2023

THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL AS THEOLOGY: HOW NARRATIVES OF CONVERSION EXPERIENCE IN LITERATURE EXPOSE THE REALITY OF LIVED BELIEF

Elizabeth Ann Walker Thomae

THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL AS THEOLOGY: HOW NARRATIVES OF CONVERSION EXPERIENCE IN LITERATURE EXPOSE THE REALITY OF LIVED BELIEF

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

to the faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
of
ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES
at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY
New York
by
Elizabeth Ann Walker Thomae

Date Submitted: 04/19/2023

Date Approve: 04/20/2023

Elizabeth Ann Walker Thomae

Dr. Stephen Sicari

ABSTRACT

THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL AS THEOLOGY: HOW NARRATIVES OF CONVERSION EXPERIENCE IN LITERATURE EXPOSE THE REALITY OF LIVED BELIEF

Elizabeth Ann Walker Thomae

To think of the human life as a walking, talking, living and breathing poem radically changes the way we view our day-to-day experiences. A strong tie exists between the written word and the human aesthetic experience, especially concerning religion, a tie that has existed since literature's inception. Many great philosophers, psychologists, historians, and theologians alike have attempted to grasp what truly composes a religious experience and what gives these experiences meaning. Herein lies the dilemma: religious experience escapes concrete explanation, yet is felt and expressed by every person, albeit in an array of different ways. Religious experience is beyond the capacities of language, yet it requires language to be discovered. Literature, however, bridges the existing gaps by diving deep into human souls and bringing the inexpressible to the surface. This power is most evident in conversion stories, from the apostle Paul to Saint Augustine, from TS Eliot to Bob Dylan and beyond. Conversion experiences, whether a slow, arduous process or a dramatic "ah-ha" moment, exemplify what it means to believe on a profound and innate level. Additionally, there is an evident connection between the conversion experience to personal trauma. The discord between what a

traumatized individual experiences daily and what they believe in that moment can lead to the “ah-ha” moment of transcendence that brings religious change.

In this thesis, I closely analyze the conversion stories recorded in *Things Fall Apart* and *The Color Purple,* paying special attention to trauma, to showcase literature’s ability to tackle naked truths regarding what it means to be a human in ways that theology alone falls short. I explore what exactly it is about literature that allows readers to gain a deeper understanding of the human experience of belief. I prove that the power of literature lies in its ability to bring us closer to the divine and in the examples it provides of spiritual journey. Through the stories we read and characters we encounter, we are reminded of the profound beauty and complexity of the world and of the living theology that comprises what we believe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As odd as it might be to begin my thanks with a place rather than with a person, I do want to first thank New York City for being the perfect backdrop to write this thesis. Living in Manhattan and being surrounded by the constant energy of millions of lives inspired me to write about the lived human experience, as well as piqued my curiosity of how belief translates from knowledge to action. New York City embodies my writing experience—from reading *Things Fall Apart* on the E train to diving into Saint Augustine in the New York Public Library to exploring womanist theology during the first few beautiful spring days in Central Park. New York is the perfect background to research and to write and to live, and I cannot thank it enough for existing and for being my home the past two years.

Of course, I must thank my family for their endless support. Thank you to my parents who might not totally understand what I do as a literature scholar, but call me daily to see how it's going, to gauge my stress level, to make sure I'm taking care of myself, to tell me they're proud. My husband Luke deserves special thanks, for he has been a massive lifeline to me through the entire process of writing this thesis. He constantly listened to me spitball ideas when I first began my graduate degree and was trying to find my research interests. He's rubbed my back while I cried countless times, doubting myself and wondering if I was really good enough to accomplish this. He's made dinner, taken care of the dog, and done the laundry when it was really my turn, just because he saw that I was stressed and needed time to write. His selfless love, kindness, and support have meant the world to me, and I want to thank him from the bottom of my heart.

My first class in my master's program was Dr. Stephen Sicari's religion and literature class, and it was in this class I knew with full confidence that I was on the right path. He has been a constant supporter of my work, and it has been an absolute joy and honor working with him. His support has been invaluable to me, in more ways than I can count. Whenever I would chat with him about my work, he would make me feel at ease, no matter how much stress I brought in with me to our meetings, and he would affirm my work, reminding me of my place in the academy. Plus, chatting with him about sports and PhD programs and life was always so *easy.* His mentorship style is approachable and genuine, while also incredibly insightful and helpful, making interactions with him both enjoyable and useful. I would be extremely lucky to encounter another advisor like him in the next phase of my journey.

There are countless others I have to thank for this accomplishment: Dr. Dohra Ahmad, for pushing me to see things from different perspectives and introducing me to entirely new ways of thinking. Dr. Kathy Lubey, for offering me a safe space to vent when I desperately needed an ear to hear me. Dr. Amy King, for her kindness and patience in support of me as a student (and for showing me that Victorian literature is actually pretty cool!). Thomas Seweidd-DeAngelis, for his empathy and encouragement every day at the Writing Center as I balanced being a student, a wife, a graduate assistant, and a human being. To my friends back home (Samantha Bradford and Megan Schrock, looking at you!), for their endless support through Marco Polo videos, texts, and calls, and for their constant reminder that I am loved and not alone. To my fellow graduate students (a big shout out here to Jackie Graber, Brian Hicks, Dawn Cancellieri), for affirming my experiences, for always being down to eat sushi pizza, for gossip, for

reminding me that I'm not crazy, and that I am, in fact, simply a graduate student with a lot on my plate. To my Gallery Church community, for holding me up in prayer and for reminding me that my true worth lies in my identity as a follow of Christ.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Religion as Artform

In the Christian tradition, the apostle Paul discusses faithful followers as God's "workmanship," created for good works and walking in the ways of the Lord (English Standard Version, Eph. 2:10). This word "workmanship" stems from the Greek ποίημα or poiēma, the same root from which we get the English "poem" and "poet." To think of the individual human life as a walking, talking, living and breathing poem radically changes the way we view our day-to-day experiences. The use of these words is no mere coincidence or haphazard analogy; rather, it exposes a way of thinking about the human religious experience as something deeply connected to art. A strong tie exists between the written word and the human aesthetic experience, especially concerning religion, a tie that has existed since literature's inception. As LeBlanc and LeBlanc point out, "perhaps our theological starting points and the language that defines them—does determine the trajectory of our lived theology after all" (184). Theology needs words in order to build the worlds it envisions, and believers need these words, these stories, to grasp the worlds that theology promises.

