness, implying his awareness of the exploitation of his black neighbors. This single comment is all that Meely says on the matter, and his next statement is “I have a cane pole and a can of worms” (25). When testifying at his trial about Junior’s calling him a “sabine,” Meely is hesitant to repeat the word “nigger,” referring to it as “that other ignorant word” (191). Here, Wells shows Meely to be angered by the derogatory name not because it connects him to the black community but because he understands the “ignorant, mean” intentions behind its use. Again, these instances of social commentary are merely hints, and as such the narrative focus remains directed at Meely’s spontaneous, immediate perspective.

Meely’s lack of prejudice is prompted not only by his naiveté, but also by the sense of commonality he feels toward Cassie and Chilly. Because of his depressed economic circumstances and because of his Cajun and Native American heritages, Meely exists on the margins of the dominant culture. With Cassie he has a connection because they have both lost a parent, and they played together as babies when their mothers were friends. When Cassie and Meely are comparing their schools, she says, “I didn’t figger white folks would be studyin’ ’bout colored ones” (54). Meely responds by pointing out that his white school
fails to teach about his ancestors, the Humas Indians, as well. Meely is not a stranger to unfair judgments and biases as evidenced by Junior calling him “trash” and “sabine.” Of course, the reader realizes that although Meely has similar experiences to Cassie’s and Chilly’s, as a white person, his situation is not equal to theirs. The reader tends not to judge Meely harshly, however, not only because of his innocence, but also because his seeming lack of malice or unfair negative judgments of others.

Wells’ portrayal of the theme of race relations is characterized by some ambiguity. First, Meely’s understated attitude toward racial attitudes, while it serves to expose the arbitrary nature of racial divisions, may have the additional result of undervaluing the seriousness of the issue. Second, the novel’s ending, which indicates the beginning of a relationship between Meely and a white girl, may signify an upholding of the dominant ideology. However, as one finds repeatedly in novels of this type, the fluidity of the narrative form works to maintain uncertainty regarding Wells’ and Meely’s attitudes. Meely reluctantly agrees with Cassie when she says, “we couldn’t be steady,” concluding, “there’s a lot the world still don’t understand” (228). Suggested in this minimally interpretative sentiment, of course, is the notion that others have a problem with interracial relationships, not Meely, and that he refuses to internalize the dominant ideology even if he sometimes follows society’s rules. Further adding to the ambivalence of the significance of the outcome of Cassie and Meely’s relationship is the fact Cassie is motivated not only by social pressure but also by the fact that she has loyalty to her boyfriend, Chilly. Ultimately, the minimal degree of an overt focus on race can be attributed both to an upholding of dominant values and an undermining of them.
Issues related to race, class, and gender are intricate ones, and finite conclusions about them often seem inadequate. In conveying Meely’s innocent perspective, along with maintaining an impression of spontaneity in the narration, Wells portrays a protagonist in the process of dealing with complex social and cultural realities. Therefore, Wells’ narrative strategies reflect the ambiguous relationship between individual identity and social context. Moreover, Wells successfully utilizes immediate narration in re-envisioning self-representational writing, and more specifically the Bildungsroman, as he succeeds at offering to Meely the benefits of domestic life without his having to sacrifice connection to the natural world.

Notes

1 Because of their low economic status, Ellen and Meely do not fit the profile of a traditional Bildungsroman hero. See Pin-chia Feng for an explanation of how the English Bildungsroman “adds an overt class ideology to the androcentric basis in the German tradition” (4). Jerome Buckley’s often-cited outline for the typical Bildungsroman is representative of this focus on class, as in it the protagonist’s quest is said to center on preparation for a career. Buckley’s model reveals an emphasis on middle or upper-middle class protagonists, figures who are in a position, because of the class (as well as gender and race) to travel and further their education and careers.

2 As critics such as Fertel observe, one finds ambiguity in Twain’s treatment of Huck’s rejection of society, so the result is not complete authorial advocacy of isolation. Certainly, the reader feels discomfort when Huck’s freedom endangers others, specifically Jim.

3 As is true in Ellen Foster, family is redefined in Wells’ novel, and alternative families prove more reliable than birth relatives.

4 Compared to Ellen, who presents herself to the foster mother and asks to be taken in, even offering up all the money she has saved as an incentive, Meely is passive in the process of finding a home after his father is gone. This fact may indicate lingering discomfort on Wells’ part regarding the subversion of the conventional heroic quest.

5 See the Introduction for a brief discussion of differing views regarding the viability of the Bildungsroman genre in contemporary literature.

6 See Paul Ricoeur’s essay, “The Time of Narrating and Narrated Time.” In chapter two of Story and Discourse, Seymour Chatman also discusses the varying possibilities for
proximity between time of the narrating and narrated time but uses the terms “discourse
time” and “story time” (67-78). What we find most often in Meely are examples of what
Chatman refers to as “scene,” in which discourse time is equal to story time.

7 Gullestad points to the different cultural perceptions regarding written versus oral
expression. She observes, “Writing is considered somehow artificial or fabricated. . ., whereas speech is considered to be closer to reality, less constructed, and more spontaneous” (10-11).

8 For example, in Celie’s and Ivy’s letters, one finds many deviations from standard usage in
the written text.

9 As cited in the Introduction of this work, Paul John Eakin claims that autonomy and
affiliation are both aspects of self-identity for males as well as females. Additionally, in his
psychological studies, William Pollack describes repeatedly observing boys’ feelings of
isolation and longing for connections, although they are conditioned to hide them.

10 The novel is by no means highly political, but in portraying the story of a poor boy
growing up in the pre-desegregated South, it seems unavoidable that Wells interrogate
certain cultural practices.

11 Narrative descriptions such as this one, in which Meely bathes in the bayou rather than
indoors, demonstrate a literal coupling of the domestic and natural realms.

12 Citing Raymond Williams’ *Marxism and Literature*, Shamir and Travis point to an
intriguing potential connection between immediacy and emotion. They claim that Williams
perceives emotion as “[occupying] a temporal present, an emergent or preemergent state
before the procedure of classifying, defining, and fixing as cultural products . . . sets in” (7).
Thus, they observe in Williams’ work connections between emotion and the possibility of
social change.

13 Meely’s qualified statements also add to the speakerly quality of the narration, as they
imitate the cadence of the speech of people in the region.

14 Fertel discusses how Twain’s notice, in which he rejects the presence of a moral in the
novel, promises a work that is “free of rhetoric and artifice” (158). This notice, which
suggests spontaneity, stands in contrast with the explanatory note, in which Twain explains
that the variations of dialect represented in the novel “have not been done in a hap-hazard
fashion.”

15 Fertel’s observations are not relayed as failures on Twain’s part. Instead Fertel argues
greater tension within the novel than is often perceived, more specifically, that Twain
displays an ambivalence regarding the novel’s Romantic themes.
The extent of the privacy of Meely’s narration is unclear because Wells does not establish the circumstances under which Meely tells his story. However, it is clear that while Meely tends to be quite candid in his interactions with others, he is even more forthcoming in the narrative because he shares thoughts with the reader that he does not with others.
Chapter Three:

“Finding ‘I’ within ‘Us’: Personal and Representative Voices in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*”

Both Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Lee Smith’s *Fair and Tender Ladies*, the focus of the next chapter, are characterized by an infrequently used narrative technique: immediate self-narration of nearly an entire life.¹ Walker and Smith both utilize the epistolary form, a form that provides the best, if not the only, means for convincingly achieving this narrative feat of sustained immediacy. By implementing the letter format, Walker and Smith maintain the impression that the narrator writes her story progressively over time. The epistolary structure does not inherently involve a close proximity between narration and events, but the form is certainly conducive to the creation of immediacy. When writing letters, people generally describe events, thoughts, and emotions that are recent in their experience. Anne Bower observes, “More than other narrative forms, letters... emphasize how written responses are enacted in pieces, with revisions, discontinuously” (2).

Walker and Smith establish narrative immediacy with many of the same results as those achieved by Gibbons and Wells.² All of these writers attempt to portray an authentic-seeming voice for their protagonists.³ Furthermore, these novelists create and maintain immediacy in the narration of their works, and doing so allows for fluidity in the narrators’ self-expression. Rejecting the notion that self-definition is based upon finite, unilateral conclusions, these writers portray duality and ambiguity in the achievement of self-identity. Finally, immediacy affords the novelists the literary freedom to uphold and reinvent genres such as autobiography and the *Bildungsroman*. 
The achievement of openness in form and narration is a particularly pressing concern for Alice Walker, the only author considered who portrays a triply oppressed narrator-protagonist. In creating Celie, a figure oppressed because of her class, gender, and race, Walker is no doubt concerned with avoiding stereotypical, essentialist representation. In her comparative study of Walker’s novel and its nineteenth-century precursor, Iola Leroy, Deborah E. McDowell cites Walker as one of several contemporary black woman novelists who have succeeded at “[liberating] their own characters from the burden of being exemplary standard-bearers in an enterprise to uplift their race” (287). As a result of this paradigm shift, McDowell argues, Walker and her contemporaries achieve “not only greater complexity and possibility for their heroines, but also greater complexity and artistic possibilities for themselves as writers” (287). Much of the intricacy and honesty that characterizes Walker’s portrayal of Celie can be attributed to the novel’s narrative immediacy, which is created largely through its epistolary form.

Indeed, the structure of The Color Purple, which furthers the impression of spontaneous narration, serves Walker in a number of ways. First, Walker succeeds at the dual purposes of presenting an “authentic” and individualized voice and of creating a work that is representative of a community. In her study of the theme of Bildung in African American works, Gunilla Theander Kester points to the commonly experienced “[vacillation] between writing a personal history and a representational history” (6).

Without question, the novel probes the private life of an individual character. Whether or not Walker succeeds at creating a work that is representative of the black community, however, has certainly been debated. While the accuracy and success of Walker’s attempt may be uncertain, the novel nonetheless does indicate an interest on the writer’s part to
explore cultural phenomena and to enact social commentary. A number of aspects of the novel suggest Walker’s dual goal of writing a personal and a representative story. Walker’s choice to include letters from Nettie, whose experience and voice are markedly different from Celie’s, is perhaps the most obvious indicator that Walker is interested in multiple voices. Walker also re-enacts dialogue between characters so that even though the work is narrated in the first person the perception is that characters other than the narrator speak. Furthermore, the structure of the novel and the techniques of narration, which are characterized by fluidity, work to convey both the personal and the representative qualities of Celie’s voice. As Janet Gurkin Altman observes, the epistolary form is characterized by “subjectivity and multiplicity of point of view” (195). Because of the immediate, mimetic nature of the narration, furthered by Celie’s minimal interpretative commentary, any social critique is made through suggestion rather than overtly enacted by Walker or Celie. Thus, the flexibility of the narration allows for broad interpretative possibilities and, therefore, broad representation.

The letter format, in Walker’s unique manifestation of it, affords Walker the opportunity to speak for a community but to do so while directing focus to a single primary character. Anne Bower concludes that in epistolary works, “the novel’s author still manipulates the letters’ contents and form for particular ideological or entertainment purposes, but the letter form will constrain us to read those manipulations within the dynamic of the female character’s agency, power, and discourse” (12). While some have criticized Walker for her portrayal of Celie’s passivity, one might well argue that Celie serves as a successful representative voice because of her complexity, which is suggested in the dual nature of her character. McDowell claims that Celie represents an honest and
imaginative portrayal because Walker does not feel compelled, as her predecessors did, by reader expectations to create a protagonist who fulfills an unrealistic and restrictive standard of behavior. Understood this way, Walker’s “authentic” portrayal of Celie means that she is not wholly one characteristic: she is not fully complicit or resistant, ignoble or exemplary, self-reliant or dependent.

Thus, Walker’s depiction of Celie hinges upon the practice of valuing and maintaining dualities, an achievement Walker manages largely through the fluid structure of the novel. As Wendy Wall observes, “The form of [Walker’s] text necessarily yokes together unity and disparity. The epistolary style divides as it unifies, it consists of a series of discrete entries that form a whole” (83). More specifically, the letter format allows for the portrayal of agency and independence in a narrator while also highlighting isolation and a consequent desire for affiliation. Altman is often cited for her discussion of “the letter’s power to suggest both presence and absence” (15). Letter writing is an act marked by isolation because it is prompted by distance between sender and receiver. Although the letters represent an attempt at connection or overcoming distance, both the act of writing them and that of reading them are performed in isolation. On the other hand, writing letters provides a means of connection in that the result is a material entity (a letter) that serves as a substitute for the absent sender. Letters exemplify the notion that identity is relational because “the most distinctive thing about the letter form as a literary device may be that no matter what else it does, it always attempts to elicit or offer a response” (Bower 5).

The epistolary structure, with its reliance on both absence and presence, suits well Walker’s portrayal of female self-actualization, a process that involves finding and asserting an independent voice while maintaining connections. Over the course of the novel, Celie
progresses from having a devastatingly lacking sense of self-value as she survives by being complacent in the abuse and oppression that permeate her existence to a strong sense of self and a rejection of patriarchal control. These steps toward autonomy do not negate the need of community; indeed the opposite is true because Celie’s relationships with women are crucial to her developing individuality. While Celie initially seeks affiliation out of a sense of dependence and desperation, she comes to thrive in supportive relationships that involve mutual respect and that foster self-identity. The epistolary form allows for autonomous self-expression by providing a forum for even the most marginalized voice. According to Anne Bower, “Marginalized characters in epistolary novels. . . through their letter writing take control of language in a particularly direct, personally accessible form of communication” (6-7). Because epistolary writing is a form that always seeks a response, it is a befitting forum given Celie’s need to overcome isolation and alienation, as well as her need for agency.

In addition to conveying a sense of duality appropriate to Celie’s experience, the letter format is also conducive to the creation of a narration characterized by immediacy, intimacy, and candor. By establishing that Celie’s letters are written shortly after the described experiences, Walker shows Celie’s development as being propelled by the act of “writing through” her experiences and reactions. Thus, narrative immediacy allows Walker to mimetically recreate the process of Celie’s development and consequently to stay true to the complexities of Celie’s experience and to the “authenticity” of her voice.

Walker creates an impression of immediacy through several techniques, most of which convey the “speakerly” quality that characterizes Celie’s written narration. In portraying Celie’s vernacular, Walker employs present tense verbs, a practice which creates
an impression that what is being narrated is happening in “the now.” Walker’s practice of re-creating dialogue also adds to the sense of immediacy. Furthermore, Celie’s narration contains a minimal amount of interpretation of experiences, as one typically finds in reflectively narrated works.

Walker’s use of dialect in Celie’s letters, while lending immediacy to the narrative, also creates the impression that the reader is privy to Celie’s rather than Walker’s voice. Walker furthers this perception as “[she] provides none of the self-conscious assurances to the reader—apostrophes, contractions, corrections from the “well-spoken” characters—that she knows the standard” (McDowell 288). Throughout the novel, even in the more stifled letters to God, Walker provides Celie with individuality and subjectivity through the use of dialect, an aspect of the narration that represents a rejection of the dominant culture. Valerie Babb argues, “Celie creates a new literacy” (112). Walker’s decision to relay Celie’s and Nettie’s narration in a written form is purposeful, according to Babb: “By mastering and modifying writing, Celie and Nettie change it into an implement that is no longer solely the property of men and whites” (108). Babb further contends that the novel works to overturn the hierarchy that places the written form over orality. The fluidity imparted by narrative immediacy assists Walker in this blending of oral and written expression, and consequently, in portraying Celie’s unique and subversive voice.

The style of Celie’s writing serves as indicator of her eventual sense of self-acceptance. Initially, the perception is that the vernacular characterizing Celie’s narration results from necessity because she is denied formal education. Eventually, however, Celie consciously claims her non-standard language. When Darlene offers to teach Celie standard English, she refuses and continues to write the letters as she chooses, saying, “Look like to
me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind” (194). One sees in Celie’s opinion of language her desire not to be impeded by the rules of standard usage and more significantly by the rules of what is perceived as the language of whites.

The immediacy that Walker evokes conveys both Celie’s vulnerability and her developing power. Celie’s vulnerability is conveyed as Walker presents her as being in the midst of experiences when writing about them and therefore uncertain about why things happen to her or why she feels, acts, and thinks as she does. The spontaneity of the narrative functions in Walker’s creating an impression of strength and agency in Celie because writing letters provides her with a means of independent expression, even when she has no means for such in her life. Anne Bower argues that “letter novels present heroines who gain power over themselves and their circumstances not through another’s intervention nor through luck but through their own power to (re)write” (15). For Celie, who is so strongly oppressed and as a result repressed, gaining this power comes as the result of a long process of development.

Just as Walker presents Celie’s character development as a process, she also portrays Celie’s progressive movement from the passive recording of her experiences with only minimal expressions of her thoughts and emotions to confident assertions of her self-acceptance and her philosophies of life. Walker re-creates the process of Celie’s identity formation by evoking immediacy in the narration: “[Celie’s] writing is... a complex means of restructuring herself, an active process in which she moves toward a self-realization through the mediation of language” (Wall 84). Because Celie’s thoughts are presumably recorded as they occur to her, they change over the course of the novel. Celie’s progression
involves both finding ways to separate herself (physically and ideologically) from those who impede her development and playing an active role in maintaining supportive relationships.

Because affiliation and commonality are necessary components of Celie’s self-actualization, the progression of her development requires that she share her story with a receptive, sympathetic audience. Once Celie finds such a reader, she succeeds at asserting herself outside the letters, openly and publicly resisting her oppressors. Wendy Wall cites Celie’s achievement of public assertion as the point at which her private and public selves merge. Finding that Celie keeps an “other” self in reserve in the majority of her letters, Wall explains that Celie eventually comes to “[take] on the form of her ‘lettered’ text” (91).

Before reaching this point, however, Celie writes out of desperation, one might say as a means of survival, in an overwhelmingly oppressive environment. The letters are seemingly written initially in response to Celie’s stepfather’s injunction that “you better not never tell nobody but God” (11). Walker portrays the fourteen-year-old Celie’s conscious purposes for writing as being an anxious need to understand the horrible things she has endured: “Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (11). In this request, one also finds Celie’s desire to receive a response from God. Celie is likely prompted, too, out a desire to have a voice, but this need is much repressed because of the silencing attempts by her “pa” and later by her husband Albert. Despite this repression, even in the earliest letters, writing serves as a means of self-assertion, if not consciously on Celie’s part. Allowing her the safety of complying with her “pa’s” admonition while also serving as an outlet for documenting and acknowledging her pain, letters provide Celie with a needed place to “preserve a ‘real’ self” (Wall 85). The immediacy that Walker evokes through her chosen narrative techniques allows Celie’s preserved self to maintain vitality.
Celie’s mindful claiming of her emotions and eventually her inner, private self is a long time in coming given the extent of the domination under which she lives. The men in Celie’s life view her as property, not as a person, and as such she is expected to act in full compliance with their demands, and in her outward actions, she does. Celie’s “pa” and later her husband attempt to control her by denying her human presence, much less her subjectivity, basing her worth on her ability to serve them. When Celie’s mother is sick and refuses to have sex with her stepfather, he forces her to “do what [her] mammy wouldn’t” (11). Further commodification of Celie is enacted when she is offered as a replacement for Mr. ______’s dead wife and as substitute for Nettie. Celie is allowed no say in the decision that she will marry Albert, a man who proves to be as abusive and oppressive as her “pa.” In “selling” her to Albert, Alphonso describes his daughter in terms of the services that she can provide: “She ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed and clothe it” (18). Albert agrees to “take” Celie seemingly because his mammy has quit and because he could use the cow that is promised. While Celie is denied any subjectivity in her life, in the first-person accounts of her letters, she is able to assert her presence.

Celie’s sense of human value, not to mention her autonomy, is severely threatened by the hopelessness that pervades her life and that is only in part the result of her gender. A lack of hope permeates because so few options are available to the poor, black members of Celie’s community; the men have a few more possibilities available than the women, but not many.10 Even if the men in Celie’s life had more liberal and compassionate views of women, self-expression would still seem frivolous (for either men or women) in such a difficult, physically demanding agrarian existence, an existence doubly harsh for blacks,
who had to endure racial oppression as well as economic hardship. Celie’s life with Albert is more like that of a slave than a wife, and her physically demanding environment is certainly not conducive to writing, especially not about oneself. Addressing letters to God, as opposed to participating in the overtly self-indulgent act of writing in a diary, offers Celie a more socially acceptable outlet for self-exploration.