Many great philosophers, psychologists, historians, and theologians alike have attempted to grasp what truly composes a religious experience and what gives these experiences meaning. From the very beginning of time, humans have been "cultivating a perception of existence that differed from the empirical and had an instinctive appetite for a more enhanced state of being, sometimes called the Sacred" (Armstrong 4). Humans are experiential beings, being that give language to the experiences they have, especially concerning the experiences that reach beyond ordinary, tangible, natural life. For

example, prominent womanist theologian Andrew Prevot attempts to give language to religious experience, arguing that culture, history, and personal experience can combine to create a theology of liberation and power (2). Most notably, William James, a renowned philosopher at the turn of the 20th century, asserted that religious experience itself is "inexpressible," yet spent the entirety of his Gifford lectures (eventually becoming the book *The Varieties of the Religious Experience*) attempting to express what exactly sets the religious experience apart (Hardtke, et al., 1). This is the dilemma: religious experience escapes concrete explanation, yet is felt and expressed by every person, albeit in an array of different ways. Religious experience is beyond the capacities of language, yet it requires language to be discovered. Because religious experience interweaves itself deeply into the visceral parts of daily life, breaking through the mundane to create something extraordinary, the only way to truly understand it is to go directly to the source— the humans living and speaking about these experiences.

Because religion and religious experience are so intricately personal, the attempts to explain or define them have often times gone awry. Theology specifically falls short because it attempts to give a logical reasoning to something that defies logic. Religious scholar Karen Armstrong argues that over time, both theology and scripture adopted language "that was alien to them. Logos cannot assuage our sorrow or evoke our sense of the transcendent, so it cannot convince us that, despite all the rational evidence to the contrary, our lives have meaning and value" (348). Theology offers dry, logical rationale for something that is mysterious and beautiful. In the attempt to give religious experience language, it has begun to lose its artistic quality and its connection to transcendence, trading this in, instead, for something easy to follow, something rules-oriented,

something ritualistic. Religion was once an art form that helped others "live in relation to this transcendent reality and somehow embody it" (Armstrong 9). Theology, in its attempt to explain the reasons behind the existence and workings of this transcendent reality, sullies the experience. An art form should not have to be explained or understood; rather, it should be enjoyed and appreciated for its effects instead of its reasons. Martin Luther once proclaimed that "faith does not require information, knowledge and certainty… but a free surrender and a joyful bet on [God's] unfelt, untried, and unknown goodness" (qtd. in Armstrong 336). However, as a society, we have moved away from this type of freedom and joy in religious experience and have traded it for theology and dogma. The art of religion has been lost to the rules and regulations. We are in desperate need of a new theology that "does not sacrifice the intention of God for relationship" for fracturing rituals and dogmatic principles; namely, we need to exchange the dusty theology for something that more acutely acknowledges the lived experiences of believers (LeBlanc and LeBlanc 189).

With this in mind, there is only so much philosophy, psychology, and theology can do or explain from their detached, aerial views of religious experience. Literature, however, bridges the existing gaps by diving deep into human souls and bringing the inexpressible to the surface. Stories "offer us a flower garden of potentialities for the theological anthropology—that is, responses to the question: What has God created us to be, think, believe, say, and do in this world?" (Hopkins 286). Combining the language of mythos and the language of reality, literature is able to aid us in discovering truths about the human experience, what is necessary, what is essential (Armstrong 52). Igbo scholar Iwo Ikwubuzo reminds us that story and myth make "humans conscious of their lives… it

fosters an urge and desire to evaluate oneself for the purpose of leading a good life. It encourages upright living in society" (190). The stories contained in literature help develop spiritual consciousness and make religious teachings something tangible and alive. Literature gives us access to sights otherwise unseen, the parts of oneself that individuals tuck away, to keep secret. To quote EM Forster, "in the novel we can know people perfectly… They are people whose secret lives are visible or might be visible: we are people whose secret lives are invisible" (64). In a novel, we are granted access to the depths of religious experience that is simply unattainable in any other way. Jörg Lauster, a theology professor in Munich, emphasizes this point: "literature has the capacity to bring religious articulations very close to individual life experience" (23). Religious articulations, or expressions, describe how an individual expresses his or her beliefs. This can take many different forms, such as liturgy, prayers, scripture, tradition, music, art, institutions, etc. Literature itself is an articulation and, as Lauster asserts, can display the inner workings of articulations otherwise inaccessible on its pages. Literature gives an all-knowing eye to its readers and allows for transcendence.

The Power of Story

Saint Augustine exclaims "What is the meaning of this story?" in his *Confessions,* a question every reader must ask themselves as well (170). It is a powerful question to answer, especially concerning the connection between religious experience, belief, and humanity in the novel. The power of literature regarding belief and experience is most evident in conversion stories, from the apostle Paul to Saint Augustine, from TS Eliot to Bob Dylan and beyond. Conversion experiences, whether a slow, arduous process or a dramatic "ah-ha" moment, exemplify what it means to believe on a profound and innate

level. Putting faith in something or someone takes individuality and confidence, taking into consideration an entire life of experiences and memories. It is a peak of human experience and is something felt on a fundamental level. Additionally, there is little doctrinal theology surrounding conversion meaning it is easy to separate the conversion story from dogmatic theology, allowing the experience to exist in its true from; the stories begin with a need and end with the feeling that the need has been met, all without theology really being involved or thought about at all (James 97). The conversion experience exists outside of dogma, outside of rules and regulations, outside of perfectly articulated religious beliefs. It is a space where experience speaks for itself.

And speak for itself, experience truly does and does often. This is clear in Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, one of the earliest conversion stories to be recorded. In the eighth book of his *Confessions*, Augustine reminisces on his conversion to full belief in Christianity, something that moved him from complete spiritual paralysis to epiphany and joy. A monumental component of his conversion was story and language; this theme echoes constantly throughout his writing. He first hears the story of Victorinus, a highly respected man and rhetorician who converted to Christianity, and it moves him: "When your servant Simplicianus told me the story of Vicorinus, I began to glow with fervor to imitate him" (164). Later, he hears the story of Ponticianus, whose entire conversion rests on reading, story, and language: "In the house they found a book containing the life of Antony. One of them began to read it and was so fascinated and thrilled by the story that even before he had finished reading he conceived the idea of taking upon himself the same kind of life… He read on and in his heart, where you alone could see a change was taking place" (167-168). It is clear that there is power in story, for it moves even the most

unsympathetic of listeners. Stories change hearts and minds, opening them up to possibilities that did not before exist. Because of this, story has inherent power. It is through story that Augustine himself was eventually moved to conversion. He hears the story of his friend Ponticianus which prompts him to explore the things he believes, resulting in visions imploring him to read scripture. It is through reading scripture and enjoying it that he sees its inherent poetry and becomes drawn to it: "For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled" (178). Stories, experiences converted to language, give even the most unexpecting convert the motivation to believe. Stories can produce experience. It is through their experiential nature that they glean their power. They are an art form unlike any other in the way they bring life to human experience.

Saint Augustine's reflections on conversion also highlight an evident connection between the conversion experience to personal trauma, a connection many others have noted since. Because a conversion experience is one of the most personal religious experiences an individual can have, it can often come from a place of severe discontentment with one's circumstances. There is a gnawing at one's soul, an emptiness. One's life may not match the things she believes, making life unbearable. There may be an unending pain in one's life that nothing can help him ease. Whatever the pain or the trauma or the discontent is, the only thing to bring peace to or make sense of the situation is a complete change in belief, in identity. Augustine writes:

> What is it that makes men rejoice more for the salvation of a soul for which all had despaired, or one that is delivered from great danger, than for one for which

> hope has never been lost or one which has been in less peril?... The victorious general marches home in triumph, but there would have been no victory if he had not fought, and the greater the danger in the battle, the greater the joy of the triumph… It is always the case that the greater the joy, the greater is the pain which precedes it. (161-162)

Augustine argues that great pain will equate a greater religious experience; a transcendent experience through conversion will bring true joy due to the deliverance. William James notices this as well, making a connection between melancholy and eventual religious contentment. He asserts that melancholy "constitutes an essential moment in every complete religious evolution" and that this eventually leads the individual experiencing this phenomenon to happiness and "insight into truth" (15). The discord between what a traumatized individual experiences daily and what they believe in that moment can lead to the "ah-ha" moment of transcendence that brings religious change.

Definitions

Before diving deeper into the relationships between story, religious experience, conversions, and trauma, and why these things together surpass theology, defining a few of these keywords may be helpful. Traditionally, James defines religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (19). I would like to keep the feelings and experiences of the individual in relation to the divine, but expand the notion further. For this purpose, I borrow Frederick Streng's working definition of religion:

> Religion is a *means of ultimate transformation*… an ultimate transformation is a fundamental change from being caught up in the troubles of common existence (sin, ignorance) to living in a such a way that one can cope at the deepest level with these troubles. That capacity for living allows one to experience the most authentic or deepest reality—the ultimate. (qtd. in Armstrong 8)

Religion is something that allows an individual to escape their current situation, whether that be a sin pattern they cannot escape, an abusive relationship, the awful traffic of I-285, an identity crisis, a dead-end job, or anything in between, and enter into peace. Religion allows a person to make sense of the world around them and survive the things life throws their way, big or small. This peace and assurance allow someone to live authentically, making room for ecstasy and transcendence. It is, as James suggests, an individual act, experience, or feeling concerning the divine, but it encompasses so much more. This individual experience or feeling can lead to something that surpasses the individual to the collective and to the transcendent.

Religion can be experienced in a few different ways. There is belief, which is a personal, ecstatic, emotional thing. Belief connects to the core of who someone is and is oftentimes thought of as the general spirituality of an individual. To further explain the concept of belief, Nigerian theologian O. U. Kalu defines a worldview, or a belief, as "a mental construct that empowers actions and endows rhythm and meaning to life processes within communities" (qtd. in Uwaegbute and Odo 349). Belief is an internal process of knowledge, contentment, and feeling that allows the believer to process external life. Additionally, this highly personal spirituality or belief often leads to self-transcendence, meaning that the internal belief takes shape externally, often moving the

believing individual "beyond mere self-maintenance or self-interest," and toward wholeness with the world around them (Conn 236). Belief, worldview, spirituality – different words for different embodiments of the same core idea, the idea that every individual, for belief to be sincere, taps into their rich inner life to view their outer life with wonder.