Because Celie’s development requires that she become part of a supportive community of women, her sense of self is limited until she begins writing to her sister Nettie, a receptive audience, instead of a silent, seemingly uninterested God. When Celie begins writing to God, however, “[her] world does not include women who can help her” (Bower 65). For much of Celie’s life, men attempt to and succeed at destroying her relationships with other women, an act that is not surprising since forcing isolation is a way on enforcing silence. Celie’s stepfather undoubtedly contributes to her alienation from and then the early loss of her mother. Because of her “pa’s” imposed silence, Celie does not tell her mother who fathered her children, and as a result, Celie is mistreated by her already distant mother. One could certainly argue that Celie’s mother dies as a result of the overwhelming demands placed by her husband. As Celie asserts, “trying to believe his story kilt her” (15). Celie’s husband, Albert, also works as a destructive force upon Celie’s female relationships. He takes Nettie from Celie twice, first by forcing Nettie to leave their home and second by withholding her letters. Because Celie lives alienated from others, “[her] marginalization and extreme need leave only one available confidant—God” (Bower 65). In God, then, Celie seeks a replacement for her lack of female confidantes. Carolyn Williams claims, “‘spelling G-o-d’ is clearly meant to fill the gap left by the absence of the sister, as the first letter to God clearly substitutes for telling the mother” (276).
Along with demonstrating Celie’s desperate need for connection, Celie’s correspondence with God reveals her external rather than internal focus. A young, naïve girl, repressed by her circumstances, Celie has no faith in her own abilities or knowledge nor a sense of her own worth. Therefore, she seeks answers from an external source, more specifically to a version of God created by white society. Eventually, Celie succeeds in finding redemption when she looks inward for a source of salvation and plays an active role in creating the image of God in which she believes. One must note, however, that she reaches this point of individuation only after becoming a part of a female community.

Given the highly oppressive, restrictive circumstances within which Celie writes, the simple act of picking up a pen in the act of self-expression is an autonomous and defiant venture for Celie. As many have convincingly argued, Celie’s development is impeded as long as she writes to God, but close consideration of Celie’s narrative voice and Walker’s narrative techniques uncovers how even Celie’s minimalist early letters provide her with an outlet for autonomous expression. As Wall observes, “Celie’s naiveté and brutal honesty in self-presentation. . . negate the opposite critique of her letters as a series of concealments, erasures or lies” (84). In her letters, Celie is able to acknowledge, to make present and real, that which is otherwise denied: her abuse and mistreatment and her human presence in spite of the odds. In her letters to God, because of their private nature, she has an outlet for revealing that the man she thinks is her father rapes her and is the father of her children. Celie rightfully believes that for her safety she must obey her father and “shut up and get used to” his sexual abuse, but in the letter she admits, “But I don’t never git used to it” (11). While Celie is silent with Alphonso, in her writing she defies his command that she accept what he does to her. Thus, even in her earliest letters, in which she expresses very little
emotion, she does manage to speak out, even if subversively. The power of Celie’s claim, “I don’t never git used to it.” is enhanced by the non-standard usage it conveys. The repetition of the double negative “don’t never” suggests Celie’s horror and disgust, even as she conveys her uncertainty and confusion about her “pa’s” abuse.

Because Celie reveals her secrets only to God, she seemingly follows Alphonso’s admonition. However, Celie does not tell God what happens to her, she writes it. While many critics of the novel overlook this important distinction, Anne Bower observes, “perhaps Celie writes to God as an act of rebellion against her ‘pa’ who gave her permission to ‘tell’ God, but never would imagine she would write to Him” (64). Afterall, Alphonso believes she is “too dumb to keep going to school” (19) and likely believes she will do exactly as she is told. Thus, merely by the act of recording in writing what happens to her, Celie rejects the view that her only worth is found in what she can do for the men in her life.

Indeed, the fact that Celie writes letters to God holds significance because her audience is one to whom someone cannot mail letters. According to Christian theology, although God is not physically present, one can communicate with Him at any time through prayer; letters are not needed. As mentioned earlier, traditionally in epistolary writing the letter is often regarded as a substitute for the absent sender and therefore the material reality of the letter has importance. Even though Celie’s letters to God are not sent or received, their physicality is important in a several ways. First, as Bower reminds us, that which is written has permanence over the spoken word: “Even words spoken to another. . . seem transient. Letters document” (66). The letters are tangible entities that Celie creates and can claim as her own. Second, the letters act as a crucially important vessel, or as Wendy Wall argues, “They become the surrogate body for Celie, an inanimate form that both fends off
pain... and allows her to express the intensity of her emotions” (85). Since Celie has been denied her humanity and worth in such pervasive ways, the tangible quality of the letters, which act as representatives of her, is vitally important. Carolyn Williams observes, “Writing—as opposed to speech—seems safe, seems even the sign of ongoing life” (276). Indeed, because writing results in a tangible product, it provides confirmation of the presence of the writer, and writing signifies the continuation of life because one is immortalized in it. Moreover, the “ongoingness” of one’s existence is portrayed in an especially successful way in writing that is characterized by immediacy. Ultimately, the epistolary form makes it possible for Walker to stress the importance of both process and product in the novel. The material reality of letters draws attention to the creation of a product. Additionally, the letter novel stresses the writing process because the perception is that the letters are written progressively over time.

Although writing to a conventional God eventually becomes unsatisfactory for Celie, in her letters to Him, she does succeed in enacting resistance to patriarchal control. At the time that Celie writes to God, he represents to her an all-powerful figure who holds the means for her eventual salvation and freedom. It is to this prevailing figure that Celie relays incriminating evidence regarding the men in her life (who ironically are themselves associated with God in Celie’s mind). Additionally, Celie shares openly with God her private thoughts, even those that go against traditional Christianity, often without the guilt or fear of judgment that one would expect from someone with her beliefs. Also significant is that while Celie addresses God with the genuine hope of receiving a response from Him (as is evidenced by the extent of her anger and disappointment when he fails to respond), Walker portrays Celie as writing ultimately for herself. Writing to God functions for Celie
as a self-protective guise so that she may achieve self-expression, even if she does not consciously set out to do so. Walker portraits Celie as genuinely seeking God in her letters; however, Walker also conveys spontaneity in Celie’s writing. The sense is that Celie writes her thoughts with minimal self-editing; therefore, this immediacy allows Celie a significant degree of freedom from the restraints of audience.

Of course, the God that Celie believes in for much of her life is a patriarchal figure who is distant, aloof, and silent. Still, she writes things to him that one would share only with a trusted confidante. In her life outside of her letters, Celie must quietly accept mistreatment. However in her writing, directed significantly to an authority more powerful than the men in Celie’s life, she exposes their abuse as well as their rigorous undervaluing of her. As King-Kok Cheung concludes in her comparative study of Walker and Maxine Hong Kingston, “The unspoken or unheard testimonies become powerful indictments on the page” (164). For example, in the very first letter, Celie’s statements about her Pa’s abuse are unemotional but powerful nonetheless: “He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t” (11). Celie then goes on to describe explicitly the first time her “pa” raped her. Through the brevity and stoicism that characterize the early letters, Walker relays Celie’s inability to understand fully what happens to her while still allowing Celie’s words to reveal not only the horror of molestation but also that of being denied human presence.

Another early instance in which Walker utilizes Celie’s understated, minimal narration to reveal her indictments of men is found in the description of Alphonso and Albert’s “business” discussion regarding the marriage of Albert and Celie. Here, the reader perceives Celie’s awareness, even if limited, that she has more worth than what is
acknowledged by these two men. Celie does not make any overt statements in opposition to her treatment in the scene, which to the reader is reminiscent of the slave auction, but she does point out Alphonso’s callousness: “Pa call me. Celie, he say. Like it wasn’t nothing. Mr. _____ want another look at you (20).” Celie’s descriptions of her mistreatment and abuse are characterized largely by detachment, but suggested in her minimally editorializing description “Like it wasn’t nothing” is the notion that Celie understands that she does not deserve to be dehumanized. Although Celie’s attitude is often difficult to determine, Walker certainly indicts Alphonso and Albert in this scene, and the immediacy of the narration allows her to do so while staying true to Celie’s voice. In having Celie express her thoughts with stark honesty, with the minimalism seen in these brief statements, Walker successfully creates the illusion that we as readers of the novel are privy to the raw thoughts of the narrator. It is appropriately “realistic” that a character of Celie’s age in her circumstances would be repressed and would have limited understanding.

Vital to Celie’s progression toward an inward focus is the rejection of the popularly held beliefs that enable patriarchal restriction. Because Celie’s environment and the influence of others are so stifling, she must successfully reject restricting beliefs in order to have a set of values that is truly her own and to claim for herself the subjectivity that has been denied her: “Breaking hold of a dominant tradition is a step toward self-deliverance for artists” (Cheung 169). Even when Celie is not conscious of the ways that she defies oppressive ideas, her writing still succeeds in subversion. As already discussed, the mere act of writing about herself serves as a rejection of her “pa’s” and later her husband’s perception that she is without value. Furthermore, there are a number of ways in which Celie offers in her writing a perception of herself that runs contrary to that of others.
In one of the very early letters, Celie confesses her attraction to women, something perhaps even more of a cultural taboo than being molested by her father. As Walker portrays the development of Celie’s sexual orientation, reenacting Celie’s “writing through” her feelings, her early attitude toward her lesbianism is not surprisingly characterized by ambiguity. In her fifth letter to God, Celie admits, “I don’t even look at mens. That’s the truth. I look at women tho, cause I’m not scared of them” (15). Implied in Celie’s admission are both an undermining of male power and an acknowledgment of it. Celie reveals her attraction to females as she tells of being beaten for winking at a boy in church. In her statement, “that’s the truth,” Celie reinforces her claim of innocence as well as the foolishness and futility of her pa’s punishment. Celie’s explanation that she is attracted to women because they are not threatening, however, has ambiguous connotations. In her reasoning, she reveals her desire to resist male control, but she also concedes that her personal longings are dictated by the power that others hold. In spite of the ambiguity of their impetus, Celie’s lesbian feelings do allow her a degree of freedom from the control of men.

While men exert command over her body, Celie reveals in her letters to God that their control over her inner self is limited. Because Celie is not physically attracted to men, she is not under the strong influence that such attraction can exert. For example, Celie is not particularly affected by the fact that Albert is not in love with her. She is bothered by his affair with Shug only because she loves Shug herself and because Albert’s desire for Shug contributes to his abusive tendencies. She is unable to physically fight the men in her life, but she can refuse them in her mind. Her conclusion “Most times mens look pretty much alike to me” (23) works to disarm a portion of their power.
Linda Abbandonato argues that Walker uses Celie’s lesbianism to “[challenge] patriarchal constructions of female subjectivity” (1106). Abbandonato further points out that because homosexuality “disrupts the terms of the social contract,” that allows women to be exchanged as objects, “feminist theory constructs homosexuality as a powerfully subversive threat to social order” (1110). Walker likely has such an agenda, but, of course, Celie does not. The reader can nonetheless infer that Celie’s lesbianism works as a means of resistance against patriarchal control. Therefore, by evoking narrative immediacy, which leaves open interpretive gaps for the reader, Walker achieves the effect she seeks while still allowing Celie’s voice to dominate.

It is worth noting that Celie makes the conscious decision to share with God her sexual feelings toward women, even though they go against the beliefs of traditional Christianity. One might conclude that Celie is compelled by a desire to confess her sins; however, her first revelations about her lesbianism are presented with the same matter-of-fact tone as are her descriptions of her abuse. Therefore, while Celie does not show defiant pride, she does not seek forgiveness either; at the most she expresses uncertainty because of her sexuality. Walker’s portrayal of Celie’s sexuality furthers the perception that one is reading Celie’s spontaneous thoughts because they are seemingly unedited by guilt or morality.

While one notices a marked change in Celie’s writing when she begins writing to Nettie, Walker also portrays a distinct progression in Celie’s self-expression in her letters to God. The early letters to God are marked by minimalism: her descriptions of experiences are brief and expressions of Celie’s reactions to events are close to absent. As the novel, progresses, however, the letters contain more lengthy descriptions, and more importantly,
they become more inwardly focused. One finds that Celie begins to reveal her private emotions: her confusion, sadness, and anger. In writing down her emotions, she takes the important step of acknowledging that she indeed has feelings rather than claiming emotional numbness. At this point in the novel, Celie continues to have difficulty expressing herself verbally and to display compliance with patriarchal control, so these letters portray Celie in what Wall describes as an “intermediary stage” (91). Again, the continuously available letter format, and the immediacy that Walker evokes within it, allows Celie to document her changing and conflicting emotions.

In addition to the act of writing, Celie’s developing relationships with other women are profoundly influential in her achieving an inward focus. As these relationships progress, eventually God becomes an unsatisfactory confidante in comparison. As already discussed, during Celie’s early years, she does not have the support of a female community; the men in her life destroy any chance of one. From the beginning, however, Celie nonetheless demonstrates an awareness of the importance of female relationships in the struggle against patriarchal control and oppression. Celie sacrifices herself while attempting to protect other women. She does not tell her mother about her “pa’s” abuse for fear that such knowledge will be detrimental to her already weak physical state. Before being separated from Nettie, Celie has the beginnings of a mutually supportive relationship with her. The potential threats of abuse by their “father” and then by Albert, however, mean that the main objective for the two sisters is survival. First, Celie offers herself to her “pa” in Nettie’s place, and later Celie becomes Albert’s wife instead of Nettie. When Nettie resists Albert’s sexual advances, he sends her away. Celie fears that Nettie is dead, and her sister’s presumed fate
confirms her belief that compliance is the best response to male power. Up to this point, Celie has not been exposed to a woman who successfully opposes a man.

Meeting Sophia, a bold woman unlike any that she has known, has a profound effect on Celie. When Sophia first enters Celie’s life, she is at a point at which her actions indicate full compliance with Mr. _____’s abuse. In her letters about Sophia, however, Celie admits her admiration of daughter-in-law’s independence. These letters clearly show the growing distinction between Celie’s outward image and her inward thoughts. In her narrator’s private, written expressions, Walker reveals the ambivalence of Celie’s views of other women. Celie admits her respect for Sophia, but her admiration is hindered by her shame for the complacency that characterizes her own life. Although Celie must overcome the split between her outward persona and inner self in order to gain autonomy in her life, such division demonstrates progress in Celie self-actualization. In her first letter about Sophia, Walker reveals that Celie has inner strength and a desire for subjectivity, even though she is the model of compliance and long suffering in her life.

By confirming Albert’s advice that Harpo should beat Sophia, Celie publicly upholds the view that women need to be controlled. What she shares in the letter, however, is that shame and jealousy are what prompt her to tell Harpo to beat his wife: “I think bout how every time I jump when Mr. _____ call me, she look surprise. And like she pity me” (43). Celie’s feelings of shame indicate awareness on her part that Mr. _____’s treatment of her is wrong, even if she is not yet ready to demand better. Walker reveals that Celie’s complacency is the result of a will to survive, not true acceptance. That Celie’s tremendous guilt lasts until she makes things right with Sophia suggests her early sense of female loyalty.
Although addressed to God, Celie’s letters about Sophia and later those about Shug are centered on her relationships with them much more than on her relationship with God. In her letters, Celie documents and validates her affiliation with women. By re-creating the dialogue shared by the women, Walker keeps the narrative focus on female intimacy. Again, narrative immediacy furthers Walker’s dual purposes. Walker demonstrates the importance of female community not by authorial intervention or overt narrator commentary. By including extensive dialogue, Walker succeeds at valuing the voices of a number of women, while also highlighting Celie’s agency, as she is the one who presumably relays the conversations to God. Furthermore, by re-enacting these specific scenes, Walker portrays the process, specifically the internal conflict and confusion, that Celie undergoes as she finally disengages from God and connects with her inner self.

The conversation in which Celie makes amends with Sophia carries significance beyond marking the beginning of their friendship. It is noteworthy also because in it Walker portrays Celie’s ambiguity about the benevolence of God. Unlike God, Sophia responds to Celie and acknowledges her emotions. Up to this point, Celie’s belief in God has meant the denial of her anger and emotional pain. As Celie explains to Sophia, her faith is what prevents her from expressing anger toward her parents: “Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what” (47). When asked if she really feels nothing, Celie does not deny her anger, but she explains why she tries to ignore it: “Sometime Mr. _____ git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways” (47). By asking Celie about her anger and acknowledging her right to it, Sophia prompts her to look inward and explore her feelings. In her letters, an outlet that is immediately available and private, Celie begins to express her
most private thoughts, including those she does not share even with Sophia. When Sophia
confides in Celie about diminished sexual desire for Harpo, for example, Celie attempts to
give her advice. In a letter, however, Celie admits honestly, “I don’t know nothing about it.
. . . Only time I feel something stirring down there is when I think about Shug” (68). While
Cenie at this point still has a repressed public persona, in her writing she begins to
acknowledge her private one.

Cenie’s relationship with Shug is undoubtedly crucial in her developing sense of self.
As in the letters about Sophia, Walker re-creates the development of the relationship so that
the impression is that Celie candidly shares her feelings for Shug with God but seems to do
so with little conscious thought about her audience. Walker reveals Celie’s progression
from displaced dependence on Shug to the development of her own independence stemming
from the achievement of a mutually satisfying and respectful relationship. In Shug, Celie
finds a confidante who listens and responds, acknowledging her worth. By prompting Celie
to appreciate, to own her body and to feel entitled to erotic pleasure, Shug also encourages
Cenie’s acknowledgment of her inner self.

When sharing her history with Shug, Celie reveals her emotions about the abuse and
alienation that have pervaded her life. As Celie records her developing relationship with
Shug, her writing likewise becomes characterized by descriptions that are more internally
directed and more emotional. Shug responds with kindness when Celie tells her she was
raped by her “pa” at fourteen. In her first letter to God, in which Celie briefly describes the
rape, her focus is on her stepfather’s actions and her reactions are almost completely absent.
In contrast, in response to Shug’s receptiveness to her pain, Celie openly shares what she did
not reveal to God in that first letter: “Seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug
arms. How it hurt and how much I was surprise. How it stung while I finish trimming his
hair. . . . How he don’t ever look at me straight after that” (108-109).

Celie continues to write to God even after she has Shug in her life. Sharing things in
her letters to God that she is not able to admit even to Shug, Celie’s letters are reminiscent of
those that might be written to a female confidante. When Celie is not yet able to express her
desire for Shug, she writes to God about it. Celie describes in detail the time that Shug
encourages her to look at her naked body, teaching her about her “little button.”
Furthermore, she admits only to God her hurt feelings about Shug’s relationship with Albert:
“When I hear them together all I can do is pull the quilt over my head and finger my little
button and titties and cry” (80). As is true in earlier letters about Sophia, Celie’s letters
about Shug are focused more on their bond than on her relationship with God. In fact, some
of Celie’s admissions could be classified as blasphemous. Celie writes, for example, “I
wash [Shug’s] body, it feel like praying” (53).

In her letters to God, Celie documents and therefore validates the words and thoughts
shared between her and Shug. Still, as long as Celie writes to a God who represents
patriarchal control, she continues to be impeded by a concern for his judgments of her: “All
my life I never care what people thought about nothing I did, I say. But deep in my heart I
care about God what he going to think” (175-176). Thus, even though she often writes
unapologetically about her relationship with Shug, Celie expresses confusion regarding her
feelings. Celie writes that Shug’s loving Albert is “the way it spose to be. I know that. But
if that so, why my heart hurt me so?” (75). In the same letter that Celie admits self-doubt,
she also claims pride when Shug sings a song for her: “First time somebody made
something and name it after me” (75). Thus, Walker continues to re-create Celie’s “middle”
stage, in which she experiences a struggle between her personal needs and desires and her loyalty to God.

Celie’s journey toward fully confident self-acceptance and self-assertion in her writing and in her life moves toward completion when she rejects the patriarchal God to whom she has written so many letters. The ultimately independent act of finding a “new” God is brought about because of her relationship with Shug and her reconnection with Nettie. Learning from Nettie that her “pa” is actually her stepfather, she becomes completely disillusioned with God: “Come to find out, he don’t think. Just sit up there glorying in being deaf, I reckon “(176). At this point, Celie recognizes that the God to whom she has been writing fails to be the type of confidante that is now available to her in Shug and Nettie. Although quite troubling to Celie, her disillusionment with God frees her to speak, not just to write, independently: “I blaspheme much as I want to” (175). Finding it a “strain” to do without God, however, Celie begins the process of finding (creating, really) a new version of God. Writing, not only for self-expression and self-examination but also as a means of making connections, remains essential in Celie’s development. And it is through the process of writing that Celie moves from feeling nothing, to struggling to “chase that white man out of [her] head” (179), to eventually having an internalized, individualized view of a God.