On the other hand, there is dogmatic belief. While dogma is traditionally understood to be the rigid following of already existing religious rules (think of Catechisms and creeds), it can also be something much more abstract. Dogma for the purpose of this argument is anything rigid and unfeeling that negatively affects someone's journey towards belief. This can – and will, as I will argue – take many shapes, such as misinterpretations of religious texts, societal standards, gender roles, etc. Dogma is anything that offers a hard line or stance on morality and belief, offering no nuance and no room for discovery. It loses connection with humanity and with beauty, focusing solely on how one should behave to fit into society, religious or not.

Conversion tends to encompass a shift away from dogma and toward freeing belief. James defines conversion as a process "gradual or sudden, by which a self-hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities" (96). I adopt this definition, for it contains everything crucial for understanding the importance of the conversion experience in relation to literature and theology. James reminds us that conversion can either be gradual or sudden, and that either way is valid. Further still, the difference between these two types of conversion, which James later coins "volitional" and "self-surrender" respectively, is not radical at all; rather, the two types of conversion

are fairly similar and work in conjunction with each other (James 98). The volitional conversion is what I focus on, as literature has the immense capacity to dive into the psyche of a human undergoing this kind of change. Conversion does not need to be an immediate epiphany. Instead, it can be a slow burn, a change over time, a build-up towards a final "light-bulb" moment. Saint Augustine reflects this type of conversion in his *Confessions*, when he recalls that "many years of my life had passed – twelve" from when he initially was introduced to the concept of Christianity to when he decided it was worth believing (169). Augustine also confirms that the two types of conversions are not terribly different, since both include an epiphany of some sorts. His recollection of his experience offers us both detail on conversion, as well as helping further us construct our definition:

> I had known it all along, but I had always pretended that it was something different… I stood naked before my own eyes… Yet in my bones I knew that this was what I ought to do. In my heart of hearts I praised it to the skies… It must be a resolute and whole-hearted act of the will, not some lame wish which I kept turning over and over in my own mind, so that it had to wrestle with itself, past of it trying to rise, part falling to the ground. (169-171)

Augustine confirms that something in his mind and heart had known what he wanted to believe. Something pulled him toward belief, but he denied its power. His actual conversion experience consists of him recognizing his own need for something greater and recognizing the frailty of his own lived experience. It is an individual choice, like a flip he has switched, yet at the same time it is also something fluid, something he wrestles with. Conversion, though accompanied by a moment of individual decision, is still

something that can fluctuate, morph, change. It must fit the individual's experience and allow them to move about in the world as they want. Conversion gives the believing individual the motivation and the joy to keep on living, while also extending the grace that it will never be completely figured out.

Purpose

There is much that literature can do that theology alone simply cannot. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the correlation between trauma and conversion is clear, as is the power of literature to bring these concepts to light. Their use of story and of language, as well as their commitment to the authenticity of human experience, allows readers to grasp a theology about belief that otherwise may be unclear, distorted, and dry. To showcase literature's ability to tackle naked truths regarding what it means to be a human in ways that theology alone falls short, I will closely analyze the conversion stories recorded in *Things Fall Apart* and *The Color Purple.*

CHAPTER 1

She believed because it was that faith alone that gave her own life any kind of meaning.

Things Fall Apart, pg. 80

Gender, tradition, nature, trauma, language, emotion, and religion – all themes and ideas in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* waiting to be sifted out and digested. I echo Chinua Achebe's daughter, Nwando Achebe, in that *Things Fall Apart* resonates with readers because of its "subtle, if you like, hidden, themes buried within it" (121). This being said, it would be nearly impossible (and irresponsible) to ignore the postcolonial situation of the novel, even when discussing the novel primarily through a religious lens. We cannot divorce the belief in the story from the culture and the circumstances that produced the belief. Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* delicately, as his relationship with the two conflicting worlds of which he writes is complicated. As both Nigerian and Christian, he is critical of the imperial agenda and how it negatively affected the Nigerian people, while equally crediting the Christian missionaries for giving hope to those in the culture that may not have had it otherwise. Achebe is careful to avoid the pitfalls of the typical African narratives of his time: either dehumanizing African culture or using African culture as a prop for a white, heroic story ("An Image of Africa" 9). He constructs a world that in itself carries legitimacy and custom, rather than a world existing solely as a foil for Western culture or a barbaric people needing saving from themselves. By the time the white missionaries enter two-thirds into the story, the reader is comfortable with Igbo customs, societal roles, superstitions, foods (there is a *lot* of discussion of yams). This comfort is such that the white man's entrance is just as jarring

to the reader as it is to the people of Umuofia. Umuofia and its customs are complete, valid, "normal."

Similarly, he does not paint the white, evangelical man as *completely* evil; he writes the initial Christian missionary, Mr. Brown, with grace, subtly acknowledging the sentiment that many missionaries in the colonial movement truly had good intentions and simply found "themselves drawn willy-nilly into play as agents of imperial policy" (Porter 88). Achebe achieves this balance well in his depictions of the two religions in competition with one another. For example, the tribe granted the Christians land in the Evil Forest to build their church, an area that was considered cursed by the tribe. They believed by putting them in the Evil Forest, they had condemned the Christians to death. So, when the Christians did not die and the church lived on, the tribe was confused and disheartened. Is what they believe falsity? On the other hand, a convert to Christianity, Okoli, was said to have killed the tribe's sacred python. Quickly after, he fell ill and died, a sign to the tribe that their gods will handle their affairs as they please and that they should not fear the Christians. Upon reading, it is clear Achebe does not take a side on the actual beliefs of the people; rather, he comments on how one believes and how belief is expressed.