Celie’s new spirituality involves both affiliation, or as Shug explains, “feeling. . . part of everything, not separate at all” (178), and affirmation of individuality. Yet again, one finds parallelism between form and theme in the novel. Given the communal aspect of the “new” God that she begins seeking, it is fully appropriate that Celie begin writing to her sister rather than a silent Being. Nettie gives Celie the response she has sought and not
received from God. Signifying the potentially tenuous nature of affiliation, correspondence between Celie and Nettie is disrupted: because of Albert’s intervention, Nettie’s letters are delayed in reaching Celie, and Celie’s letters to Nettie are returned when the ship that she is traveling on sinks. Despite the long delay, finally reading Nettie’s letters provides Celie with needed information and needed sense of connection to her sister. Revising her perception of God is ultimately not an act of dependence, even though it is prompted by the influence of others. As Shug explains, spirituality is an active rather than a passive venture involving seeking God inside of oneself rather than in others. Discovering God, is therefore, an individualized process. Because Celie writes about her experiences, one perceives her desire to correspond. Although their communication is interrupted, Celie’s and Nettie’s letters are presented as a correspondence. On the other hand, Celie writes to her sister with an acute awareness that communication is precarious; therefore, she certainly writes for herself as well as out of a need to overcome feelings of disconnection from Nettie.

Celi’s refusal to address her letters to God marks the point at which she makes the shift from self-assertion in writing to achieving it in her life. In Celie’s letters to Nettie, Walker relays the integration of Celie’s internal and external personas. Her new view of God is an empowering one, one that clarifies for her Albert’s weaknesses: “Next to any little scrub of a bush in my yard, Mr. ______’s evil sort of shrink” (179). With the added admission, “But not altogether,” Walker captures Celie’s developing autonomy as it is in progress.

Walker further relays Celie’s progress by indicating changes in a very specific component of epistolary writing, the closing. In the letters written to God, with the exception of the last one, which is addressed to her newly envisioned God, there is no
closing, a signal of Celie’s lacking sense of agency. Beginning with the letter to Nettie in which she rejects God, Celie begins closing her letters with “Amen.” Here Walker highlights Celie’s movement toward independence because by closing the letters this way, Celie asserts her ability and her entitlement to determine and even create her own spirituality, a spirituality that is available to everyone, including her sister Nettie. In this regard, the closing also reaffirms the theme of community. After leaving Albert, Celie begins adding her name to the closing, an assertion of agency that she has not made before.

In Celie’s parting words to Albert, she claims her subjectivity to him for the first time: “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here” (187). With the powerful proclamation, “I’m here,” Celie asserts her presence to a man who has denied her such for years. Referring to her own voice as “a voice,” Celie indicates she feels a greater power speaking through her. This separation between her voice and her self, however, also demonstrates her continuing difficulty in owning her inner voice, as she has been impeded from doing so for all of her life. In recording the scene in a letter, however, Celie reasserts her display of strength for herself and for Nettie, the addressee of the letter. The immediate nature of Celie’s narration highlights the “ongoingness” of the power that Celie asserts in the moment with Albert. The suggestion is that the act of writing continues to prove vital in Celie’s self-actualization. It is in her next letter that Celie signs her name for the first time an act of self-validation.

Celine’s leaving Albert is, of course, not the end of her journey. Although she has succeeded in self-assertion and has found happiness in her relationship with Shug and in the hope of Nettie’s return, she has not yet reached full self-acceptance and self-contentment. When Celie loses Shug to a young man and then receives word that Nettie is presumed dead,
she again finds herself feeling isolated. Not surprisingly, she turns to her writing as a means of dealing with her sadness. As it did when she was a girl, writing allows Celie to gain a feeling of connection despite alienation, and she continues writing to Nettie, saying, “Maybe, like God, you changed into something that I’ll have to speak to in a different way, but you not dead to me Nettie” (229-230). Unlike in her earlier oppressive circumstances, however, writing also aids in Celie’s ultimate achievement of self-contentment apart from Shug and Nettie: “I be so calm. If [Shug] come, I be happy. If she don’t, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn” (247-248).

Importantly, Walker maintains a sense of narrative immediacy in Celie’s late letters by continuing to re-create scenes mimetically with the use of dialogue and present tense verbs. Even though Celie has gained important insights by the end of the novel, the focus of Celie’s narration continues to be the recording of her experiences, especially her interactions with others, with minimal interpretation. Therefore, Walker maintains a sense of close proximity between narrator and protagonist. Given Walker’s thematic focus on acceptance within a community and on the complexities of “self,” the fact that Celie does not position herself as an authority is appropriate. While autonomy and affiliation seem to be conflicting needs, Walker portrays them as being mutually dependent. The ultimate goal that is achieved in Celie’s letters and eventually in her life is relationships with others that are based on mutual responsiveness and reciprocal appreciation and respect. This type of relationship enhances rather than impedes individuality. The reason that Celie and Albert are able finally to share a friendship is that Albert reaches a point at which he listens and responds to her, appreciating and respecting what she has to offer. In return, Celie comes to have an appreciation for him: “Mr. ______ look at me real thoughtful. . . . And now it do
begin to look like he got a lot of feeling hind his face” (239). Celie and Albert have
discussions about weighty issues such as gender and religion. Nonetheless, Walker has
Celia re-enact the conversations in the letters rather than paraphrase and editorialize about
the significance of their discussions.

The final letter of the novel, with its inclusive epistolary salutation, is a manifestation
of Walker’s dual focus on Celie’s individual voice and on communal experience. As usual,
the “I” of the narration belongs to Celie, but as she often does, Walker has another character,
in this case Harpo, comment on the significance of the family reunion: “White people busy
celebrating they independence from England July 4th, say Harpo, so most black folks don’t
have to work. Us spend the day celebrating each other” (250). Harpo’s words signify the
cohesion that those gathered have gained, but they also serve as a reminder of the threat of
oppression that still exists. Wendy Wall concludes that in Harpo’s expression “the unity that
exists in the closure of the book. . . is a qualified one” (92). There is much celebration of
“us” in the final letter, in which Celie expresses gratitude that her sister and children have
returned. In the closing words of the novel, Celie expresses no grand insights or universal
truths but simply states her contentment in being part of a community: “I don’t think us feel
old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest we ever felt” (251). In
Harpo’s words and Celie’s, Walker maintains a sense of openness up to the end, denying
finality or absolute closure and staying true to an authentic portrayal of Celie and her
community.18

Notes

1 In Ellen Foster and Meely LaBauve, the first two novels considered, the writers evoke
immediacy in the narration but do so while portraying a relatively short span of time.
2 However, a number of factors distinguish the first two novels considered from the second two. First, the circumstances under which the narrator shares his or her story are not established in *Ellen Foster* or *Meely LaBauve*, while they are in *The Color Purple* and *Fair and Tender Ladies*. Furthermore, the narration in the first two novels, while the format is not clearly established, seems to be oral, while the narration in Walker’s and Smith’s novels is clearly in written form (although both novelists evoke orality within the narration).

3 As discussed in the introductory chapter, in works that are reflectively narrated (and in which there is a substantial ideological gap between the “narrating I” and the “experiencing I”) authority tends to be imparted to the narrator more than to the protagonist.

4 While Nettie’s letters play an integral part in the novel, Celie’s letters are the primary focus of this chapter, as she is the protagonist and primary narrator. Furthermore, Celie’s letters, with their raw honesty and vivid vernacular style, provide the better example of narrative immediacy.

5 As Walker has received strong criticism from the black community regarding what is perceived as an inaccurate portrayal of blacks, particularly men, there are those who claim that Celie’s voice should not be read as a representative one. Trudier Harris’ essay is perhaps most powerful and best-known example of this criticism.

6 McDowell argues that while the novel gained a large readership of white women, “The narrative strongly implies that the audience is comprised mainly of Walker’s ‘sisters,’ other black women” (297).

7 Of course, Walker’s focus on dialogue also contributes to a sense of immediacy in the narration.

8 In *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* Linda S. Kauffman points out that “Walker simultaneously reaccentuates the traditional genre and transforms it by fusing it with [the slave narrative]” (189).

9 Bower points out that even in novels such as *The Color Purple* and *Fair and Tender Ladies*, which can be likened to diaries because they are addressed to recipients who cannot respond, “a response, even if only the illusion that a response, is possible” (6).

10 Citing the phenomenon of how black men in response to racism become oppressors of black women, Linda S. Kauffman argues that Walker captures the ambiguities characterizing relationships based on domination. Furthermore, Kauffman observes complexity in Celie’s response to oppression: “Rather than sentimentalizing victimized Womanhood, Walker . . . depicts her collusion in the oppression of others” (198).

11 The same can be said for Celie’s survival instincts. As Kauffman observes, “Walker’s allusions to slave narratives remind us that for those enslaved, merely to survive was a form of resistance” (189).
12 Anne Bower attaches a similar importance to the material reality of Celie’s letters, claiming that “they can function metonymically to mark loss and restoration of creativity, self, and community” (66).

13 While some have claimed that Celie’s practice of omitting the first name of men and referring to them as Mr. _____ indicates her subservience to them, this practice can also be perceived as an indictment. In this practice she denies their subjectivity, as they do to her in life.

14 Indeed, in much of the novel Celie addresses God in the salutation of her letters but then fails to address or engage Him within the letters.

15 Significantly, Celie is introduced to new spiritual possibilities by connecting with women, specifically Shug and Nettie.

16 By using Albert’s words, Celie undermines the power and control he attempts to exert with them.

17 An intriguing manifestation of Celie’s reliance on writing is found in the scene when Shug tells Celie of her affair with the young man. Celie writes rather than speaks her anger and hurt to Shug even though they are in the same room.

18 Wendy Wall finds that because of the “thematic juxtaposition of unity and disunity” in the theme and structure of the novel, “the text resists final closure” (93).
Chapter Four:

Female Artistry and Narrative Immediacy in Lee Smith’s

*Fair and Tender Ladies*

Like *The Color Purple*, Lee Smith’s *Fair and Tender Ladies* is an epistolary novel that provides an intimate first-person account of the life of a female protagonist. As one typically finds in letter novels, in this work Smith evokes narrative immediacy by creating the impression that the protagonist, Ivy Rowe, writes the letters over time, narrating experiences shortly after they occur. Moreover, the reader’s perception is that Ivy writes while in the midst of experiences, certainly while in the midst of interpreting them. Thus, one feels that he or she witnesses the changes that Ivy undergoes seemingly as they occur. Taken together, Ivy’s letters provide an intimate portrayal of her life from age twelve to her seventies (presumably she dies while writing the last letter). Unlike most letter novels, which portray both sides of written correspondence between characters, Smith’s work is made up of letters written by a single character, as none of the responses are included.1

Like many of Smith’s other novels, *Fair and Tender Ladies* is set in the Appalachian region of Virginia, an often-hard environment that can be particularly limiting for females. In spite of her upbringing in “a region renowned for its oral traditions and infamous for its illiteracy” (Robbins 136), the young Ivy dreams of becoming a writer. Discovering she is pregnant at the same time she has the opportunity to go to school in Boston, a teen-aged Ivy gives up her hope to become a professional writer. By the age of thirty-seven, Ivy’s life looks much like her mother’s. She is living in her parents’ house as the wife of a farmer and mother of five. Ivy’s days are filled with hard physical work and demanding domestic responsibilities. While her existence is a traditional one, however, Ivy in significant ways is herself not traditional because she successfully overcomes the self-loss that proves
detrimental to her mother. She does not become a professional writer, but her profound and powerful letters are proof that she is indeed a writer.

More than any of the other protagonists considered thus far, Ivy displays a consciousness about the act of self-narration and about what it means to be a writer; therefore, the tension between being an artist and being a woman is poignantly portrayed in this novel. Through her letter writing, Ivy manages to fulfill both her maternal and artistic desires. Smith’s novel also enacts the broader dichotomy existing between becoming an autonomous adult and being female. This tension is particularly salient in *Fair and Tender Ladies* because Smith portrays nearly all of the stages of Ivy’s life, not just her childhood and adolescence, as is the case in *Ellen Foster* and *Meely LaBauve*. Further, Smith is particularly concerned with Ivy’s continuously conflicting desires to think and act independently and to meet the needs of others. Ivy’s life is characterized by a number of dualities. Being faced with opposing forces does not defeat Ivy or prevent her ultimate self-actualization, however. In fact, through Ivy’s written expression of variable attitudes, Smith portrays in her narrator-protagonist a resistance to being confined by a unilateral ideology or to being defined by others rather than the self. From this perspective, Ivy’s fluid nature is essential to her ability to create an identity. Furthermore, Smith’s narrative strategies, specifically her evocation of vividness and intimacy in Ivy’s voice, are integral in her portrayal of Ivy’s malleability. The form of the novel, which suggests that the narration occurs progressively over a substantial period of time, allows for shifts in Ivy’s expressed ideology.

The question of whether or not Ivy succeeds at becoming an artist has been considered by a number of critics. All of these critics conclude that Ivy achieves a strong
sense of self through the private act of writing letters, but they differ somewhat regarding the degree of success that Smith achieves in overcoming or reconciling the tension between artistic endeavors and the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood. While Elizabeth Pell Broadwell concludes that Ivy ultimately “gains a sense of artistic vision and personal fulfillment” (261), she stops short of claiming that Ivy becomes an artist. Instead, she finds that “while Ivy is the one who wants to be an artist, it is, ironically, [her husband] Oakley who becomes one” (260). Katherine Kearns places Ivy in what she sees as the most advanced phase of Smith’s portrayal of the female artist. Even so, this highest phase includes only the “(partial) reconciliation of the artist’s vocation to the imperatives of family and community life” (176). Citing the fact that Ivy’s choice to be a wife and mother means that she “must give up seeing herself as an artist” (192-193), Kearns argues, “Smith has not yet affected a completely equitable reconciliation between femaleness and art” (192).4 Debbie Wesley offers that in considering Lee Smith’s female protagonists, one must broaden his or her definition of “artist.” Wesley underplays the oppositional nature of the relationship between artistic and maternal desires, claiming that Smith “sees. . . a false dichotomy between female artistry and family” (93). According to Wesley, for Smith’s women characters, their affiliation with a community and their experiences as mothers are what make them artists. Suggesting that the perception that “true” artists express themselves only in a public forum is a patriarchal one, Wesley argues that Smith “wish[es] to validate female creativity that has been devalued by patriarchal culture” (89). Herion-Sarafidis does not ponder the appropriateness of the specific label of artist in her consideration of Ivy. However, she does recognize within Ivy “a tension between. . . her clear-sighted questioning, her passionate and adventurous nature on the one hand, and her compassionate,
nurturing one on the other” (113). Herion-Sarafidis concludes that “though [Ivy’s] life from a contemporary perspective might appear intellectually thwarted, lived wholly outside the public sphere, she ends up, finally, not only with a room of her own, but actually a *house*” (118).

Without question, Ivy faces a number of impediments to her creativity. Mountain life at the turn of the century, with its economic hardships and demanding physical requirements, affords one little external encouragement for artistic endeavors. Indeed, it is an existence that impedes one’s health—as is evidenced by Ivy’s parents’ rapid physical decline—much less one’s creativity. Broadwell attributes Ivy’s struggles to becoming an integrated self in large part to her environment: “[The coal-mining community] fragments modern consciousness, creating dualism between self and society, between self and other, and, finally, between woman and artist” (249). In the limited sphere of people whom Ivy knows, most do not value artistic expression. Ivy’s teacher sees promise in Ivy’s intellectual and creative abilities: “Mrs. Brown says I have a true talent, she gives me books to read” (7). However, Ivy’s mother, Maude, imposes limitations: “Momma gets pitched off iffen I read too much, I have to help out and I will just fill my head with notions, Momma says it will do me no good in the end” (7). Maude’s own “notions” are what prompted her at the age of fifteen to elope with Ivy’s father and ultimately brought her not fulfillment or autonomy but an emotionally and physically draining existence. Therefore, her desire is for her daughters to be “realistic,” to protect themselves by accepting the limitations of their lives. The time and place in which Ivy becomes an adult are such that females are limited by what Debbie Wesley refers to as “the either/or imperative of marriage versus career”
Even though Ivy does become an artist, this either/or choice is a reality for her because she does not succeed at being a professional writer.

Ivy’s role as the matriarch of a large family on the mountain undoubtedly takes its toll on her creativity, as seen in the times when her artistic expression is diminished in letters that are “characterized by a somnambulistic quality” (Herion-Sarafidis 115) or in the lengthy periods during which she does not write at all. As Wesley observes, “Smith acknowledges that the hardships of the woman’s traditional role as caretaker can fight against her self-expression and creativity” (95). Even so, while Ivy’s artistry is at times diminished, it is never decimated. Importantly, in her portrayal of Ivy, Smith does not suggest that Ivy’s position as an artist occurs by default, that she becomes an artist in spite of being a mother and spending the whole of her life on the mountain. Such a depiction would imply that artistry expressed in a private realm is inferior to that achieved in a public one. Calling for an expanded view of artistry, Smith presents Ivy as finding inspiration within and because of her existence, not in spite of it. Importantly, the immediately and continuously available outlet of letters encourages Ivy to explore her everyday experiences and her ever-changing reactions.

While very real restrictions exist in Ivy’s environment, there is much in it that inspires her. As a girl, Ivy’s artistic spirit is fed by the books she reads and the stories told to her by her father and the Cline sisters, the mysterious elderly ladies who live high on Hell Mountain. Because Ivy has limited access to “high” art, it is the people in her life who impact her development as an artist. Ivy’s parents and her sister Silvaney are particularly influential. As Broadwell points out, “[Ivy’s] father John is associated with artistic expression. He loves to tell old mountain stories rich in folklore and to play the guitar and
sing. He is allied with that which is sensuous, natural and vital” (250). An uneducated man who is certainly not an artist in any conventional sense, John Rowe has an appreciation of the aesthetic beauty of his mountain surroundings and of the farm life, and he shares his perceptions of the splendor of life with Ivy:

Farming is pretty work, Daddy said. . . . He used to take us way up on the mountain in early spring to tap a birch and get the sap, he cut off a big piece of bark for us to lick the inside, it tasted so sweet, I recall he said to me one time Now Ivy, this is how spring tastes. This is the taste of spring (35).

Although her father dies when she is just a girl, Ivy recalls his words on a number of occasions throughout her life, including her last moments, and draws inspiration from them. Dorothy Dodge Robbins contends, “the education Ivy’s nonliterate father provides will surpass the one she receives from more formal teachers” (138). Ivy’s father represents for her passion and creativity. At the same time, because of his debilitating illness, his life demonstrates in a very real way how the harsh mountain life can destroy creativity, passion, and imagination.7

As mentioned previously, Ivy’s mother can be seen as a restrictive presence in Ivy’s development as a writer. When offered the option of an abortion, Ivy decides to have her first child and forfeit her chance to go to Boston because “I could not go against her . . . Momma has been through so much” (119). Although her mother comes to be a defeated woman, Ivy is inspired by the story of her parents’ elopement, and especially the young, vital version of her mother in the story. Ivy is of course taken by the romance of the tale, but her reaction to the story is complex. She demonstrates an awareness of the difficulties that came with her parents’ young marriage and the sacrifices that her mother made for love: “I have to say they did not live haply ever after as in Mrs. Brown’s book” (6). Ivy is fascinated with how her mother’s actions were dictated by her passion but also with how
that passion led her to rebel against an overbearing father. Through writing, Ivy is
connected with a happier, more vivacious version of her mother while also exploring the
complexities of her mother’s current existence. Ivy inherits from her mother strength and
pragmatism, qualities that prevent her from losing her sense of self to romantic notions.
Therefore, Ivy’s mother, as well as her father, influences her ability to find inspiration and
liberation in everyday life.