Much evil transpired at the hands of colonialization. This is apparent in Achebe's novel and is quite literally why "things fall apart." The novel as a commentary on these things is rich and has much to say, and many academics have already given these themes a voice. I want to move the conversation momentarily in a different direction— to dive into the center that "cannot hold" and see what religious experience reveals about this novel (and vice versa). By isolating belief and tracing its patterns throughout the novel,

we will find that dogmatic beliefs and rituals create the anarchy that is eventually "loosed upon the world," and that pure religious experience, also called ecstasy, born from trauma, allows belonging and unexplainable peace.

The world that Chinua Achebe paints is a beautiful one, full of devout, charismatic people brimming with belief and hope. Culture, ritual, and ecstasy fill the pages of the novel, especially in Part One, dedicated solely to enveloping itself in the clan's daily experience. For the people of Umuofia, spirituality is built into daily life and affects every person in the culture. Belief is a collective experience that can be felt deeply for those who join in the ceremonial transcendence:

> The drums were still beating, persistent and unchanging. Their sound was no longer a separate thing from the living village. It was like the pulsation of its heart. It throbbed in the air, in the sunshine, and even in the trees, and filled the village with excitement... The crowd had surrounded and swallowed up the drummers whose frantic rhythm was no longer a mere disembodied sound but the very heartbeat of the people" (*Things Fall Apart* 44;50)

For the people of Umuofia, their customs and their spirituality give them life. It is something that brings them together and allows them to experience ecstasy collectively. Igbo culture traditionally is very communal; the Igbo people are one with each other and with the earth (Nwoye 53). Religion to the Igbo people is how they rationalize existence, especially existence within a community, and it something to be practiced as a group rather than individually (Agbiji & Swart 2). In the novel, this communal aspect is clear as their "heartbeat," the ritualistic drums, keep them going. Achebe uses language to depict

what transcendent belief can do for a community, and the result is all-encompassing wonder.

What does this mean for those who do not fit into society's mold, however? The outcasts? The unbelievers? Those who have been hurt by the clan's customs? The *efulefu?* Though the unity collective belief brings provides solace and purpose for many, there are some whose lived experience may create in them a different way of viewing the world, causing them to question their beliefs and casting them to the peripheries of society. William James comments on this phenomenon, reminding that "the divine can mean no single quality, it must mean a group of qualities, by being champions of which in alternation, different men may all find worthy missions. Each attitude being a syllable in human nature's total message, it takes the whole of us to spell the meaning out completely" (437). The "divine" as James coins it, also called the Sacred, may differ from person to person since no one shares the exact same lived experience. While there may be something in a culture that appears universally accepted, there is bound to be a defector or two, as everyone experiences life differently and requires something unique from their spiritual lives. Essentially, what matters is not what is believed; rather, what matters is the believing itself. This is especially true in African culture, where belief reigns supreme over action or doctrine. In these traditions, "there were no creeds to be recited… what Africans did was motivated by what they believed, and what they believed sprang from what they did and experienced" (Mitchem 133). Each person's beliefs make him or her uniquely situated to add something to humanity, and these beliefs stem directly from individual or collective religious experience. Differing beliefs are healthy;

they help each person exist in their own circumstances, make sense of their lives, and fit into the overall context of the world.

James goes on to use the example of deliverance. If one is struggling, either spiritually or physically, and needs saving, this person will need a belief system that will bring this salvation. On the other hand, if someone is healthy, happy, and thriving, this person will most likely have a different need for belief and religion than salvation. Belief means something different in different contexts, as it is an extremely personal thing. This distinction gives room for those in the clan – indicating truth for life in general – to explore belief on their own, find a place that they belong, and make sense of the circumstances life has thrown their way.

Dogma & Its Pitfalls

"Okonkwo was not a man of thought but of action" (*Things Fall Apart* 69). If the entirety of *Things Fall Apart* could be summarized in one sentence, this would be it. Okonkwo is a proud warrior, a man of importance. He believes in himself and his own opinions, not backing down from a fight or from calling others out on their perceived passivity. He believes with a fire that threatens to burn everyone around him, yet this belief is misplaced, misguided, turning it into something rigid and uncompromising. Consumed with the desire to build himself up in the clan, he acts much more often than he thinks, these actions born both of fear and pride. He deeply fears what others think of him while simultaneously judging those who do not conform with the expected societal norms as he imagines them, often labeling them as "womanly" or "effeminate." This delicate relationship between fear and pride is what makes Okonkwo unique in the story, and also represents the pitfalls of a dogmatic approach to life: dogma obsesses over what

others think, whereas genuine belief turns inward, only attending to one's view of oneself.

Most notably, Okonkwo's innate desire to fulfill the expectations of the clan, his religion, and his own ego appears in the killing of Ikemefuna, the moment that pulls the string that begins to unravel for Okonkwo, his family, and people of Umuofia. After raising Ikemefuna as his own son for three years, and "inwardly" growing very attached to the child, Okonkwo joined his tribe on the journey to sacrifice him. The Oracle commanded it, so Okonkwo believed that it must be done; anything less was "effeminate" and projected an image of weakness to those around him. His view of the world was staunchly black and white, eliminating any room for attachment, emotion, feeling, or conscience in his spirit. Though being advised against the act by Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest and most respected man in Umuofia, Okonkwo departed with the party when they began the trek to the caves where Ikemefuna would be killed. Okonkwo initially tried to distance himself from the event, but eventually fell prey to his own convictions:

Why had Okonkwo withdrawn to the rear? Ikemefuna felt his legs melting under him. And he was afraid to look back. As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his machete, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, "My father, they have killed me!" as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak. (*Things Fall Apart* 60-61)

A turning point for the story at large, Ikemefuna's death represents Okonkwo's unwavering commitment to his appearance of manliness and his fear of others. He

follows through on actions he believes are right for the sake of the actions themselves. It is clear that Okonkwo is somewhat disheartened by this event; he, a fearless warrior, removes himself to the back of the group and looks away as to not see the killing. Yet, when faced with the choice between showing understandable empathy or mercy and showcasing his dominance and emotionless strength, he chooses the latter. He hears the call of the Oracle and *must* be present for the act. The tribe, through Okonkwo's eyes, believes he is devout and strong. They must not think any differently. Hs commitment to the principles of his tribe, uncoupled from any human emotion or room for grace, soils his memories of Ikemefuna, confuses his soul, and pushes his son, Nwoye, away.

Okonkwo is shackled to what he believes he must do, rather than what he wants to do. This spiritual imprisonment, like any other dogmatic practice or belief, stems from a deep desire to be accepted and to belong. Okonkwo's "whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness" (*Things Fall Apart* 13). Okonkwo saw what ecstasy and emotional contentedness resulted in, and he believes these things are empty. Because of this, he always strives to do better, to be better. A self-made man, Okonkwo always feels as if he has something to prove and is always trying to earn the acceptance of those around him. His fixation on the opinions of others is clear when he returns from exile. He consistently remarks about "the high esteem in which he would be held. And he saw himself taking the highest title in the land" upon his return (*Things Fall Apart* 172). He also hoped "his return to Umuofia would attract considerable attention" (*Things Fall Apart* 173). For Okonkwo, acceptance and being held in high regard are of the utmost importance. Nothing else matters. This is the very heart of where his dogged beliefs come from—he wants to be known, to be seen, and to be accepted.

Additionally, Okonkwo creates these unrelenting beliefs through his own life experience, causing him to push his clan away while also desperately wanting to play an important role. He places much stock on autonomy, especially when it comes to the religious beliefs of his tribe: "it was really not true that Okonkwo's palm-kernels had been cracked for him by a benevolent spirit. He had cracked them himself" (*Things Fall Apart* 27). He believes in his own agency, yet this makes him judgmental and harsh towards others. In making something of himself, he has warped his vision into thinking his ways are the best ways. He has no capacity for understanding and cannot comprehend that not every person will live the Umuofia cultural beliefs in the same way. This rigidity becomes his foil: he wants to become the best version of himself, a person that everyone will respect and celebrate, but he can never truly belong while he does not understand those around him. In his seriousness, he has missed the joys of life. These attitudes towards life, however misguided, expose his deep desire to feel at peace and to have a secure place in his clan.

Because of Okonkwo's displaced desires and beliefs, he experiences his religion through social status and personal success rather than through the beauty, music, and spirituality found in his clan, especially through the community bond. Belief must be simultaneously internal and external, individual and social, the "we" and the "I." Terry and Jeanine LeBlanc, theologians of liberation and justice, write that the "we" and the "I" should work in conjunction together in a religious society to ensure that all believers find the contentment attainable. Essentially, this means that individual belief and communal responsibility should be balanced in a healthy way in order to reach the desired end result. They write, "within this perspective, communal identity, individual identity, and

the wider creation context are equally important for a harmonious understanding of life and for balanced interactions with one another; the communal nature extends to and significantly includes the rest of creation" (173). Using their framework, it seems that Okonwko's "we" versus "I" balance is off-kilter as he focuses solely on his own glory. His religion does not bring transcendence, but instead brings perceived success, something that benefits Okonkwo alone and does not bind him to his community. He wants these successes to affirm his place in his community and feigns confidence to achieve status, yet these things remove him from the clan, as they make him unrelatable and unknowable. His relationship between himself, his beliefs, and his community is so off-balance, that he must cling to whatever promises him hope and motivation. For Okonkwo, this motivation comes from the rules and regulations he devises for himself, removing himself from the art of his clan and focuses solely on achievement. Ideally, genuine belief would come from within and positively affect outer relationships. Okownkwo's inner motivations are distorted, directly affecting his outer relationships. His rejection of the ecstatic part of his clan's beliefs and his obsession with the dogmatic elements prohibit him from experiencing the individual joy and success he desires, as well as communal joy with the clan.

While his one and only desire is to find glory in his rank in the clan, Okonkwo's dedication to his dogmatic approach to the clan's beliefs inhibits him from finding this contentment. As Nwando Achebe notes, in Igbo culture at large, equilibrium is something to be celebrated and strived after (122). The culture respects balance and craves nuance. Okonkwo's hardhearted stubbornness removes him from this balance:

> Okonkwo is not, and cannot be, representative of his culture, because he is unable to achieve the balance or equilibrium that his people so strongly admire: strength, courage, bravery; but, at the same time, Okonkwo exemplifies, rather forcefully, those attributes that his people loath: impatience, violence, arrogance, intolerance and extremism. (N. Achebe 124)

Okonkwo's draconian approach to life stems from fear of others but also causes the reason to fear others. His method of gaining respect is also the thing that causes him to lose it. Almost every time Okonkwo acts rashly, some sort of chastisement or punishment comes from either his people or their customs. The most potent parts of Okonkwo's beings are the things that his clansmen cannot tolerate, making his situation and his attitudes increasingly complex. Okonkwo's circumstances are ironically pitiful, and Achebe has created a character whose unwavering commitment to his beliefs, as well as his deep-seeded fears, cause him to lose the very thing he craves to find.