Ivy’s sister, Silvaney, whom Smith portrays as Ivy’s alter ego, perhaps has the single
greatest impact on Ivy’s development. Suffering from brain damage because of childhood
illness, Silvaney is a figure not bound by the expectations of others. Broadwell associates
her with the “ethereal” realm (250). Indeed, Silvaney represents mystery to the young Ivy,
who describes her favorite sister as “all silverhaired like she was fotch up on the moon”
(9). Because Silvaney is not bound by typical earthly concerns, she represents the
unimpeded imagination. Silvaney’s condition makes her extremely vulnerable, however.
She is abused by her twin brother Babe, and eventually she is sent to a mental institution,
where she dies at a young age. Broadwell writes that “the precariousness of Silvaney’s
physical condition . . . suggest[s] the frailty of imagination and creativity in the domestic
environment” (250). One could further conclude that Silvaney represents the vulnerability
that results from an imagination completely severed from “reality.” Silvaney’s condition
causes her to be isolated from others, and as Debbie Wesley argues, for Smith’s women
characters an undeniable link exists between community or relationships and artistry. To
Ivy, Silvaney is her “hart,” so one can fairly characterize Silvaney as representing for Ivy
part of herself. Thus, by writing to Silvaney, Ivy is able to connect with her own artistic side
while still maintaining essential connections to others.
In the first letter of the novel, addressed to a Dutch girl whom Ivy’s teacher assigns as her pen pal, Ivy reveals her artistic longings: “I want to be a writer, it is what I love bestest in the world” (7). Early on, Ivy also demonstrates an awareness of how her desire to be an artist conflicts with her desire for love and romance: “I want to be in Love one day and write poems about it, do you? But I do not want to have a lot of babys thogh and get tittys big as the moon. So its hard to think what to do” (7). Not only does the young Ivy express a desire to be a writer; her early letters reveal her propensity for writing. From the start, Ivy’s writing is characterized by the spontaneity, candor, and intimacy that make her letters vessels of powerful, artistic expression. In that first letter to Hanneke, the pen pal, Ivy very eagerly shares intimate details of her life, demonstrating an openness that her teacher considers inappropriate. Rather than maintaining a formal distance by focusing on surface details of her life such as her daily chores, Ivy tells the exciting story of her parents’ elopement, revealing her affinity for romance and her ability for telling a good story as well.

The writing addressed to Hanneke, like that which follows, is characterized by powerful imagery and vivid and profound descriptions, not just in the telling of exciting, romantic story of her parents’ beginning, but also in the narration of everyday experiences. Herion-Sarafidis describes Ivy’s early letters as being “somewhat ‘breathless’ in tone,” and finds that in them “Ivy reveals a consuming need, in Tillie Olsen’s words, to try to ‘total it all’” (111). Even when Ivy’s teacher has her write a shorter, more appropriate letter, Ivy finds it difficult to restrain herself enough to compose a strictly formal letter. The new letter begins with unemotional, curt descriptions of her life. However, as Ivy describes a recent experience of hunting chestnuts with her brothers and sisters, her passionate voice takes over until she abruptly ends the letter, realizing that she “[has] writ so long agin” (15). Smith
establishes the day of looking for chestnuts as being an ordinary, typical event in Ivy’s life. Ivy seems simply to mention it as an example of how her family has fun in spite of the many chores. Ivy’s description of this normal event, however, is vivid and powerful.

Writing to a girl whose life is far removed from her own, Ivy re-creates the chestnut-hunting expedition, painting a picture with words. In the oral quality of Ivy’s written voice, Smith evokes the narrative immediacy that in large measure is responsible for the artistry of Ivy’s letters. Describing the trek up the mountain to Pilgrim Knob, Ivy writes,

We start out walking by the tulip tree and the little rocky-clift ther on Pilgrim Knob where the chickens runs but then we keep rigt on going follering Sugar Fork for a while, you get swalledered up in the ivy to where it is just like nigt, but direckly you will come out in the clear. You will be so high then it gives you a stich in your side and you have to stop then and rest, and drink some water from Sugar Fork which is little up there and runs so gaily. (14)

In the above, one finds that Smith suggests orality and more general immediacy by re-creating Ivy’s non-standard usage and dialect and by using present tense verbs. Additionally, Smith’s inclusion of run-on sentences suggests the urgency of Ivy’s desire to express herself and share the experience. As Ivy tells of reaching with her siblings their destination high on the mountain, her descriptions become particularly poetical: “the grass is everywhere like a carpet in the spring but now in winter the grass is all froze and you can feel it crunch down when you step. . . . We was having a big time crunching it down. When the sun shined on it, it looked like diamond sticks, a million million strong” (14). Thus, one notices even in this early letter the artistry of Ivy’s writing. Like her father, Ivy has the ability to find beauty and inspiration in her nearby surroundings and in her everyday life. The immediacy of Ivy’s narration, the intimacy of the voice and the vivid re-creation of scenes, is what lends power to her descriptions of the ordinary.
In addition to the beauty of her mountain environment, Ivy is clearly inspired by her relationships with others. As Debbie Wesley argues, “the rituals that [Smith’s] protagonists maintain and the fellowship they create within their communities renders them artists” (89). Ivy’s letters to Hanneke, in which she openly shares her life and expresses a desire to receive response letters from her pen pal, demonstrate Ivy’s longing for affiliation. Over the course of her life, Ivy composes very intimate letters with the knowledge that they will not be sent; therefore, she is often motivated to write out of a desire to better understand her experiences, as one is when writing a diary. Nonetheless, one finds much evidence that Ivy’s creativity is inspired by her pressing desire to connect with someone else through her writing.

Although Ivy faces difficult times during which her artistry temporarily suffers, she persistently writes through the whole of her life letters that are characterized by the same vivid, poetic quality as the first ones addressed to her Dutch pen pal. The duality of Ivy’s nature, characterized by nurturing longings and creative ones, likewise continues throughout her life. Smith clearly portrays a connection between motherhood (particularly Ivy’s experiences with her first child Joli) and artistic inspiration. Upon discovering her first pregnancy, Ivy’s initial reaction is one of hopelessness: “All is lost” (116). While having a baby means Ivy must forfeit her aspiration to become a professional writer, Ivy’s bond with Joli ultimately elevates her artistic spirit more than it stifles it. When writing Silvaney of Joli’s birth, Ivy explains that in holding her daughter for the first time “All the poems I ever knew raced through my head” (144). Here, Smith equates the sum total of “high” art with one moment of Ivy’s motherhood. Recalling cradling Joli the first night under the “Heavenly Star” quilt, Ivy writes, “I held her close by my side and looked at the moonlight
on the closest star, red and blue and pink and purple, it seemed to glow out like the cathedral windows in Mrs. Brown’s book” (145). Again, one finds an association between motherhood and literary art.

Ivy’s writing is powerful not only because of its poetic nature but also because of its honest, raw quality. Shortly after giving birth to Joli, Ivy records not only the joy of first holding Joli; she feels compelled to capture all that she remembers about the experience of labor and delivery, to “write it down plain for I want to remember it always” (143 emphasis added). The following is her description of what she remembers about the experience of giving birth:

first the water splashing on my feet and the great pushing open and tearing feeling, but it was like someone pressing something heavy on my legs. My thighs hurt the worst, they hurt awful, . . . and then right before she came out I could hear it, Silvaney, I swear I could hear my bones parting and hear myself opening up with a huge horrible screeching noise, . . . may be what I heard was my own screaming, but I don’t think so. I think it was my screeching bones (144).

In the unflinching honesty of the above description, Ivy succeeds at writing the experience down “plain,” but with its powerful imagery, her writing is quite vivid. Ivy desires to record the experience while it is recent so that she can document it. Significantly, though, documentation in this text does not mean stagnate, finalized representation. Because of the fluidity of the format in which Ivy writes, the described experiences maintain vitality.

Ivy’s choice to marry Oakley and to return to her childhood home at Sugar Fork is a decision to make permanent her denial of the dream of becoming a professional writer. Nonetheless, Ivy’s creativity is renewed by her marriage and by being “back where I have longed to be” (180). One again finds vivid, moving narrative description in Ivy’s letter to her sister, Beulah. Ivy writes of being cold and scared as Oakley and she struggle to make
their way back up the mountain for the first time. But upon reaching the house, she feels 
exuberant: “When I stopped to try to breathe, I looked down and seen something I had not 
seen since we left there, those little yellow beauties and blue-eyed grass that come first 
every year on the mountains, don’t you remember too? And then I said to Oakley, Look 
here, spring is on the way for sure. Then we were home” (186). The reader is reminded of 
Ivy’s father’s words imploring her to “taste Spring,” to find beauty and inspiration in her 
surroundings. Ivy ends the letter with an account of planting potatoes by moonlight with 
Oakley. Significantly, this description follows Ivy’s explanation of the difficulty of plowing 
on the mountain. In contrast to the plowing, the potato planting experience is exciting, as it 
leads to Oakley and Ivy’s making love in the field on that “windiest, wildest night” (189). 

In the narration of this “wild” night experienced by a housewife in a mountain 
setting, Smith in a literal way portrays a coupling of the domestic realm (potato planting) 
and the magical one (the planting is done by the moon when “the signs were in the legs”). 
This letter to Beulah demonstrates also Smith’s conflation of affiliation and artistry as Ivy 
finds transcendence in her relationship with Oakley. Additionally, Smith suggests that the 
vividness of Ivy’s long letter is prompted largely by her desire to connect with Beulah. In 
asking, “Don’t you remember too?” Ivy encourages Beulah to recall the beauty of Spring at 
Sugar Fork, the home they once shared. Early in the letter, Ivy asks her sister to “try to 
think of me like this, in all these flowers, and don’t be mad at me or disappointed because I 
failed to marry Franklin Ransom as you hoped” (182). In the candid, vibrant depictions of 
h er new life, then, one senses Ivy’s attempt to regain commonality with Beulah. 

Even while experiencing immense self-loss as a result of the overwhelming demands 
of her life causes her to feel “caught up for so long in a great soft darkness” (193), Ivy’s
writing continues to be dramatic and powerful. She explains, “Bits and pieces of me have rolled off and been lost along the way. They have rolled off down this mountain someplace until there is not much left but a dried-up husk, with me leeched out by hard work and babies. I feel like a locust—like a box turtle shell!” (193). Breaking years of silence by writing these words to Silvaney, Ivy rediscovers her crucial outlet for creative expression. At a time when Ivy is in the midst of feeling tremendously diminished by the difficulties of her existence, her prose remains powerfully descriptive, revealing that her artistic spirit remains.

The narrative immediacy that Smith creates and maintains in the novel not only serves her portrayal of Ivy’s dual roles of artist and woman, but it also aids her in presenting Ivy as a complex woman who avoids losing her self while leading a “traditional,” domestic life. As Debbie Wesley observes, Lee Smith’s female characters become artists because “they create original lives for themselves,” and “they reject stereotypical scripts of feminine behavior” (88). According to this view, artistry in Smith’s fiction is closely aligned with self-directed self-interpretation. As argued thus far, Ivy’s choice of motherhood over becoming a professional writer is not a denial of artistry; it means that her writing is shared with a narrow, specific audience (often Ivy herself is the only reader), rather than being published for a broad readership. The privacy and intimacy that characterizes Ivy’s mode of creative expression enables her to claim a self that is unique and that undermines stereotypes. In other words, Smith portrays her as directing her own self-discovery.

Regarding Ivy’s decision not to go with Miss Torrington to Boston, Katherine Kearns claims that “Ivy . . . chooses domestic life over the necessarily more autonomous life of the self-defined artist” (188 emphasis added). Indeed, Ivy’s choice to have her first baby
makes for a definite limiting of possibilities in her life, and it is true that Ivy ultimately does not perceive of herself as a writer. However, if Ivy were a professional writer she likely would have more autonomy in her life but perhaps less autonomy in her writing, especially if writing about her life. When self-representational writing is shared publicly (for a general audience), the writer abdicates some of his or her autonomy to the reader as he or she becomes the object of reader interpretation. Ivy, too, makes herself the object of others’ analysis and judgment, but because she writes letters, she is able to exert a substantial amount of control over who reads her writing. Although Ivy does not become a self-proclaimed writer, she does assert autonomy because of, not in spite of, the format in which she writes.

One should not assume that Ivy’s writing about her mountain existence is a limiting form of expression. Herion-Sarafidis claims that Smith finds it “artistically liberating” to write about well-known material (108), and the same can be said of Ivy. By choosing the private forum of letter writing for Ivy, Smith portrays self-expression rather than self-presentation as being necessary in the achievement of self-identity. The letter format, while it does not make Ivy a professional writer, allows for continuity between experience and writing. Smith continuously reminds the reader that Ivy writes about her experiences while in the process of interpreting them; therefore, she portrays the act of writing as an essential part of the process of self-interpretation, rather than a result of it. In explaining why she burned her letters to Silvaney at the end of her life, Ivy recognizes “it was the writing . . . that signified” (314). In Ivy’s search for self, the personal, private act of writing, not a publicly available product is what matters.
The notion that reaching female adulthood is achieved at the cost of self-loss has proven to have broad implications, as one may infer from works by fiction writers and a variety of scholars. Citing the influential work of Carol Gilligan, Herion-Sarafidis claims that because a woman’s identity is shaped largely by her relationships with others, “self-denial . . . becomes a female way of life” (114). Certainly, one finds occasions in Ivy’s life in which her concern for others prompts the suppression of her own desires and needs.

Joanne Frye addresses the often oppositional relationship both in women’s experience and in their writing between being autonomous and being female. In choosing one side of this duality and denying the other, women become defined in ways that are often limiting and restrictive. Smith’s portrayal of Ivy suggests that dualities can and should be maintained.11

Undoubtedly, Ivy’s existence is one in which her own needs and desires compete with those of others: as a girl she is one of nine children in a poor family, and as a woman she is the mother of five children in equally difficult circumstances. Not surprisingly, in such demanding conditions, the needs of others often override Ivy’s own. Furthermore, Ivy’s reality, as one of many in a physically demanding environment, is such that in it her voice is easily lost. Ivy’s letters give her the means of achieving the seemingly oppositional but mutually beneficial purposes of escaping her often overcrowded, restrictive environment and finding her voice. Escape may suggest avoidance or denial, but for Ivy, discovering a means of escape helps her to accept, even embrace her life. Ivy’s feelings of alienation and self-loss are at times overwhelming; therefore, the immediately available venue of letters is vital to her self-actualization. Writing provides Ivy with a mental distraction; when engaged in it she is able to block out her immediate surroundings. In a letter to Hanneke, a young Ivy reveals her feelings of isolation despite being in close quarters with her family: “It seems
like I can not talk to my Family they is so many of us here in the house in the snow we have
to keep the younguns in you can not bath yourself or nothing and little Danny crys. They is
no place here you can go to get away from him crying” (24). In the “run-on” style of Ivy’s
writing, Smith conveys the urgency in Ivy’s need for a means of expression. Ivy’s words
also highlight the importance of the act of writing: “it is only when I am writing you this
letter late in the nigt that I don’t hear” (24 emphasis added).

In her letters, then, Ivy seeks a needed distraction from the chaos of her
surroundings. To remain in a constant state of disconnection from her immediate
surroundings would be detrimental, however, as Silvaney’s tragic existence demonstrates.
What Ivy seeks most pressingly to overcome through her writing are feelings of alienation.
As a girl and throughout her adult life, Ivy struggles with feeling ideologically and
emotionally distanced from those around her. At only twelve-years old, Ivy reveals her
feelings of alienation from her family and her sense of disconnection to “reality.” She
explains to Hanneke, a girl who is a stranger, that “sometimes it seems to me like you are
more real than all of my Family, you seem more real to me now than the days that pass”
(24). In her writing, Ivy seeks to overcome these feelings of “unreality.” Writing very
intimate letters to Hanneke allows Ivy to record her experiences, to make them “real,” so
that she is able to see and understand what happens to her. Ivy herself portrays a
consciousness regarding this need fulfilled by writing: “Sometimes I despair of ever
understanding anything right when it happens to me, it seems like I have to tell it in a letter
to see what it was, even though I was right there all along!” (181). Ultimately, writing is for
Ivy a way to validate her experiences, but to do so without having to define herself in
limiting or finite ways. Because of the continuing immediacy of letter writing, Ivy is able to document the complexities, the paradoxes that make up her existence.

Just as Ivy’s letter writing allows her to achieve both escape from and clear-sighted understanding and acceptance of her experiences, it likewise serves the dual purposes of communicating with others and exploring the self. In a broader sense, Ivy is able to achieve through her writing both affiliation and autonomy. Again, one finds that the structure of the letter format is well suited for Ivy’s dichotomous needs. As explained in the previous chapter’s discussion of *The Color Purple*, Janet Gurkin Altman theorizes that letter novels highlight both presence and absence. Consideration of this dichotomy is useful in furthering one’s understanding of Smith’s novel as well. The evocation of both presence and absence affords Ivy the opportunity for a unique duality of expression. Letter writing helps her to overcome feelings of disconnection from family and friends, but her distance from the intended audience encourages autonomous expression.

As was suggested in the exploration of Ivy’s development as an artist, relationships carry a high value in Ivy’s search for identity. From the first letter in the novel, Smith portrays in Ivy a desire to feel commonality with another. Ivy overtly expresses this longing as she shares with Hanneke her hope that they will be pen friends. Ivy not only shares her most intimate thoughts with Hanneke; she also seeks a response from the Dutch girl. At the end of the first letter to Hanneke, she asks, “Are you afeared sometimes of things you cannot put a name to, as I am?” (12). Ivy’s desire to make sense out of her life and her own self is clearly tied to her desire for connection with others.

The strong connection between Ivy’s affiliation with others and her search for self-understanding is further demonstrated in a letter she writes to her deceased father. More
specifically, the letter illustrates how Ivy’s pronounced feelings of detachment from others leads to self-doubt. At the time Ivy writes this letter, her mother has decided to move the family to the coal-mining town of Majestic. Ivy has recently experienced the sequential and sudden loss of many people who are important to her, either because of death or physical separation. Losing connection with others causes Ivy to experience a general sense of disillusionment: “Oh Daddy Daddy when I think of all them that are dead and gone, and all that is happened, I don’t want nothing else to happen to me, ever. I do not even want to be in love any more, nor write about love, as it is scarry” (75). Being disengaged from others prompts Ivy to feel that the world around her no longer makes sense: “This little gray rain blurs the edges of everything, it is like the world is nought but shadders and soft edges” (74). Indeed, affiliation with friends and family is integral in Ivy’s process of self-actualization. Although her letters during periods of particularly strong feelings of disillusionment are less passionate, Ivy always continues to write. Through her writing, then, she is able to connect with those from whom she has been separated, and consequently, to remain connected with herself.

On the occasions when Ivy writes letters to living, lucid family members and friends, she fulfills the basic need of “keeping in touch.” Ivy writes other letters, most prevalently to Silvaney, knowing that they will not be mailed, or, if mailed, they will not be understood by the recipient. Several critics have made observations about Ivy’s letters, particularly those addressed to Silvaney, similar to Herion-Sarafidis’ claim that Ivy’s writing is “motivated more by her own need for understanding the forces in her life than by a compulsion to communicate with the addressees” (109). Nonetheless, as Herion-Sarafidis also
acknowledges, Ivy often “finds herself quite desperately in need of a listener” (109). After all, Smith has Ivy write letters and not journal entries.

While Bower concludes that Ivy’s writing Silvaney is a means toward the end of self-discovery, she nonetheless finds that Ivy also seeks connection with her sister: “Ivy’s quotations and paraphrases of Silvaney’s past actions make her ‘present’” (29). Indeed, Smith creates the impression that in her letters Ivy evokes a sense of Silvaney’s immediate presence. In a late letter to her daughter Joli, Ivy explains that she has long been aware of Silvaney’s death; however, in each of the many letters to Silvaney, Ivy gives no indication that she is writing to a deceased person. Often in Celie’s letters to God in *The Color Purple*, the only indicator that He is the intended recipient is the epistolary greeting. In contrast, Ivy not only addresses her letters to Silvaney but, as she does when writing living friends and relatives, she is actively engaged with her letters’ correspondent. Ivy asks questions of Silvaney in the letters, and, as Bower mentions, reminisces about shared memories.12

In one of her later letters, Ivy addresses Silvaney in an intriguing way, one that demonstrates Ivy’s continued attempts to make her sister immediately present as a listener. Sharing with Silvaney that Oakley and she are experiencing an enhanced sexual relationship “in spite of us being so old,” Ivy writes, “I know you are not shocked by me saying this even though you are still a maiden lady, for you are my soul, and my soul is wild as ever!” (271). One notices here that Ivy addresses both herself and also a clearly envisioned persona who is capable of responding to what she reveals in the letter. Referring to Silvaney as a “maiden lady,” Smith suggests that in writing to Silvaney, Ivy maintains a perception of Silvaney based on what she was like before she died. Of course, as Bower points out, because Silvaney is incapable of responding, Ivy is able “to confide feelings and actions [to her] that
the people around her would judge aberrant” (29). Writing letters to Silvaney affords Ivy the listener she needs, but importantly, the audience is one that Ivy creates from her own memory and imagination. It is an audience that is her own “soul,” as Ivy herself acknowledges.

Before she writes letters to Silvaney, Ivy writes to Hanneke and to her friend Molly, even when she knows that the letters will not be received. Of course, the primary purpose of these letters is self-exploration, connecting with the self rather than others. Ivy is the “real” addressee of these epistles. This is particularly true in the letters to Silvaney because to Ivy, her sister represents her heart and soul. Bower posits “this inner self” that Silvaney represents “is externalized, made real to [Ivy], by the process of writing” (29). When writing to her brother Victor, who informs her of Silvaney’s death, Ivy explains her connection with her sister: “I have felt like I was split off from a part of myself all these years, and now it is like that part of me has died, since I know she will never come” (180). Ivy overcomes this self-loss by continuing to write Silvaney even after knowing of her death.

Ivy feels comfortable revealing her “wild” soul to Silvaney because she cannot respond. Significantly, though, Ivy also shares intimate thoughts with recipients who are capable of judging her at times bold, “contrary” admissions. Ivy’s process of self-discovery involves not only achieving commonality with letter recipients; it also requires resisting or rejecting others’ thoughts and definitions of her. The letter format, which allows for fluidity and which evokes both presence and absence, empowers Ivy to express herself candidly. Letters, especially those that are informal and private as are Ivy’s, are associated with impromptu expression. Furthermore, the absence of an immediately present recipient likely
adds to Ivy’s boldness. Ivy’s reactions to culturally imposed codes of behavior, because recorded over her lifetime, shift back and forth between acceptance and rejection. As Tanya Long Bennett argues, in these seeming inconsistencies, Ivy avoids being constrained by external forces. Bennett finds that “in the end, Ivy’s identity is too protean to be fixed by any particular system. This fluidity results in large part from Ivy’s habit of deconstructing, through her letters, systems which threaten to entrap her” (76). According to Bennett, the letter format of the novel allows for these fluctuations in Ivy’s sense of self because each letter is a separate entity of a larger work: “In one letter [Ivy] may express a perspective that in another letter she contradicts” (78).

Bennett does not focus specifically on narrative immediacy in the novel, but her mirror analogy is based upon the minimally perceptible discrepancy between Ivy’s experiences and her written re-creations of them. Bennett suggests that Ivy’s letters act as a mirror for her, as they allow her to “see” and understand her experiences. Because letters allow for progressive, continuing interpretation, “they foster in [Ivy] the possibility of fluidity, of her identity as a fluctuating and fragmented self, rather than a fixed one” (Bennett 78). The reader is accepting of Ivy’s ideological fluctuations because one understands that her thoughts are recorded while in process over a lengthy period of time. Significantly, Ivy’s expressed beliefs do not progress in a linear fashion but shift back and forth in a more cyclical fashion. Linear movement suggests singularity in its ultimate destination of closure. As has been argued in each of the previous chapters, narrative immediacy allows for openness, for the continuation of possibilities, a scenario befitting the experience of self-actualization. Unlike the other novels, this work carries us seemingly to the very end of the narrator-protagonist’s life. Even in Ivy’s narration as she faces death,
Smith refuses finality in self-interpretation, having Ivy celebrate the many selves she has been and ending the novel seemingly in the middle of one of Ivy’s thoughts.

In her psychological study, Lyn Mikel Brown observes in girls on the brink of adolescence intriguing shifts back and forth between acceptance and rejection of dominant ideologies. Brown concludes, as do others like Carol Gilligan, that most females eventually stop resisting dominant expectations regarding female behavior. The first two novels considered in this study, *Ellen Foster* and *Meely LaBauve*, end with a protagonist on the brink of adulthood. Smith’s novel portrays the cyclical nature of acceptance and resistance continuing into and lasting throughout adulthood. Thus, in her portrayal of Ivy, Smith not only challenges the reader to modify his or her understanding of the female artist as Debbie Wesley argues, but Smith also broadens and complicates conventional perceptions of female adulthood. Smith portrays a protagonist who is both female and autonomous, the achievement that Joanne Frye explores in her work.

Del Jordan in Alice Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women* demonstrates a “chameleonlike identity” and therefore represents a literary persona similar to Ivy (Frye 85). Because Munro positions her narrator-protagonist in a retrospective position, the novel serves to further demonstrate the particular effects of close narrator proximity in Smith’s work. Both Ivy and Del express dichotomous ideologies. For example, Del describes her desire to be an object of affection and to have an independent, questioning mind: “I wanted men to love me, and I wanted to think of the universe when I looked at the moon” (150). In both novels, the protagonist’s fluctuating beliefs serve as a means of resisting restrictive dominant values. As Frye observes, because each chapter of Munro’s novel acts a self-contained unit, each with a different theme, “the structure emphasizes choice and change in
resistance to totalized unity” (92). Wesley notes that a similar result is achieved by the letter format in Smith’s novel. Additionally, because the narrative voice of both novels is portrayed as being spontaneously expressed, the point of view of each work, along with the structure, works to emphasize fluidity. In contrast to Ivy, however, Del writes of her experiences with the perspective of time distance and therefore demonstrates consciousness of her dual perspectives: “I was free and I was not free. I was relieved and I was desolate” (200). While the subject self in Munro’s work experiences uncertainty and confusion, the sense is that the narrating persona speaks from a position of comparatively greater surety and confidence.

Undoubtedly, in the areas of gender and sexuality females are defined by the dominant culture in limiting ways. In response to such definitions and expectations, Ivy responds in paradoxical ways. Ivy’s ambiguous reactions to her relationship with her first sexual partner, Lonnie Rash, are illustrative. Bennett observes that from one letter to the next, Ivy’s expressed beliefs can change. The letters about Lonnie show that Ivy’s thoughts shift even within individual letters. As Smith often does, she portrays Ivy as writing of her experiences with Lonnie while the relationship is in progress. While writing, then, Ivy is not only seen in the process of interpreting her feelings for Lonnie, but she is portrayed as experiencing the confusing transitional time between adolescence and womanhood. This suggested immediacy is what accounts for Ivy’s ideological fluctuations. In the first letter to Silvaney about Lonnie, Ivy repeatedly admits the ambiguous nature of her feelings. For example, she writes, “there is the thing that is happening, which you can say, and see, and there is another thing happening too inside it, and this is the most important thing but its so
hard to say” (96). Likely, the two “things” that Ivy describes are her outward expression of that which fits within dominant views and her inner questioning of that ideology.

Smith portrays Ivy’s expressed perceptions regarding her first sexual relationship as both upholding and subverting societal norms. Ivy’s behavior is rebellious because she does not allow her actions to be dictated by the dominant culture’s condemnation of sex outside of marriage. While Ivy does not always abide by societal rules, however, she does not reject the rules themselves. For example, in her first letter to Silvaney about Lonnie Rash, Ivy reveals that she judges herself as “bad, bad, rotten clear through” because her sexual desires have been overriding her obedience to God. She experiences guilt because of the similarities between her feelings of sexual arousal and those of spiritual fervor (97).

Nonetheless, in the same letter, she openly admits that she does enjoy the times of sexual exploration with Lonnie: “I know this is bad but it feels so good” (98).

The implications of Ivy’s decision to have sex with Lonnie are complicated by the fact that it is made in reaction to her confusion over being kissed by her teacher, Miss Torrington. In having sex with Lonnie, Ivy rejects certain societal rules, but if the act is an attempt to confirm her heterosexuality, in it she also conforms to dominant ideologies. To Silvaney, Ivy admits her contradictory feelings about Miss Torrington, suggesting the kiss is exciting but also saying it is “awful” (106). Ivy’s reactions to Miss Torrington’s behavior before the kiss are also conflicting. She is pleased by all that Miss Torrington teaches her, but she also admits feeling controlled by her teacher: “It was like she owned me” (104).

Although achieved without intention, Ivy deconstructs typical notions of gender roles as she presents Miss Torrington in what might be likened to a patriarchal position. At the end of the letter to Silvaney, Ivy describes feelings of loss that extend beyond the loss of her
virginity. Ivy admits, “I do not understand this Silvaney, but it is true” (107). Because Smith creates the impression that Ivy writes about her experiences before she fully understands their implications, she encourages the reader to accept that Ivy’s written expressions are unfiltered renderings of her immediate thoughts.

Again, it is not only in her letters to Silvaney that Ivy reveals her ambiguous responses to her experiences. Indeed, Ivy tends to be more guarded in her letters to recipients who she knows will read her letters. Nonetheless, in these letters, Ivy does express thoughts that are in opposition to dominant ideologies. When writing to Beulah (someone who is particularly bound by societal rules) about Lonnie, for example, Ivy strongly asserts her decision not to marry Lonnie in spite of all of the external pressure to do so: “I will stick to my guns against them all” (109). In the same letter as this assertion, however, Ivy reveals how her confidence is undermined by the judgments of others. Although Ivy does not reveal to Beulah the exact nature of her relationship with Lonnie, she shares with her sister that her teacher, Miss Maynard, told her she was “ruint.” Ivy asks Beulah, “Do you think I am ruint or merely compromised?” (109). At the end of the letter, Ivy asserts, “I do NOT believe that if you make your bed, you have to sleep in it forever. Do you?” (111). Because Ivy’s fairly bold statements are coupled with questions that reveal doubt, the reader recognizes that when writing the letter, Ivy is in the process of interpreting her feelings. By successfully portraying Ivy as “writing through” her conflicting thoughts, Smith avoids defining Ivy in limiting ways. In fact, Ivy closes the letter “your devoted but compromised sister” (111), answering her own question about her character and deciding on the more ambiguous label.
As Ivy writes about her relationships with the men who come after Lonnie, she continues to show fluctuation between acceptance and rejection of patriarchal control. At two different points in her life, Ivy resists being defined by others by having love affairs, which ironically enough also involve experiencing a loss of self-control. These affairs nonetheless constitute acts of resistance because, by participating in them, Ivy rebels against cultural norms and dictates. With Franklin, Ivy engages in sex outside of marriage, and with Honey she has an extramarital affair. Not surprisingly, in her writing about each of the affairs, one observes Ivy’s fluctuating views: she at times asserts autonomy by unapologetically describing how the affairs benefit her, but she also reveals her feelings of dependence on these men and expresses guilt about how the affairs negatively affected others.

As she does in most of her letters, Ivy writes about Franklin Ransom in order to gain understanding and to express her conflicting thoughts and reactions. Ivy meets Franklin, who is the son of the superintendent of the coal mining company, while living with Beulah on Diamond Mountain. While Beulah sees Franklin as an excellent prospect for marriage for her sister, Ivy, now a nineteen-year-old unwed mother, demonstrates in her letters that she does not suffer under such an illusion. She writes to Silvaney, “Poor Beulah. She always thought we were courting. I don’t know what we were doing, Silvaney, but it wasn’t courting!” (167).

Ivy expresses a concern for keeping up appearances for Beulah’s sake, but she reveals in her letters her freedom from guilt regarding her affair with Franklin. In writing to Silvaney, Ivy appropriates the label “ruint,” and by doing so, she undermines the power that the judgment carries. Ivy explains, “If you are ruint, like I am, it frees you somehow” (164).
One again observes ambiguity in Ivy’s self-assessment, however, because while Ivy does not allow her actions to be dictated by the judgments of others, in calling herself “ruint,” she does accept their judgments of her as accurate. In this regard, she upholds conventional beliefs regarding female sexuality.

Ivy writes about the affair with Franklin not just to Silvaney but to her sister Ethel and her mother’s old friend, Geneva, as well. Smith again creates an impression of candor in the narration, despite the fact that Ivy writes to recipients who may potentially judge her. Because the described events and thoughts hold immediacy for Ivy, she again expresses ambiguity regarding them. Feeling “beholden” to Beulah for taking her in, Ivy cannot bring herself to tell her that she has no intention of marrying Franklin. However, in her letter to Ethel, Ivy claims the independence that comes with being an unattached woman, asserting, “I am nobody’s girl” (154), in rejection to the ownership implied in Oakley’s jealousy. In the same letter, however, Ivy admits being influenced by obligatory feelings. Knowing that Franklin’s parents are out of town, she is aware that sex is implied in his invitation to dinner at their home. Ivy asks Ethel what she would do. Quickly deciding that she knows her sister “would do exactly what [she] wanted to do!” (154), Ivy claims less freedom for herself: “But I have Joli to take care of now, and I am beholden as well as ruint” (154). Although Ivy eventually decides to accept Franklin’s invitation, she has not yet made up her mind when she writes Ethel.

In Ivy’s letter to Geneva, Smith portrays her conflicting attitudes regarding entering a socially acceptable relationship. Being wooed by both Franklin and Oakley Fox, two very different men, Ivy finds herself “caught between a rock and a hard place” (160). Smith suggests that Ivy’s choice is not a simple one in which choosing Oakley will mean
conformity (and a lack of autonomy) and choosing Franklin will mean rebellion (and independence). Ivy reveals her desire to direct her own choices when she writes, “Oakley is real good but I dont love him. I don’t” (160). Ivy suggests that she will not be with Oakley just because he is “good.” Although “Franklin is not any good,” and therefore represents rebellion, Ivy continues in her relationship with him at least in part out of obligation: “I can’t quit on Franklin while Beulah and Curtis are still here, they still think Franklin is somebody for me to marry” (160). Indeed, Smith makes use of the spontaneous outlet of letters to reveal the tensions within Ivy’s continuously developing sexuality and independence.

In her writing about her decision to marry Oakley, one again finds in Ivy’s description evidence of both socialization and self-determination. Marrying Oakley means returning to the farming life of her girlhood. She writes to Silvaney with excitement as she imagines bringing Silvaney to Sugar Fork, where “you and me will clean the house together and scrub the floors” (174). Immediately following this expression of Ivy’s seemingly blissful acceptance of her pending domestic existence, Ivy again returns to her father’s aesthetic view of farming: “Farming is pretty work” (174-175). Smith reminds the reader that for Ivy physical labor can mean artistic inspiration as well as repression of creativity. At the end of the letter, Smith indicates a connection between Ivy’s inherited view regarding the transcendent possibilities of farm life and her feelings for Oakley: “When Oakley kisses me, it seems like I can hear Daddy saying, Slow down, slow down, Ivy. This is the taste of spring” (174-175). Ivy’s decision to marry Oakley is portrayed as a very practical one that signifies Ivy’s settling into a domestic life similar to that led by her mother. Oakley is a very reliable man, the opposite of Franklin Ransom. Importantly, however, the decision is
also one that is prompted by her romantic spirit, as it is in the midst of the tragic and confusing circumstances of the mine explosion that Ivy realizes that she loves Oakley. Most importantly, the decision is one that Ivy makes for herself, rather than from any societal pressure to give Joli a father.

Ivy’s affair with the bee man, Honey Breeding, occurs under different circumstances from her relationship with Franklin. Ivy is forty-years old and about twenty years into her marriage with Oakley. Ivy’s liaison with Honey is characterized by ambiguity because it affects Ivy in seemingly oppositional ways: it allows her to overcome the feelings of self loss resulting from the overwhelming demands of her domestic life, and it also makes her better capable to fill her roles of wife and mother. Ivy writes to Silvaney about her time with Honey Breeding after she returns to her family to find her daughter LuIda has died. Despite her knowledge of the outcome, Ivy re-creates for Silvaney the passion and excitement of the days spent with Honey. In the description of Ivy’s time high on the mountain with the bee man, Smith includes substantial dialogue, re-creating conversations between them and the stories they share. The concluding paragraph of the letter reveals that Ivy writes the letter while her grief for LuIda is still painfully recent: “My heart is too heavy, too full. But somehow I had to write this letter to you Silvaney, to set it all down. I still am in pain and sorry” (240). When describing her time with Honey, however, Ivy resists telling Silvaney of her sorrow until after she has fully expressed the exhilaration and passion that she experienced with Honey, first explaining how he “had given me back my very soul” (232). Ivy alludes to the fact that her time with Honey had a cost but then interrupts herself with “we’ll get to that,” resisting the urge to reveal exactly what the sacrifice is. Smith suggests here that in writing about, and thus reliving, her experiences, Ivy is able in the same
letter to express great sorrow and guilt and also to write about the love affair unapologetically: “Say what you will, and I don’t care what anybody said then or might say now, it could not of happened otherwise. I had to do it, I had to have him” (230). Thus, in the immediacy that Smith evokes in Ivy’s narration, she places great importance on Ivy’s acceptance of self, of her actions, and of the complexities of her feelings.  

Ivy fluctuates between acceptance and rejection of patriarchal authority not only in her relationships with men but in her responses to conventional Christianity. Again one finds that Ivy demonstrates wavering confidence but not outright rejection of the dominant ideology. Representatives of Christianity (with the exception of Oakley) are in Ivy’s experience enforcers of patriarchal control; they are figures who make hypocritical judgments of others based on narrow definitions of proper behavior. While Ivy never rejects the existence of God or even the concept of salvation, she chooses not to be “saved.” Even in some of her earliest letters, Ivy grapples with the complex concepts of God and religion. Smith successfully creates the impression that the voice expressed in these letters belongs to a girl with “spunk” and a questioning spirit. Because Ivy seemingly writes the early letters before she has learned to be overly concerned with decorum, it is not surprising that she expresses both confusion and outright rebellion. In a letter to Hanneke, Ivy expresses uncertainty about the nature of God: “Mister Brown told us one time that God is good, but He is not good or bad ether one” (17). In a letter to her teacher, Mrs. Brown, written while Ivy is in the midst of grief over her father’s death, she asserts without apology her rejection of God: “No I do not pray, nor do I think much of God. It is not rigt what he sends on people” (32). As Bennett argues, “From the beginning, then, Ivy doubts the innate goodness of the Christian God, thus undermining to some extent Christian ideology’s power over her”
Bennett also points out, however, that while Ivy subverts traditional Christianity in this way, she nonetheless demonstrates a belief in the existence of a male God.

The previous examples demonstrate that Ivy reveals her doubts and uncertainties about Christianity to friends and family capable of judging her, not just to Silvaney. Again, the letter format enables Ivy’s candor and her inconsistencies, which both work to undermine dominant ideologies. As a teenager, Ivy writes to Beulah about her confusing experience at a tent revival. As she often does, Smith evokes immediacy in Ivy’s re-creation of an event. In relaying the religious fervor of the revival, Ivy quotes the fiery words of the preacher, Sam Russell Sage, as he warns the parishioners of the imminence of death. Ivy describes finding herself under the influence of the preacher, not because of a longing for God but because of genuine fear: “Beulah, it was awful! For where will I go? I wondered. And what will happen to me? . . . I was terrified” (94). Again, Smith portrays Ivy’s changing responses to her experiences. In her letter to Silvaney, Ivy openly resists the authority of Sam Russell Sage: “If [he] is who God has sent, I don’t know if I even want to be saved” (97). When writing to Beulah, Ivy admits to not being “saved” at the revival but omits her doubts about her eventual salvation, saying, “I have not been saved yet, so I hope I do not die anytime soon!” (94). Even though Ivy expresses a concern about dying a sinner, she does so with a seemingly light-hearted tone. Additionally, Ivy does not linger on this grave possibility but quickly moves on to other topics of discussion. Therefore, her words suggest acceptance of the belief posited by traditional Christianity that eternal life is reserved for those who have been “saved,” but implied in her tone is resistance to the pressure she felt at the revival. Ivy’s resistance is merely suggested and is expressed along
with sentiments of acceptance; therefore, her thoughts about Christianity continue to indicate ambiguity.

In the letters that Ivy writes to Silvaney as a middle-aged woman (and even in those she writes during her last days), one finds that Ivy’s position on conventional Christianity continues to be unclear. Ivy reveals to Silvaney her resistance to organized religion: “I would not say this to another soul, Silvaney. . . . I would a lots rather sit on the porch and think and look out at the world, than to go to church” (205). In the same letter, she also admits uncertainty: “I don’t know why I have never got the hang of it” (205). Still not willing to outright reject God’s existence, Ivy reveals how she hedges her bet by participating in certain conventional religious practices: “I do say my prayers when I go to bed, you remember that little prayer momma taught us” (205). While Ivy candidly admits her doubts, she also expresses a desire to believe unconditionally as Oakley does. Therefore, Ivy keeps open the possibility of “salvation,” and when she gets a visit from her brother Garnie, now an evangelist, she wonders if he is indeed a messenger of God. Even though she “is in the mood to listen” to Garnie, however, Ivy cannot help but have doubt: “Well, if this is the vessel God has picked to carry his message, then it is a mighty damn poor one” (259). Although Ivy calls herself “contrary” for doubting Garnie, he proves to be a poor messenger of God indeed: he uses scripture to judge her as a “whore” and then proceeds to unbuckle his belt (for what purpose Ivy never knows because Oakley intercedes).