Okonkwo showcases the pitfalls of believing out of habit, fear, or obligation rather than belief stemming from one's true, inner being. Okonkwo, living in fear of others and holding himself in too high of regard, has created a dogmatic internal regimen for his life, something that cannot hold a person together when life begins to crumble. A joy that accompanies genuine belief that cannot be matched by dogma is hope for the future. Dogma is rooted in nothing; it is for appearances only. Dogma is of no help to a person when trials come because it is so impersonal. In exile, a season Okonkwo describes as "wasted and weary," there lies no hope for Okonkwo's spirits because everything he places his hope in has abandoned him. He recalls:

> His life had been ruled by a great passion—to become one of the lords of the clan. That had been his life-spring. And he had all but achieved it. Then everything had been broken. He had been cast out... clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. The saying of the elders was not true—that if a man said yea his *chi* also affirmed. Here was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation. (*Things Fall Apart* 131)

Things are beginning to fall apart for Okonkwo and his belief immediately begins to waver. He does not have the spiritual center to keep him afloat amidst his suffering. His experiences no longer align with the teachings of his tribe, so he questions the principles he followed for so long. The center of his belief was himself and how he appeared to others; this center can no longer hold. Okonkwo experiences true pain with no relief because his dogmatic belief had no true foundation. This despair and lack of hope in his belief is what brings Okonkwo to his ultimate demise. He cannot make sense of the clashing of cultures, the disregard of his reappearance to the tribe, the conversion of his son, and the passiveness of his clan. Without genuine belief, Okonkwo cannot live.

It is important to note that despite this dismal tone and negative portrayal of Okonkwo's worldview, he did, in fact, love his clansmen and hold true to their beliefs until the end in whatever way he could. Human beings are not all good nor all bad, including a character like Okonkwo. Though his attitudes towards life, towards himself, and towards others were not ultimately celebrated by the clan and led to his suicide, that does mean that there is nothing good to be gleaned from his perception of reality. This is clear when he mourns for his circumstances in light of what is going on around him: "Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the

clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountable become like soft women" (*Things Fall Apart* 183). In this passage, Okonkwo is still trapped in his own insistence that manliness and strength look a very particular way. But beyond this, Okonkwo feels deep grief for the people around him and for the culture that he has grown to know and to love. He does not want to see his home destroyed, yet he feels helpless against it. Even the most backwards of dogmatic doctrines may have a heart somewhere, and his clan is where Okonkwo finds his heart. Similarly, Okonkwo fears that his clan's religion will be wiped out, confirming that Okonkwo does truly believe and find comfort in this faith, although his personal experience of this faith was distorted. He daydreams about the afterlife, "He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man's god. If such a thing were ever to happen, he, Okonkwo, would wipe them off the face of the earth" (*Things Fall Apart* 153). He believes in the afterlife, in a spiritual realm where he and his ancestors will be reunited. He wholeheartedly is committed to his clan's beliefs, to the point that he is committed to fight for them to remain, even after death. Okonkwo finds a certain normalcy and peace in his religions and customs, even if his unwavering attitudes towards these beliefs skewed his actions towards others.

Okonkwo's dogmatic approach to his beliefs should sadden readers because it does make one wonder how things would have been different should he have held a more nuanced view of life. He earnestly believed in everything he did and did not waver from these beliefs for an instant, something that would be commendable if there was room for

grace. His good friend Obierika provides an example of what this nuanced view might look like. A man respected throughout the clan, Obierika acts as Okonkwo's more inquisitive and thoughtful counterpart; While Okonkwo was a man of action, Obierika "was a man who thought about things" (*Things Fall Apart* 125). Like Okonkwo, Obierika deeply commits himself to the clan's teachings and rituals, yet he acts according to his convictions rather than to what seems acceptable in the eyes of others. Specifically in the killing of Ikemefuna, Obierika gives perspective on what could have conspired if Okonkwo had not been so forcefully dedicated to his belief. When Okonkwo asks Obierika why he did not join the group to kill Ikemefuna, he also implies that Obierika is not devoted to the clan or their belief. Obierika offers a different interpretation: "I do not [question the decision of the Oracle]. Why should I? But the Oracle did not ask me to carry out its decision... And let me tell you one thing, my friend. If I were you I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the Earth... if the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it" (*Things Fall Apart* 66-67). To use an old adage, it is not the letter of the law that matters, but the spirit. This is how Obierika treats his beliefs and how he acts upon them. Though he and Okonkwo share the same respect in the clan, the same beliefs, and the same status as warriors, Obierika understands that there is nuance to the spiritual realm while Okonkwo can only see straightforward principles laid out before him. In Igbo society, Obierika's approach to his beliefs should be celebrated, as they encourage active assessment of their faith. Nwando Achebe writes that "although individuals within the society are discouraged from openly rejecting the decrees of the gods, they do have the right, and are in fact, expected to remove themselves from participating in actions that are morally

offensive to themselves" (126). Obierika's nuanced view of the situation displays more thoughtful application of their clan's beliefs, signifying that he has a more mature grasp on the different actions that can accompany belief. Obierika reminds Okonkwo, and therefore the reader, that one can still be devout without being dogmatic; one can still believe but find room to do what is just by their own conscience.

In a similar manner, Obierika teaches that it is not inherently a sin when one questions one's faith. A healthy amount of doubt may be healthy for any believing person. Just as Jacob wrestled God after facing many doubts about his faith's promises in the Judeo-Christian tradition (Genesis 32:22-32), so Obierika wrestles with what he sees in conjunction with what he believes. When Okonkwo is exiled, Obierika mourns the fate of his friend and struggles with why something like this had to happen. He ponders,

> Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led into great complexities... if the clan did not exact punishment for an offense against the great goddess. Her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender. As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others. (*Things Fall Apart* 125)

Obierika knows what he believes but must come to the conclusion that his beliefs are good, just, and right on his own. He pursues truth in a healthy manner until he can find peace in his soul about these things. Questioning one's beliefs is not inherently wrong, but instead allows one to become more confident in one's personal faith and to come closer to the transcendent experience that religion promises. Obierika wrestles with the injustice of sending his friend away, but in the end decides that what is best for the clan at

large is what matters. He can find peace in the things he believes in through working through these nuanced interpretations of custom and ritual rather than following blindly.