In Ivy’s writing of the disturbing experience with Garnie, Smith again relays the progression of her protagonist’s attitudes, creating the impression that the reader is privy to Ivy’s thoughts as they occur. When Garnie accuses her of pride, she at first feels “scared,”
recognizing an element of truth in his condemnation. Her fear quickly becomes acceptance, however: “I have been proud Silvaney, in my body and mind, I am proud still and if this is sin then I must claim it as my own” (261). Nonetheless, even in this independent assertion, in which she resists the oppressive demands of conventional Christianity, Ivy still avoids a broad rejection of Christianity because she accepts the label of “sinner,” a judgment based on the dominant ideology. That Ivy continues to embrace uncertainty late in life and even in her letters to Silvaney is thematically significant. Ivy understands that Silvaney will not judge her for her unpopular beliefs, so when expressing more conventional beliefs she is not motivated by a need to project an acceptable persona. Ivy describes feeling inspiration both in conventional and unconventional circumstances. Thus, Ivy’s letters to Silvaney, in which she reveals conflicting positions, demonstrate her desire for many possibilities so as not to be limited by one belief system.20

As Bennett concludes, Ivy’s fluctuating beliefs regarding a number of complex cultural issues suggest a resistance to the concept of “universal” truth in favor of “a tendency to treat truth as relative” (86). Smith’s successful creation of narrative immediacy directly contributes to this achievement. Because Ivy is presumably always in the process of interpreting her experiences when writing about them, she does not present finite interpretive conclusions. In this regard, the narrative calls for reader involvement. Furthermore, just as Ivy resists the authority of others who attempt to control her, “she will not pose as an authority through whom others may learn the truth of human existence” (Bennet 94). In her resistance to “universal truths” through an authentic portrayal of the experience and voice of an individual female, Smith successful redefines the concept of “artist” as she conveys the necessarily dichotomous experience of female self-actualization.
The reader understands that Ivy does receive letters from others as she alludes to them on occasion.

As Anne Bower observes, Celie, although involved in the purposeful act of writing letters, does not make reference to either reading or writing her letters. Bower argues that “Celie, although needing to write, has no interest in or context within which to comment on herself as a writer” (66).

This tension is perceived in Celie’s experience too, but unlike Ivy’s, Celie’s struggles simply to be considered human, to believe that she has any worth or value, take precedence for most of the novel.

Kearns further points out that Ivy’s daughter Joli also demonstrates Smith’s only partial reconciliation of the conflict between femaleness and art, claiming, “To write books, Ivy’s daughter must divorce and send her son David to live with Ivy” (192).

Maude’s pessimistic view of her daughter’s prospects likely stems from the fact that her own young life afforded her no good option: marrying John meant accepting a difficult and demanding life, but if she had not eloped, she would have had an easier life but would have remained under the control of her father.

Maude’s concern that her daughters’ romantic notions will lead to a life like her own is revealed in Ivy’s first letter, in which she records a discussion overheard between her parents. Her mother worries, “These girls is all so pretty. . . theyd be better off ugly, these girls is all so pretty theyd be better off dead” (8).

Symbolically, Ivy’s father dies because his heart, the vessel of love and passion, fails him.

Here, one finds yet another similarity between Smith’s novel and The Color Purple.

In her last letter, Ivy claims, “I thought then I would write of love (Ha!). . . . I never became a writer atall. Instead I have loved, and loved, and loved” (317). Suggested here is that Ivy’s definition of a writer is one who writes fictional stories, and she does not become that kind of writer. Clearly, Ivy’s claim that she is not writer is not a claim of passivity or failure, however.

Even if Ivy were a writer of fiction, her work, if not her self, would become the object of the reader’s interpretation.

Although Frye does not consider Smith’s novel, she does find that other similar writers are able through the use of first-person narration to maintain this duality.
Unlike her letter to God, Celie’s letters to Nettie demonstrate a similar sender-recipient intimacy.

Bower, adapting Janet Altman’s terminology, labels Silvaney as a “zero-degree confidante” because “she passively receives confessions and stories” (28-29) and therefore does not respond.

As Bennett points out, this deconstruction is not purposeful on Ivy’s part, a factor that is fitting given that Smith intends Ivy’s writing to seem impromptu.

She writes a letter before she has sex with Lonnie, writes one shortly after they have sex, and writes before and after she knows she is pregnant.

Ivy likely feels secure being candid with Ethel and Geneva, who are both women with a history of resisting societal expectations.

Indeed, Ivy writes of feeling a lack of control when with Franklin. When, he tries to force her to leave Joli and go with him to Memphis, ironically, her domestic responsibilities prompt her to assert her self and reject his control.

I refer here to Ivy’s letter about the time that she spent with Honey on the mountain. She also writes an earlier letter in which she describes meeting Honey and how doing so makes her feel “alive,” “on fire” (208). She reveals her premonition that “something awful is about to happen here,” but when she writes this earlier letter, the affair has not yet occurred.

Smith clearly presents Honey as Ivy’s alter ego. Ivy writes, “We are exactly the same size. It is like he is me, some way, or I am him” (217). Because Smith portrays Honey as representing a part of Ivy, one could argue that he exists only in Ivy’s imagination. Whether their affair is real or invented, Honey represents for Ivy freedom and autonomy. In connecting with him, Ivy rediscovers part of herself.

See Bennett, who observes, “[Ivy] constructs a world in which she is not enclosed within the fixed system of traditional Christian ideology, or the fixed systems predicated by the notions of a universal psyche, but in which she also has the freedom to experience a variety of spiritually transcendent moments” (82).
Conclusion:

Variations in Proximity:
Immediacy and Retrospection in First-Person Voice

This study has thus far focused on first-person narrated novels in which little to no durational gap is perceived between events and their narration. Although significant differences exist among novels of this category, they are undoubtedly similar in one substantial way. In each of the primary novels considered here is found little if any perceivable distinction between the ideological stance of the narrating persona and that of the protagonist. When writers establish this minimal durational lapse, the narrative has a mimetic quality: the narrator is portrayed as re-creating rather than constructing his or her experiences.\(^1\) On the other hand, when a significant duration of elapsed time exists between experiences and their narration, the degree of perceived narrator presence is quite variable among different works and even within individual works. Traditionally, the passage of time contributes to an autobiographer’s or a first-person narrator’s demonstrating a high degree of consciousness regarding his or her task.\(^2\) However, the novels considered in this concluding chapter illustrate that it is not a foregone conclusion that the existence of a substantial temporal distance between a narrator and a protagonist will result in a high degree of ideological separation between them.

In order to explore more fully the significance of elapsed time in narrative, whether it be minimal or substantial, this chapter considers a selection of novels in which there is a substantial temporal gap and in which are found varying degrees of ideological and emotional separation. The first three novels considered, Wally Lamb’s *She’s Come Undone* (1992), Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), and Jill McCorkle’s *Ferris Beach* (1990), are characterized by a narrator presence so minimally marked that the
protagonist is easily mistaken for the narrator. As a result, these novels are very similar to the novels previously considered in this study. Each of the texts in the second group, Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1944), William Kowalski’s *Eddie’s Bastard* (2000), and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), like the preceding works, has as its thematic focus the maturation process of a young protagonist. Even given this emphasis, the writers highlight the existence of an older narrator who is clearly distinguishable from his or her younger self. The resulting effect of this type of narrative situation is that the narrator constructs through memory his childhood and adolescence rather than *re*-constructs them. In the first group of novels, the narrator’s past consciousness informs his or her present state of mind, and in the second group, the opposite is the case: the narrator’s present consciousness shapes the interpretation of the past. One of the most significant findings coming from the study of these works with retrospective narrators is that regardless of the degree of portrayed narrator presence, the writers still feel compelled to evoke narrative immediacy in their works.

This chapter, then, examines texts that are retrospectively narrated in the light of previous observations and assertions made about immediate narration, with the hope of further revealing the complex possibilities of first-person voice. Traditionally, a reflective stance in self-representational writing makes for confidence in one’s ability to know and interpret his or her past self; however, recent novels demonstrate that within the act of retrospection is often ambiguity. As Frye explains, while “the predominant narrative convention of past tense can be a way of fixing the story, giving it a determinant pattern” (56), “the narrator’s memory can yield a different ‘reality,’ a different chronology: a
subversion of fixity” (57 emphasis added). The introduction of narrative elements that create immediacy in narration works to enhance this sense of “subverted fixity.”

An excellent example of a novel with substantially elapsed time between events and their narration and a comparatively minimal degree of marked narrator presence is the recent bestseller, She’s Come Undone, by Wally Lamb. In this novel is a significant durational gap between events and their narration, as Dolores is “almost forty” when she shares her story, which begins with her earliest childhood memory. Although the novel is established as having retrospective narration, it is noteworthy in a study of narrative immediacy because in a number of ways Lamb’s techniques work to lessen the emotional and ideological gap perceived between the narrator and protagonist. For much of the novel, the presence of the narrator is consequently underplayed.

Lamb’s novel is the first-person account of Dolores, a narrator-protagonist who recounts her life from early childhood up to the present. As we find in the novels considered in the previous chapters, Dolores faces heart-breaking struggles, circumstances that impede her successful self-actualization. By the time she is in the eighth grade, Dolores has dealt with a mentally unstable mother, abandonment by her father, who is unfaithful and abusive to her mother, and being raped by a neighbor. In response to these circumstances, Dolores reacts in passive and self-destructive ways, most often seeking comfort in spending hours in front of the television and binge eating. As the plot progresses, Dolores’ difficult life continues, and she is no longer capable of coping. At 247 pounds, and shortly after her mother’s sudden death, Dolores unsuccessfully attempts college. Even after undergoing years of intensive counseling and, through a tremendous display of strength of mind, losing all of her excess weight, Dolores regresses when she enters a marriage that requires the
denial of herself (both because it is based on lies about who she is and because Dolores subordinates her needs and wants to her husband’s). Eventually, Dolores achieves self-acceptance, a point of mental health that comes when she accepts without guilt her past actions. The novel’s minimal narrator presence, more specifically, its lack of presently imposed interpretations and judgments of past actions, conveys this attitude of self-acceptance.

Like many writers, Lamb creates a sense of immediacy and intimacy by maintaining a high degree of attention to detail in his narrative descriptions. Even though the narrated events occurred a number of years earlier, Dolores recalls seemingly minute details, even when remembering her distant past. In the opening of the novel, describing what she calls her earliest memory of the family’s first television, for example, she describes the delivery men’s clothes as being the same color as the box they carried and that the stairs were cement (3). She even describes the textures of the ridges on the knob on the TV, comparing it to one of her father’s checkers. This high degree of detail is coupled with a minimal number of markers indicating the passage of time. In fact, for part of the description, present tense verbs are used. Through the inclusion of such details, Lamb creates the impression that Dolores relives experiences rather than just recalls them. Dolores’ words provide confirmation, as she admits, “Many times each week memory makes me a child again” (17). This admission also suggests a lack of emotional separation from her younger self: even though the Dolores who narrates has finally come to a healthy point of self-acceptance, she has great empathy for the young, insecure girl she once was because she frequently revisits her.
Lamb’s attention to detail does not by itself separate his novel from others with reflective first-person narration because vivid narrative description is very common. Adding a further sense of immediacy in Lamb’s novel is his frequent practice of relating the younger Dolores’ thoughts without markers to indicate the durational gap between the narrator’s mental state and that of the protagonist. This, too, is a technique that may be found in works with a strong narrator presence. In this novel, however, it is particularly prevalent, and the lines distinguishing the narrator’s consciousness from the protagonist’s are especially blurred. Two separate occasions in which Dolores recalls the time shortly after being raped by Jack Speight are demonstrative here. In describing the experience of learning of Jack’s wife’s miscarriage, Dolores records the following thoughts: “I wasn’t Little Miss Innocent. Hadn’t I gotten into the car with him all those afternoons? Touched myself thinking about him that time? Baby-killer Dolores, guilty as sin” (111-112). The reader likely determines that these sentiments belonged to Dolores in the past because they follow a statement that suggests such: “I sat up and told myself to admit it; we had killed that baby” (111 emphasis added).

In Dolores’ narration of her mother’s reaction to her being raped, however, one has less certainty that the emotions expressed belong in the past. Dolores explains, “She saw me not for what I was—an accomplice in the baby’s murder—but as Jack’s innocent victim. I was able to drop her to her knees with demands. So I did” (117). The realization that Dolores was capable of manipulating her mother could be the result of retrospective interpretation, or it could represent what Dolores recognized at the time described. The reader is not sure. In the first part of the quotation, the narrating persona does not say that she thought she was an accomplice but that she was one; therefore, the suggestion is that the
older Dolores still perceives herself as a responsible party in the miscarriage. If one accepts F.K. Stanzel’s theory that free indirect style can occur in first as well as third person narration, Lamb’s technique in this type of example can be classified as such. Stanzel defines free indirect form as “the combination of the speech, the perception or the thought of a fictional character with the voice of the narrator as the teller” (219). In a first-person scenario, the thoughts of the experiencing subject are intermixed with the voice of the narrating one.

Lamb’s detailed narrative descriptions of events are coupled ironically with a noticeable minimalism, as Dolores shares very few adult interpretations, or more importantly, few judgments of earlier experiences. When emotions are described, such descriptions are brief. The tone of the novel is characterized by a matter-of-fact, even stoical attitude, similar to what one finds in Celie’s, Ellen’s, or Meely’s narration. Thus, the tone of the narrative is often reflective of the mood that one would expect the adolescent (rather than the adult) Dolores to express to those around her. For example, Dolores’s description of the moment when she learns of her parents’ pending divorce is very brief. The only emotion revealed is in the mention of tears in Dolores’ eyes. When her mother asks if she has any questions about the divorce, Dolores inquires coldly if they will get to keep the Cadillac and if she will still be able to go to a friend’s slumber party. It is not surprising that a young girl would shut down emotionally in the midst of such a moment, especially since she blames her mother for the failure of the marriage. However, the Dolores who narrates also portrays a lack of emotion and refrains from intruding upon the narrative to explain her hidden feelings at the time. A short time later in the narrative, Dolores describes her behavior at the slumber party: how she misbehaved, began shaking
uncontrollably, and blamed herself for the divorce. Here, the impact that the divorce had on Dolores is revealed to the reader, but is done so through Dolores’ actions rather than through narrator intervention. Even in the areas of the novel in which the narrator’s presence is suggested (such as when she summarizes blocks of time), the impact of the narrator’s presence is minimized because of the unemotional tone of the narration.

As the novel progresses and Dolores moves into adulthood, Lamb continues to focus on her perspective at the time of narrated experiences. Because Dolores’ descriptions of her adult self are more internally focused than those of her girlhood and adolescence, one may conclude that a shift occurs involving a more intrusive narrating persona. However, the change is likely attributable to the fact that Dolores, the protagonist, becomes more self-aware (she has been through years of therapy) even if not completely self-accepting. Exemplary are the descriptions of Dolores’ marriage to Dante. When Dante makes it clear that he will leave her if she does not have an abortion, Dolores explains, “I couldn’t leave him, not even for [a baby]. As long as he loved me, I was my new self: Cinderella, Farrah—living with the guy a whole gym full of girls wanted to dance with. I had a job, monthly bills, a normal sex life. I was weak in the knees with love. I was weak” (336). The self-judgment that ends this description of Dolores’ thoughts could belong to a narrating persona reflecting on earlier actions, but it could just as likely be Dolores’ perceptions at the time she was facing an abortion. As the novel progresses, the elapsed time becomes progressively shorter, and at the end of the novel the durational gap between experience and narration is removed. The last chapter is narrated entirely in the present tense and the narration is indistinguishable from that in the primary novels considered in the previous chapters.
Throughout the novel, then, Lamb successfully utilizes narrative strategies to blur distinctions between a subject self and a narrating persona.

Unlike Lamb’s novel, in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* the exact length of elapsed time between events and their narration is left unclear. Allison’s novel is thematically relevant to this study in that it is the self-narrated story of a young girl’s coming of age. Moreover, like the protagonists in the other novels considered, Ruth Anne, or “Bone” as she is commonly known, matures in circumstances marked by impediments to the development of the self. Apparent in her tale is the same struggle we find elsewhere—the tension between maturing (finding and asserting independence) and being female (being devalued and objectified). Bone exists in a harsh environment where women grow up fast. Bone’s female role models are strong women, but their strength is portrayed as resulting from a required acceptance of the reduced options available to them in life. Structurally, Allison’s novel is worth consideration because, although a substantial durational lapse exists between experience and narration, Allison minimizes the perceivable ideological separation between her protagonist and narrator. The plot of the novel, the progression of Bone’s life, suggests that Bone has followed and will follow the path taken by the other Boatwright women. However, the novel’s narration, with its dual qualities of retrospection and immediacy, not only reflects the ambiguities and complexities of Bone’s character, but it also allows for greater possibilities for her than are suggested by the plot.

While Allison provides markers of the young protagonist’s age throughout the novel (the novel traces her life from birth to almost thirteen), she does not reveal Bone’s age at the time she narrates her story. We do, however, know that the Bone who narrates is older than seventeen because early in the novel she refers to being that age at a time in the past: “The
The first time I ever saw Uncle Travis sober was when I was seventeen” (2). The indicators of an age difference between the narrator and the protagonist are briefly provided and are underplayed, so that the reader may easily overlook them.\textsuperscript{11} In the novel are minimal intercessions by the narrating persona so that an impression of neutrality is achieved. Even so, as in some of the other novels discussed later in this chapter, there are moments of interpretation that obviously have come about after the passage of time. It seems unlikely, for example, that as a young child Bone would understand or be able to articulate that her “mama’s” strength came as a result of her “granny’s resentment,” her “aunts’ fear and bitter humor,” and her “uncle’s hard-mouthed contempt” (10).

The presence of a narrator (as a persona separate from young Bone) is felt, too, in the early sections of the novel, in which the narration is closer to third person than first. In these early descriptions, Bone narrates in vivid detail events in which she was neither a participant nor a witness.\textsuperscript{12} In describing these events in specific detail and confidently asserting the private thoughts and motivations of others, Bone (the narrator) demonstrates no sense of doubt as to the accuracy of what she reveals.\textsuperscript{13} In telling the reader of the tragic death of her mother’s first husband, Lyle Parsons, and of her mother’s shame over having a child labeled a “bastard,” the narrator recounts what she claims were her mother’s intimately-held frustrations: “Ain’t there sin enough, grief enough, inch by inch of pain enough? Ain’t the measure made yet? Anney never said what she was thinking, but her mind was working all the time” (14). Again, one perceives a strong sense of certainty in the narration, as Bone does not speculate about her mother’s likely thought but rather quotes her mother’s inner monologue.\textsuperscript{14}
In introducing to the reader Glen, the man who later would come to abuse and eventually rape Bone, Allison includes very specific details, even though there is no mention of Bone’s being at the diner on the day that her mother and Glen meet. Allison has Bone describe the day of the week, the food served at the diner, and Glen’s work on that day, all without a hint of uncertainty. Most importantly, Bone relays Glen’s thoughts at first meeting Anney, intimate thoughts that he would have unlikely ever shared with his step-daughter: “It was like sex, that food, too good to waste in the middle of the day and a roomful of men too tired to taste. He chewed, swallowed, and began to come alive himself. He began to feel for the first time like one of the boys, a grown man accepted by the dangerous and notorious Black Earle Boatwright” (11). This omniscient-like narration imparts to Bone an emotionally distanced stance in which she has power and control over the portrayal of the man to whom she is powerless in her life. In these early descriptions, the character who later abuses and rapes Bone is portrayed as “skinny, nervous little Glen Waddell [who] didn’t seem like he would amount to much” (10).

In her study of the novel, Renee R. Curry claims that Allison’s portrayal of Bone is one that succeeds in deconstructing cultural attitudes (held both by the patriarchy and feminists) that equate silence and innocence with girls. In illustrating how Allison “subvert[s] the conventional story of female becoming” (103), Curry cites Allison’s characterization of Bone as showing masochistic sexual desire, expressions of anger, and an ability “to hold others responsible for their actions” (103). To Curry’s evidence can be added Allison’s techniques of narration, which are an integral part of the novel’s deconstructive power. Indeed, the novel subverts conventional stories of girls; however, some of what Curry perceives as Bone’s self-certainty as a protagonist is self-certainty in the
act of telling her story, which is done retrospectively. Because the narrator’s retrospective stance is underplayed, it is not surprising that Curry refers to the narrator as a twelve-year-old girl. Citing Bone’s profoundly striking assertion, “I would be thirteen in a few weeks. I was already who I was going to be” (309), Curry concludes that “by the end of the novel [Bone] knows who she has been all along” (102 emphasis added). It is Curry’s argument that Bone “[is] not in the process of becoming” (95). Indeed, Bone at a young age is very self-aware and perceives of others with a keen eye, but Allison undoubtedly portrays her as being in process. As Curry points out, Allison is candid in her portrayal of Bone’s sexuality, but the Bone who is the subject self of the story is influenced and silenced by cultural attitudes. For example, believing that masturbating is “committing a sin” (175), Bone does not discuss with her sister Reese the very normal practice that they have in common. When she discovers Reese with their mother’s panties over her face, she pretends not to notice.15 Allison chronicles Bone’s progression from having feelings of guilt, to directing her anger toward others, to making the self-protecting decision not to return with her mother to live with Glen.

Bone demonstrates self-awareness, as Curry argues, but not always self-acceptance until the end. Once when examining herself in the mirror, for example, rather than being proud at the realization that she is “strong all over” (205), Bone (the protagonist) wonders “why couldn’t I be pretty?” and expresses her desire “to be more like the girls in storybooks, princesses with pale skin and tender hearts” (206). Despite the certainty expressed in Bone’s assertion of self-awareness at the end of the novel, the significance of it is ambiguous. While claiming that she “was already who she was going to be,” she also admits that she “knew nothing, understood nothing” (309). Curry reads strength into Bone’s
assertion, but hopelessness could certainly be read into it as well. Furthermore, because Allison so successfully blurs distinctions between the narration and experience, it is unclear if the narrating persona makes the retrospective assessment that at twelve she had indeed already reached a point of culmination or if she is simply describing her thoughts at the moment in the past, thoughts which may or may not still exist. Curry argues that the novel suggests continuity between past, present, and future. The narration, with its intersections of retrospection and immediacy, does make it difficult to distinguish between different time frames. As a result, the novel’s narration successfully reflects the ambiguities inherent in the process of maturation, particularly those that exist for females growing up in profoundly oppressive circumstances.

Jill McCorkle’s *Ferris Beach* is similar to *Bastard Out of Carolina* in terms of its narration. Like Allison, McCorkle establishes the point of view as being retrospective but creates a minimal narrator presence in Kate Burns’ first-person account of her girlhood and adolescence in a middle-class family. This narrator chronicles the struggles she faces as a maturing young woman, the experiences that lead to a loss of innocence: her strained relationship with her mother, her insecurities about her appearance, her first sexual experience, her first encounter with death. These experiences, which are typical of adolescence, although viewed by the narrator with the benefit of the passage of time, are treated with a significant degree of seriousness and empathy. Over the course of the novel, Kate learns to forego girlhood fantasies for more “realistic” views. Ultimately, however, the novel ends with a continuing hope for possibilities despite the harshness of “reality,” and McCorkle’s narrative techniques reflect this hope.
At the beginning, again one finds no specific temporal reference to indicate the age difference between the narrator and the protagonist, although a time lapse is suggested. The narrating persona makes interpretative observations that in their succinct, yet highly insightful nature imply retrospection. The following early description of Kate’s parents is illustrative: “For every animated move my father had, [my mother] had composure and reserve” (2). The language used and emotional distance suggested in this type of brief but telling observation seem appropriate for a reflective narrator. Additionally, in some of the early descriptions, Kate relays an understanding of the meaningfulness and connectedness of various aspects of her life, a perspective that generally comes with the passage of time rather than occurring to one while in the midst of experiences. About her seemingly free-spirited and independent cousin Angela, for example, Kate recalls: “I attached to Angela everything beautiful and lively and good. . . Angela was energy, the eternal movement of the world” (5). The insights expressed here undoubtedly belong to the Kate who narrates her story, not her past, younger self (known by the more childish “Kitty” or “Katie”). Admitting that she did not know Angela very well and that as time passed she found it difficult to recall details of her brief time with her cousin on a trip to Ferris Beach, Kate (again, from her reflective stance) recognizes her youthful compulsion to make Angela into her own fantasy, a creation of her mind. A similar retrospective wisdom is apparent in the following description of Mrs. Poole, the town’s busybody: “[Mrs. Poole] was that misplaced woman who attempted to maintain aristocracy in a primarily blue-collar town” (35). The opening pages are characterized by these descriptions, in which McCorkle establishes her narrator’s reflective stance. As the novel progresses, however, one finds less evidence of narrator presence.
Although McCorkle establishes a distinction between the “narrating I” and the “experiencing I” in the novel, the means through which she does so are quite subtle, so that a typical reader may regard the young Kitty as the narrator, telling her story while in the midst of adolescent angst. One reason for the novel’s prevailing effect of narrative immediacy is that the narrating persona demonstrates an attitude of empathy toward her past struggles. The Kate who narrates Ferris Beach treats her adolescent insecurities and fears either with a degree of seriousness that lessens a perceivable emotional gap between the narrator and the protagonist, or with no indication of her current attitude. In the description of the night when Kitty looks at the sky hoping for a guardian angel, the consciousness of an older Kate seems to be at work in the interpretation of the moment: “I wanted to cling to the sensation that there was someone out there for me, . . . hovering, loving. I wanted to believe that I, too, would one day be there, uplifted and held by the truth of it all” (54). This explanation is likely influenced by adult interpretation, but the narration is characterized by sincerity rather than condescension. Again, this empathetic tone works to minimize any impression of emotional distance between the narrator and the protagonist.

At other times, this lack of emotional separation between older and younger selves results from McCorkle’s practice of presenting Kate’s past thoughts without indicators of elapsed time. In the narration of Kate’s first sexual experience, for example, is the following explanation: “There were no guarantees that I’d see [Merle] again, no guarantees that my mother and Angela would make it home from the lawyer’s office, no guarantees that I’d wake up tomorrow or that I’d ever turn seventeen or that there was any kind of life waiting for me” (257). The reader understands these to be Katie’s thoughts at the time she had sex with Merle. However, the narrator relays her previous perceptions without
introducing them with markers of time passage such as “I thought” or “I was thinking.” In addition, the thoughts are presented in a straightforward manner, without overt analysis or judgment by the narrator. Suggested here is the possibility that these thoughts are still held by the older narrator. Certainly, there is no sense of condescension toward this teen attitude of fatalism (perhaps because Katie has good reason to feel hopelessness, as her friend’s mother and later her own father each die suddenly).

Also adding to a sense of narrative immediacy in McCorkle’s work is the gradual unfolding of Katie’s more “realistic” perceptions of herself and others. For most of the novel, the reader is limited primarily to Katie’s young, idealized perceptions of her cousin Angela, and conversely, her overly critical views of her mother, which are colored by her adolescent insecurities and rebellion. It is not until the end of the novel that a fuller, more “realistic” portrayal of Angela and Cleva, Kate’s mother, is provided. The reader is eventually made aware of Angela’s weaknesses: her dependence on men and her tendencies toward irresponsibility and selfishness. Likewise, McCorkle reveals only near the end that Cleva’s distance stems from her being rejected by Angela in the past at times when she had attempted to act as a mother figure to her. Had McCorkle chosen to provide foreshadowing of Katie’s later realizations (as one often finds in works with reflective narrators), then the presence of the narrator would be more strongly felt and likely more influential in the reader’s interpretation of Kate.

In her essay, “Dizzying Possibilities, Plots, and Endings,” Elinor Ann Walker claims that through the creation of Kate, McCorkle successfully portrays the difficult process of one’s reaching self-actualization during female adolescence, a time when girls are in the midst of “competing cultural prescriptions of female roles” (80). Walker convincingly
argues that in the novel’s use, and at times deconstruction, of well-known stories (myths, fairytales, autobiographies), McCorkle “probe[s] the ambiguities and multiplicities of growing up female” (80). In addition to an intriguing use of stories and myths, McCorkle’s choices regarding the novel’s narration play a key (although less obvious) part in the portrayal of the ambiguities of growing up female. Walker concludes that Kate ultimately “rejects the romance plot for a more realistic story” (92). Arguing that a reliance on romanticism proves restrictive in a girl’s search for identity, Walker also recognizes the difficulties that may accompany a loss of romantic notions. “The spinning world of possibilities” that Kate enters at the end of the novel “is disorienting at best” (Walker 93). A world stripped of romantic illusions is, as Walker describes, a “world rife with danger and betrayal” (92-93) for both for the girl and the woman. In portraying a close ideological proximity between the retrospective narrator and her younger self, McCorkle relays the ambiguity that characterizes not only the experience of girlhood and adolescence but of womanhood as well.

In *She’s Come Undone*, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and *Ferris Beach*, the retrospective stance occupied by the narrator allows the writers to highlight their young female protagonists’ agency. Through the act of memory, the narrators of these novels endow their earlier selves with self-awareness and self-worth, qualities that the reader assumes have been impeded in the past. With the passage of time comes a sense of confidence in one’s interpretations of his or her previous experiences. Because the presence of the narrator is underplayed in these works, however, the writers create the impression that their protagonists (not just the narrators) have this confident self-awareness. Retrospection not only suggests certainty in knowing one’s self, but in some reflectively narrated works this
confidence extends to an expressed faith in the existence of a unified self. The experiences of these three protagonists tend to belie absolute certainty or singularity; therefore, the writers make narrative choices, which create a sense of immediacy and allow for openness and multiplicity. These novels all end with uncertainty and ambiguity, despite the fact that their narrators occupy a seemingly knowledgeable, retrospective position. In works with a high degree of narrator presence, the protagonist is often placed in a position of object rather than subject as the narrator’s consciousness presumably is in control of the portrayal of the past self. Nonetheless, the remainder of this chapter will demonstrate that even in novels with a high degree of marked narrator presence are suggestions of ambiguous relations between the past and the present. In considering instances of immediacy in the narration of these works, one understands better not only the nuances of first-person voice, but also the intricate connections between narrative voice and its social context.

While the narrator is minimally perceptible in the works thus far discussed, in Richard Wright’s Black Boy the narrator’s presence is unquestionably felt to the point at times that it overrides that of the subject self. In Chapter Two of this study I mention Richard Wright’s Black Boy as a contrasting example to Meely LaBauve, which is narrated in the present tense, so that the narrator and the protagonist are virtually indistinguishable. Wright’s purposes, especially his desire to make the work representative of a group of people, are such that they call for the confidence and certainty that come with a strong narrator presence.

In Black Boy are many occasions in which the narrator shares insights that the young “Richard” has not yet achieved. In revealing his childhood attitude toward Jewish people, for example, the narrating persona describes himself as one of a group of “black children,
poor, half-starved, ignorant victims of racial prejudice” (72). In such descriptions, the narrative distance suggests he is describing a different person rather than himself. As a reflective adult, the Richard who narrates explains what he did not understand as a child, that “an attitude of antagonism or distrust toward Jews was bred in us from childhood” (72).

Typically, in novels with immediate narration, judgments of the protagonist’s thoughts and actions are not overtly made by the narrator but are left to reader interpretation. In *Black Boy*, one of the ways in which the narrator’s presence is made known is through such judgments. The following description of himself as a young boy is illustrative: “I felt that the ‘white’ man had the right to beat the ‘black’ boy, for I *naively* assumed that the ‘white’ man must have been the ‘black’ boy’s father. And did not all fathers, like my father, have the right to beat their children?” (27 emphasis added). Such descriptions highlight the ideological distance between the narrator and an earlier, unenlightened past self.

Even at the times in which the narrator Richard shares thoughts that he likely *did* have at the time of the described events, one continues to find reminders of the elapsed time between experience and narration. In describing his stay at the orphanage, Richard remembers the following: “I held myself in, afraid to act or speak until I was sure of my surroundings, feeling most of the time that I was suspended over a void. My imagination soared; I dreamed of running away. Each morning I vowed that I would leave the next morning, but the next morning always found me afraid” (35). Here the language and imagery used belong distinctly to the adult recalling the experience. Additionally, the practice of summarizing in a few sentences a substantial period of time is typical of retrospection. While the narrator demonstrates sympathy for his younger self, he continually maintains a degree of distance.
Also reminding the reader of the narrator’s presence is Wright’s use of foreshadowing. These glances into the future allow for past events to be interpreted with a broader level of understanding. One finds an example in the description of the young Richard’s approach to his father and his father’s mistress to ask for money. The narrator explains that the experience made him feel “ashamed” and gave him “the feeling that I had had to do with something unclean” (39). Significantly, this description is followed immediately by a foreshadowing of the next time Richard was to see his father twenty-years later. The narrator explains that at the later visit he comes to view his father with pity, as he realizes that “from the white landowners above him there had not been handed to him a chance to learn the meaning of loyalty, of sentiment, of tradition. Joy was as unknown to him as was despair” (40-41). Clear distinctions are undoubtedly made here between the perceptions of Richard the scared, ashamed boy and those of the man who visits his father much later. While the past self tends to inform and influence the present consciousness of the narrator in the novels thus far considered, the present more strongly informs the past in this work. John O. Hodges, in considering Wright’s re-creation of dialogue, finds “the portrait that we have is one which is determined more by the author’s present attitudes and experiences than by any actual events in his past” (421).³⁹

In some surprising ways, narrative immediacy, along with the heightened presence of the retrospective narrator, plays a role in Wright’s portrayal of a present consciousness’s informing past events. Even though the durational and ideological gap between the narrator and the protagonist is quite pronounced in *Black Boy*, Wright (or more accurately, the narrator) does create immediacy through the use of dialogue and detailed descriptions.²⁰ In *Memory and Narrative*, James Olney notes that Wright’s descriptions of events are
characterized by a surprising vividness, given that they are said to have occurred many years before *Black Boy* was written and that some of the experiences did not even happen to Wright.²¹ According to Olney, the result of the work’s narrative vibrancy is that “the I is deployed in such a manner as to seem to guarantee a continuity of identity from four to twelve to thirty-seven” (241 emphasis added). Put another way, Wright’s retrospective narrator uses vivid description in order to enact an impression of continuity between the past and the present selves. *Black Boy* invites in the reader a high degree of assurance that what is assessed regarding earlier experiences was and is still “true,” a confidence that the past self is knowable and can be made present. As Olney observes, Wright “exercises a compelling narrative power over the reader’s imagination” (239). Interestingly, then, narrative immediacy, which is typically associated with openness, adds to the certainty and power portrayed by the clearly retrospective narrator.

In *Black Boy*, Richard Wright attempts two purposes in that he seeks to write both a personal story, one that attempts self-exploration, and a representational story, “a ‘voice for those ‘voiceless’ blacks of his generation” (qtd. in Hodges 432).²² Both of these goals are furthered by Wright’s techniques of narration, which intersect retrospection and immediacy. As happens frequently in autobiography and fiction with retrospective narrators, self-exploration in this work involves examining one’s present self in light of his past experiences. For this goal, then, a reflective stance is highly appropriate. Furthermore, the confidence and insight that frequently come with restrospection are useful in the achievement of the second goal. In serving as a voice for others, Wright doubtless would want that voice to be strongly and clearly expressed. In a seemingly ironic twist, immediacy likewise adds to the portrayal of certainty in the narration, as has been argued. The practice
of giving past experiences immediacy (either by recalling or by creating vivid details) is an integral part of the process undertaken by the narrator of ascribing value and meaning to his past experiences. Therefore, narrative immediacy plays a fundamental role in Wright’s successful achievement of his lofty purposes.

William Kowalski’s debut novel *Eddie’s Bastard*, published in 2000, has (like Dorothy Allison’s novel) a “bastard” as its narrator-protagonist, but in an intriguing twist the mother, rather than the father, is unknown. In contrast to *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the “bastard” in this novel is a male, and he gets the title not from the state or the community but presumably from his mother. As a baby, the protagonist of the story, Billy Mann, is left on his grandfather’s front step with an attached note that reads “Eddie’s bastard,” Billy’s mother is suspected as the one who leaves him. Unlike Bone’s situation in Allison’s novel, no permanent record is kept of Billy’s status as a bastard. The title arises from Billy’s self-designation: “That’s pretty much how I’ve come to think of myself—Eddie’s Bastard, plain and simple. It’s not a very dignified title, but it’s a title nonetheless, and I’ve learned to bear it, if not with pride, then at least without shame” (5). Significantly, the novel is not entitled “Billy Mann” but rather highlights the protagonist’s connection to his father and reflects the importance that Kowalski places on familial ties. Billy grows up knowing only one member of his family, his grandfather, who dies at the end of the novel. Despite, or perhaps because of, his isolation, Billy seeks knowledge and understanding of his family history. While the identity of his father is known, Billy does not have first hand knowledge of him, for he is killed in the Vietnam War before Billy’s birth.

Raised solely by his paternal grandfather and weaned on stories of his family history, Billy learns how that history is characterized both by greatness and shame, greatness
because his family was once prestigious and wealthy (the town is named “Mannville” after all) and shame because Billy’s grandfather lost the family fortune in a failed venture involving ostrich ranching. With Billy’s arrival, his grandfather finds comfort knowing that he is not the last to have the Mann name, seeing hope in Billy for the restoration of family pride. Billy has big shoes to fill because his father occupies near-heroic status in the town, a standing only elevated by his premature death. The novel very clearly portrays the notion that one’s sense of self is shaped by knowledge of those who lived before. Kowalski’s techniques of narration are instrumental in the portrayal of the theme of the connectedness of the past and the present (and even the future). Also suggested in the novel’s plot and narration is a greater degree than one finds in the first three novels of certainty and hope regarding the outcome for the protagonist in the maturation process.

Kowalski’s novel proves an interesting and useful study in narration for a number of reasons. While most of the novelists considered thus far (with the exception of Black Boy) underplay narrator presence, Kowalski creates a narrator who has a presence clearly distinguishable from the younger self who acts as the protagonist. Although the exact length of elapsed time between the narrated events and their narration is unclear, the reader is repeatedly reminded that the narrator is telling his story retrospectively. One way that the adult narrator’s presence is made known is through direct references to how his previous level of understanding was limited because of youth. For example, in regard to his grandfather’s alcoholism, the narrator explains, “If I’d known how alcohol, like a cat, will torture its victims mercilessly before dispatching them, I would have been more alarmed at how much Grandpa was drinking. But I was a teenager, and teenagers rarely bother to look beyond their own noses” (186).
Intriguingly, a gap between narrator and protagonist is established and maintained although it first seems at odds with the theme of connectedness. This seeming dichotomy between technique and theme actually serves Kowalski’s purposes, however, in that through his stance as a reflective persona, the narrator imposes a sense of continuity between the past and the present. Retrospection, having distance from described events, allows a narrator to manipulate his or her presentation of those events in ways that allow for such a desired effect. The periodic quotations from Billy’s great-grandfather’s diary serve to emphasize the narrator’s retrospective stance and explicitly join the past and the present. Significantly, Billy did not have access to the diary until the time described at the end of the novel (when Billy is eighteen). In the textual reminders that Billy read the diary after the described experiences, Kowalski highlights the temporal distance between events and their narration: “Many years later, I would read what my ancestor Willie Mann had to say on the subject. . .” (112). While pointing to temporal gaps, the quotes from the diary also show connections across generations, as the narrator inserts excerpts from the diary periodically when they are relevant to his own experience. Perhaps more significantly, the inclusion of his great-grandfather’s words of life wisdom, presented as universal truths that relate to his own thoughts and actions, adds to the tone of confidence that one finds in the narrator’s interpretations of his past experiences. Shortly before his description of facing the school bully, Billy quotes what his great-grandfather had to say about “the ancient urge to kill the weak” that “lurks just beneath the surface” of modern man (112). Kowalski suggests that what Billy reads in the diary as an adult allows him a better understanding of his childhood and adolescence. The above quotation from the diary regarding human nature and violence
is provided in conjunction with an incident in Billy’s life that supports his great-grandfather’s philosophy: he is beaten up by the bully.

The same excerpt from the diary further suggests that, as a boy and not just as an adult recalling past experiences, Billy demonstrates an understanding of human nature similar to that described by his wise great-grandfather. The narrator recalls how in a class discussion of *Lord of the Flies* he told his teacher that in the novel the boys’ “killer instincts were awakened” (112). Significantly, then, the excerpts from the diary provide validation of his youthful actions and his character as a young man. In moments such as these, one witnesses how the present consciousness of the narrator, through the act of memory, informs the portrayal of his past self. In examining the novel’s treatment of the relationship between the past and the present, however, one discovers a greater degree of complexity than has so far been described. While Kowalski undoubtedly portrays a present consciousness informing a past one, the reverse relationship is also at work in the novel. The reader is informed early on that Billy’s grandfather continuously shares with him stories from his past. Therefore, long before he reads the diary, Billy is highly influenced by his past. Specifically, he believes that he is destined to carry on the greatness displayed by his ancestors. Thus, a circular, rather than a linear, relationship between the past and present is suggested in the novel. Given this fact, it is not surprising that throughout the narrative Kowalski blurs distinctions between the narrator (the representative of the present) and the protagonist (the representative of the past).

The lengthy, descriptive chapter headings, reminiscent of eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels and autobiographies, call attention to narrator presence in that they act as reminders of the contrived and retrospective nature of the narrator’s endeavor
(they draw attention to the fact that particular elements of Billy’s story have been selected and organized into chapters). However, while these chapter titles suggest retrospection, they are presented in a present tense voice, as is customary in earlier works with similar chapter headings. In this aspect of the novel, then, one finds the intersecting of immediacy and retrospection, the blurring of distinctions between the narrator and the protagonist. As an example, Chapter Six is entitled, “My Fourteenth Year; I Become a Man; How Willie Found the Money; the Rory Curse; I Become a Writer.” This particular heading promises two major life achievements—becoming a man and becoming a writer—asserted with a high degree of certainty, despite the fact that they are generally thought to be highly significant milestones characterized by complexity. Such confidence may suggest retrospection, as one often recognizes moments as being life-altering after time has passed. However, it is likely that the above assertions could be made by a boy of fourteen. What happens to warrant the claim, “I become a man,” is that Billy loses his virginity. The idea that this achievement alone makes one a man represents a limited view of manhood, one likely held by an adolescent.

Suggested in the above discussion of the chapter headings is the notion that, despite the novel’s prevalent reminders of the narrator’s retrospective stance, present also are aspects of the narration that suggest immediacy. I have already argued that narrative retrospection is utilized to evoke a sense of continuity between past and present. Interestingly, narrative immediacy aids in the same purpose. At the very end of the novel, the narrator recalls the thoughts he had while at his grandfather’s wake. He explains his hope for the future, specifically of having children and continuing the family line. The narrator goes on to muse, “We are daredevils, superpeople, heroes, we Manns. Small-town
heroes, but heroes nonetheless” (367). Because of its immediacy (the lack of markers that indicate elapsed time), this sentiment can be associated with the consciousness of the narrator as well as that of Billy at eighteen. On several occasions as a boy, Billy perceives of himself as a Celtic warrior or a superhero. The suggestion, through the immediacy created in the ending of the novel, is that this childhood perception, while perhaps toned down slightly, continues in Billy’s present and future. In describing himself at the funeral, the narrator uses primarily the past tense. As a result, Kowalski suggests that time has elapsed between narration and the final scene. The exact length of time is left open, and the reader is left with Billy’s eighteen-year-old hopeful projections of his future. The narrator does not reveal whether the projections proved to be accurate. The openness of the ending furthers the confident sense of continuity between the past, present, and future that characterize the whole of the novel.23

As with *Black Boy* and *Eddie’s Bastard*, the narrator’s presence is unquestionably felt in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. However, Harper Lee, more frequently than Wright and Kowalski, limits the narration to Scout’s likely level of awareness at the time of the narrated events. Nonetheless, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the present consciousness of the narrator certainly informs the presentation and interpretation of the past self. From the beginning, the novel is established as being reflective: the narrator introduces events as if they occurred in the distant past, and a sense of elapsed time is suggested in nostalgic descriptions of Scout’s family history and of the town Maycomb. The level of the language (and at times the level of consciousness) is clearly that of an adult. For example, the presence of the narrator Jean Louise is clear in wistful descriptions such as the following:

> Somehow, it was hotter then . . . . Men’s stiff collars wilted by nine in the morning. Ladies bathed before noon, after their three-o’clock
naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frosting of sweat and sweet talcum. . . . A day was twenty-four hours long but seemed longer. . . . [I]t was a time of vague optimism for some of the people: Maycomb County had recently been told that it had nothing to fear but fear itself. (10)

In the above passage, a reflective adult is perceivable and in control of the narrative. In this instance, the present consciousness of the narrator influences a nostalgic interpretation of the past, with the passage of time the past often comes to seem better than it was in “reality.” Even so, the longing of nostalgia, while it highlights the gap between past and present, suggests a desire to recapture childhood. Inherent in such a desire is a kind of deference to the younger self. Indeed, there are instances in the novel in which the perspective of the narrator clearly overrides that of the protagonist, and throughout most of the narrative the language and style belong to the adult speaker. Nonetheless, the narrating persona also intentionally portrays related thoughts as belonging to the young Scout. The following passage, which is found in one of the courtroom scenes, is illustrative: “As Tom Robinson gave his testimony, it came to me that Mayella Ewell must have been the loneliest person in the world. . . . She was as sad, I thought, as what Jem called a mixed child: white people wouldn’t have anything to do with her because she lived among pigs; Negroes wouldn’t have anything to do with her because she was white” (194). Lee provides specific, overt indicators that what is presented are Scout’s thoughts at the time of the trial. The narrator explains that the realization about Mayella occurred as she heard the testimony. Additionally, as the narrator relays Scout’s perceptions of the Ewells’ plight, these thoughts are interrupted by Atticus’ next question of Tom at the hearing (194). One finds a particularly strong sense of immediacy here, considering the clear indicators that what is narrated belongs to the distant past.
The gently mocking tone that characterizes much of the narration warrants consideration in the examination of narrator proximity in the novel. Very frequently, the tone is marked by an exaggeration, which simultaneously highlights the presence of the adult narrator and works to re-create childhood perceptions. The tone implies reflection because one’s thoughts in childhood are often exaggerated versions of “reality,” but one only understands them to be such from the perspective of adulthood. Significantly, however, the narrator refrains from overtly judging her childish perceptions as being silly or naïve. Instead, such perceptions are presented with little indication (other than the language) of the presence of the adult narrator. A representative example is Jem’s description of Boo Radley, which the narrator drolly characterizes as “reasonable:” “He dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that’s why his hands were bloodstained—if you ate an animal raw, you could never wash the blood off. There was a long jagged scar that ran across his face; what teeth he had were yellow and rotten; his eyes popped, and he drooled most of the time” (17). Although the reader likely perceives sarcasm in the label “reasonable,” the narrator does not overtly judge this description as an exaggeration.

Although there is a clear temporal gap between narration and experience established in this novel, Lee is nonetheless interested in relaying what is to be perceived as an authentic rendering of the consciousness of young Scout. On occasion (usually at the beginning and end of chapters), the narrator does provide what seem to be her own present interpretations, but significantly, this narrator commentary is found mostly in descriptions of setting—the time, place, and cultural climate. On the other hand, when the subject matter is Scout or her immediate family, Lee usually limits the narrator to insights that Scout would likely have as a girl. When specific, influential experiences of Scout’s youth are portrayed, the narration is
characterized by a high degree of dialogue and/or a rendering of Scout’s inner monologue, both being elements that create a sense of immediacy.

This focus on girlhood consciousness (coupled with a minimal degree of adult interpretation) is found in the novel’s treatment of Scout’s rejection of cultural expectations regarding female behavior. Lee clearly portrays Scout as a “tomboy,” as she refuses to wear dresses and gets into fights. Particularly significant is the narration of Aunt Alexandra’s tea, during which Scout’s aunt attempts to shape her into a lady, an event further significant because during it Scout learns of Tom Robinson’s murder. In the language of the statement, “There was no doubt about it, I must soon enter this world, where on its surface fragrant ladies rocked slowly, fanned gently, and drank cool water” (236), Lee suggests the adult narrator’s presence, but Lee clearly intends the presented thoughts to be perceived as being those that Scout had while attending the tea. As the narrator goes on to explain how she felt “more at home in my father’s world,” the lines distinguishing the narrator and the protagonist blur: “No matter how undelectable there was something about [men] that I instinctively liked. . . they weren’t— ‘Hypocrites, Mrs. Perkins, born hypocrites,’ Mrs. Merriweather was saying” (236). While we understand that a reflective narrator is speaking, one of the ladies at the tea (at a moment in the past) completes the narrator’s sentence. This moment in the novel is another in which Lee makes a conscious effort to highlight the authenticity of the narrator’s re-creation of the past. A further effect created, of course, is a sense of affiliation between the narrator and her past self.

Further contributing to the reader’s impression that he or she enters the consciousness of young Scout are the repeated instances in which the narrator does not intrude with commentary. Shortly after Scout contemplates the genuineness of men as
compared to the women she knows, she learns of Tom Robinson’s murder. Poignantly, Scout follows her aunt’s lead and suppresses her emotions in response to the news: “With my best company manners, I asked [Mrs. Merriweather] if she wanted some [cookies]. After all, if aunty could be a lady at a time like this, so could I” (240). No narrator commentary of this obviously weighty act by Scout is given. As in novels in which a minimal durational gap is established between events and their narration, interpretation of the significance of Scout’s behavior is left to the reader. The reader understands that these women, on whom Scout is modeling her behavior, have just shown themselves to be false and superficial. Therefore, the chapter on the ladies’ tea suggests a rather dim view of the likely outcome of Scout’s maturation process.

By the end of the novel, however, a greater sense of hope predominates, a development that owes ultimately to Scout’s empathy for Arthur “Boo” Radley, a defining moment in her maturation that outweighs her acceptance of hypocrisy as a mark of a lady. Again, in the narration of Scout’s inner monologue at this moment is a seeming focus on past thoughts rather than present interpretation. The statement, “I felt very old,” is immediately followed by the return of innocence: “but when I looked at the tip of my nose I could see fine misty beads, but looking cross-eyed made me dizzy so I quit” (282).

In To Kill a Mockingbird, Harper Lee’s explicit establishment of a retrospective narrator imparts an air of credence and authority to the narrative voice. As the novel progresses, the signs marking the presence of the retrospective narrator fade, and the consciousness of the protagonist, Scout, is portrayed as the directing force of the narrative. As memory and particularly nostalgia can be distorting, the retrospective narrative stance is tempered with attempts, through the creation of immediacy, to lend a sense of accuracy to
the portrayal of young Scout. A result of this coupling of narrative techniques is the projection of an attitude of confidence in the possibility of a knowable, “authentic” past self (a confidence that has been undermined by modernism). Furthermore, the high degree of narrative immediacy that characterizes the novel’s clearly retrospective narration suggests a desire on the part of the narrator to connect to her past self, in order not only to attach value and significance to her earlier existence, but also perhaps to recapture in the present the hope that defined her past.

The broadening of this study to include novels that portray a substantial temporal gap between events and their narration ultimately shows that narrative immediacy (attempts at lessening the perception of this temporal gap) is an integral aspect of a wide range of first-person narrated works. Therefore, narrator proximity is an element of fiction that is indeed worth study, not only for extending the parameters of narrative theory, but also for enhancing our understanding of the intricate ways in which narrative voice interacts with theme and cultural context.

Notes

1 Often in autobiographical works, when a writer recalls childhood events, one’s present perspective is shown to influence his or her memory of the past. As a result, the description of one’s childhood becomes, as Olney describes, “much more a construction than a reconstruction” (“On Telling One’s Own Story” 42). Bjorklund writes that recent works on autobiography “have increasingly turned to the subject of self-construction in autobiography” (11). See Gullestad’s study, which includes Olney’s essay, for further consideration of how this phenomenon is manifested specifically in autobiographies of childhood.

2 See Bjorklund, specifically the chapter entitled, “Autobiography as a Social Situation,” in which she posits, “Autobiographers are not only constructing the stories of their lives, they are also strategically presenting the self” (17). See the introduction for an overview of Bjorklund’s discussion of the ways in which awareness of audience influences the work of autobiographers.
Because these novels have narrators who clearly occupy retrospective positions, they might be classified as fictional works modeled on conventional autobiography.

A key concern faced by autobiographers is the conflicting expectation of vividness and credibility. For a life story to be compelling and even believable, one feels the need to include more specifics than he or she likely remembers. Thus, when including detailed descriptions of long ago events, questions of credibility may be raised. Novelists face similar opposing concerns when portraying first person narrators engaged in self-representational endeavors. Because writers wish to make a story engaging for a reader, their narrators often pay close attention to detail, even when the described experiences occurred well in the past.

As I discuss more fully later in this chapter, one finds in Richard Wright’s Black Boy close attention to detail despite the elapsed time. Lamb’s novel is distinctive from other retrospective works because the vivid description is coupled with a significant minimization of the expected emotional gap between the older and younger selves.

By minimizing the perceivable gap between his narrator and protagonist, Lamb minimizes the potential conflict between vividness and credibility. Because the durational gap is underplayed, the reader likely does not question the authenticity of described events.

Vividly detailed descriptions are found throughout the novel. Of the most compelling are the painfully honest descriptions of her experiences with binge eating.

Prior to Stanzel’s study, Seymour Chatman outlined the characteristics of what he labels “indirect free style.” Chatman, however, limits his application of it to the third person.

This version of free indirect style is utilized to some degree (and with different effects) in each of the novels considered in this chapter.

Barbara White’s work is a useful source in the tension that characterizes female adolescence.

For example, in her essay on the novel, Renee R. Curry refers specifically to the narrator of the novel (rather than the protagonist) as a “twelve-year-old girl I” (102).

Some of these narrated events are experiences in which Bone was present, but they occurred before she would have likely been conscious of them, much less understand their significance.

Unlike what is customary when a first-person narrator describes something he or she did not witness, the narrating persona provides no explanation as to how she came to be privy to the events and private thoughts of others. Such explanations, something like, “As it was later described to me…,” tend to draw attention to narrator presence, which again, is downplayed in this novel. Additionally, the lack of such explanations tends to add a high degree of the confidence to the tone. Most readers probably do not question how Bone
comes to know what she describes, because the information is provided in such a matter-of-fact way.

14 One finds here an interesting example of free indirect style. Bone, like a third person narrator, combines her voice with the perceptions of her mother.

15 It should be noted that Bone’s silence with her sister is motivated by a desire to protect her as well as her belief that they are committing a sin. Bone explains that both she and Reese made sure that no one caught them in the act that they never talked about.

16 The suggestion of a retrospective stance is furthered also by the way in which the novel compresses time and skips time. For example, the time that elapses between Katie at age nine and her eighth grade year are skipped as McCorkle moves from chapter three to chapter four.

17 The past tense voice alone does not indicate the length of elapsed time, as it can refer to very recent or very distant past events. Each of the novels considered in the study as examples of immediate narration, with the exception of Meely LaBauve, are narrated with at least some use of past tense verbs.

18 As I argue in the introduction, Black Boy is most appropriately considered as “life writing” or “autobiographical fiction”—some category that makes allowances for the ways that the work deviates from conventional autobiography.

19 Hodges seems not to distinguish between Wright and the narrator of the work. While Wright is likely closely aligned with the persona who narrates the text, I contend that one should not conflate the two.

20 He also provides thoughts held by protagonist, without markers of passed time.

21 Olney cites the scene with uncle in the buggy crossing the body of water (check this).

22 This duality has been cited by several critics as being inherent in the writing of African Americans. Hodges notes it specifically in Black Boy. He observes that the work enables Wright to “understand himself and to understand where he stood in the black community” and to “create a platform from which a judgment might be pronounced on the Southern white society, which blighted the hopes and aspirations of its black youth” (418).

23 Critics such as Barbara White would argue that the confidence portrayed in this novel regarding the outcome of Billy’s maturation has much to do with the fact that he is male. The expectations for male behavior are not at odds with the objectives related to becoming a mature man: central to both are strength and independence. On the other hand, the expectations for being female (culturally associated with dependence and weakness) and for being an adult are at odds. Even so, Kowalski’s novel subverts some of the traditionally-held notions of gender. While affiliation with others is typically associated with female
development, Billy’s sense of self is clearly influenced by his understanding of his connections with others.
The concluding chapter of this study demonstrates that writers evoke narrative immediacy even when portraying narrators in retrospective positions. The effects created by the immediacy in these other novels, however, vary in some intriguing ways from those discovered in novels characterized by a more pure immediacy (works in which little temporal or ideological gap is communicated between the narrator and the protagonist). In the texts considered in the concluding chapter, the reader’s impression is that the narrator attempts to evoke a sense of close proximity to events for various purposes, such as connecting to the past, seeking understanding of the present, engaging the audience, and establishing credibility. In the primary novels considered in the main chapters, because the narrator’s presence is closely associated with that of the experiencing subject, the sense is that the writer creates immediacy in an attempt at mimesis. In works characterized by this author-inspired immediacy, writers employ narrative techniques to portray complexity and ambiguity in the narrator’s self-perceptions and self-presentation. Conversely, in cases of narrator-created immediacy, the suggestion is that narrators utilize strategies that reinforce a surety of tone and continuity between one’s present and past selves. In the different novels, the reader perceives varying degrees of success in the narrator’s attempt. Nonetheless, in each of the works the author, as he or she manipulates narrator proximity to described experiences, ultimately undermines the certainty projected by the narrator.

As a substantial element of such a variety of first-person narrated fictional works, narrative immediacy, an aspect often subtly employed so generally overlooked, warrants study, as such consideration promises the enhancement of literary scholarship in a number of ways. Such investigation, of course, helps to illuminate the diverse and innovative
narrative strategies employed by writers in communicating the nuanced interrelations between the “narrating I” and the “experiencing I.” Moreover, one better understands the ways and effects by which writers undertake the formidable task of transforming fluid, lived durational experience into a fixed, written text.

In closely studying techniques of narration, one discovers the ways in which the tone and certain themes of novels are attributable to narrative immediacy. Therefore, such work deepens the reader’s understanding of the connections between form and theme. Susan Lanser, who attempts to overcome the split between technique and literary context existing in the study of narrative point of view, convincingly argues that “we understand ideology to concern the form as well as the ‘content’ of a text” (18). Therefore, one should seek to make connections between cultural context and narrative form. Lanser advocates the use of speech act theory to overcome either/or approaches. The study of narrative immediacy also functions in the avoidance of a too limiting or restrictive approach to narrative voice.

In the study of novels with specific themes of maturation, consideration of the narrative strategies that communicate narrator proximity results in a greater appreciation for the complexity inherent in the concepts of “self” and “subject.” One further discovers that contemporary writers, especially when portraying marginalized narrator-protagonists, seek not to overcome dualities and paradoxes regarding self-identity but to maintain and therefore respect them. Thus, they seek ways to disrupt and reject notions of linear development, as well as means for unifying self-identity. In evoking narrative spontaneity, writers are able to maintain flexibility in their portrayals of characters and themes. Ultimately, because of the fluidity of forms, a farther-reaching implication of the study of narrative immediacy can be cited, namely such study is germane to questions regarding the viability of the various
(sub)genres of life writing. As I observed in the introduction, some critics have predicted the end of both autobiography and the *Bildungsroman*. In considering the present state of the latter, Pin-chia Feng argues, “the *Bildungsroman* can hardly die, because it is constantly being refreshed by new and different authors” (14). Recent scholars of autobiography have demonstrated that the same conclusion can be drawn for the broader category of life-writing as well. Careful and close study of narrative strategies reveals that the evocation of immediacy is one way that writers are re-envisioning, and therefore, enlivening modes of self-representational expression.


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Vita

Amy Faulds Sandefur was born in Texas but grew up in Zebulon, Georgia. She currently resides in Roswell, Georgia. She received a Bachelor of Arts in English from LaGrange College in 1993 and a Master of Arts in English from the State University of West Georgia in 1995. She has taught first year writing at Kennesaw State University, State University of West Georgia, and Louisiana State University. In August of 2003, she will join the faculty at West Georgia as a Visiting Assistant Professor of English. Her research interests include nineteenth and twentieth-century American literature, Southern literature, life writing, and narrative voice. At the Summer 2003 Commencement, she will be conferred with the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by the English faculty of Louisiana State University.