While Okonkwo represents one example of how the application of dogma can result in hurt and trauma for others (and for the believer), the most obvious and deplorable example is the entrance of Reverend James Smith. Mr. Brown, the initial missionary, simply wanted to live his faith and wanted others to follow. The clan even respected him and his attitude towards them because "he trod softly on its faith" (*Things Fall Apart* 178). He became friends with neighbors in the clan, made visits to other villages, and approached all interactions with the intention to learn about the other's beliefs, rather than forcing his own beliefs upon the other. It was only when Mr. Smith came, along with the new government, that things became dismal for the people of Umuofia. Mr. Smith exemplifies the very idea of a forceful and dogmatic approach to life: "He saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield..." (*Things Fall Apart* 184). For this man, he saw only one to live life and if one did not fit that very exact mold, they were to be punished. Mr. Smith fits the description of many imperialist missionaries, as they eventually began to see the imperialist agenda as a way to squash sin (Ballantyne 438). Becoming dogmatic and coercive in his tactics was a way Mr. Smith could gain control and power, as well as reach his ultimate goal of converting souls.

Edward Said in his book *Culture and Imperialism* discusses how this draconian invasion became problematic. The colonial regime believed that by enforcing their beliefs and customs (the only beliefs and customs that could possibly be "correct"), they would better these new societies. Said writes that "independence is to be wished for them *so*

long as it is the kind of independence *we* approve of. Anything else is unacceptable and, worse, unthinkable" (xviii). The colonial agenda asserted that they did not want to take over or to take away the colonized people's independence, but also wanted them to conform happily to the new culture. The District Commissioner, who arrives at the same time as Mr. Smith, echoes this sentiment to Okonkwo and other men who have been arrested for burning the Christian church: "We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy. If any man ill-treats you we shall come to your rescue. But we will not allow you to ill-treat others" (*Things Fall Apart* 194). The District Commissioner asserts that he wants the clansmen of Umuofia to be happy and this is why they have come – were the people of Umuofia not happy already? The government, paired with the church, that came to Umuofia believes wholeheartedly that they are doing the "right" thing and have very concrete goals in mind. They were never able to empathize or see the people of Umuofia as people. This is the definition of dogma: no empathy, no deviation from the perceived correct path. Being insecure (or, perhaps, too secure) of their own customs, they begin to use the customs of Umuofia as a comparison, heightening their own beliefs and distorting reality ("An Image of Africa" 13). There is no room for growth in their either/or mentality, and this stark divide is what truly makes things fall apart.

Journey to Belief and Ecstasy

There is a clear correlation between the loss of belief, as well as the move toward new belief, and trauma. Specifically, this comes from a place of dissatisfaction with one's current belief systems to explain or rationalize their current experiences. When one's beliefs do not answer life's most basic questions, belief begins to feel raw and

disheartening. Ekwefi recalls feeling this way when every one of her pregnancies ended up in her child's death, nine deaths in total. She describes that "the birth of her children, which should be a woman's crowning glory, became for Ekwefi mere physical agony *devoid of promise"* (*Things Fall Apart* 77, emphasis added). The things which should have been hopeful for Ekwefi became embittering to her spirit, her soul. She slowly lost belief and lost hope in her clan's customs: "The naming ceremony after seven market weeks became an empty ritual" (*Things Fall Apart* 77). These "empty" rituals lacked the joy that accompanies hope and true ecstasy. Because she had lived through so many children's deaths, there was no truth to her belief, no peace. Without the foundation of truth or hope to a belief system, it easily leads the believer to despair. In Ekwefi's case, all her despair turned to joy when her daughter Ezinma was born and lived. She put the entirety of her faith in the living child. Her torment can be viewed as a momentary, although arduous, trial that now strengthened her faith. Though for many, this "happy ending" never comes, resulting in some sort of moment of reckoning for the believer, a turning point, a shift.

For the people of Umuofia, the coming of Christianity exposed for whom the current belief system was not fulfilling its promise of peace and ecstasy. While most of the people of Umuofia scoffed at the new religion, there were a few who found themselves drawn to the message of acceptance or were simply looking for a new life. None of the eventual converts to the new religion "was a man whose word was heeded in the assembly of the people" (*Things Fall Apart* 143). They were those who were scorned, outcast, *efulefu*, or "worthless, empty men" (*Things Fall Apart* 143). When one's experiences do not line up with their lived experiences, there must be some sort of mental

shift that occurs, or else one will experience consistent disillusionment. One convert to this new religion was a lady named Nneka. She had given birth to four sets of twins in a row and, due to custom, had to throw them all away into the Evil Forest. She was the first woman to join the group and was pregnant when doing so. It is easy to see why Nneka would want to find something new to believe it and so easily leave her customs behind– she simply wants to find a way to keep her children. In the same way, the *osu*, outcasts, began to come to the church when they saw that it was a place they may be accepted. In the clan, the *osu* could not marry, have children, cut his hair, take titles, or live with anyone else from the clan. They were isolated and forgotten. When Mr. Kiaga, the minister in Mbanta, admitted them graciously to the church, saying "He needs Christ more than you and I... The same God created you and them," his congregants accepted the *osu*, and they soon became "the strongest adherents of the new faith" (*Things Fall Apart* 157). Every person searches for a place to belong and to find acceptance. This is clear when discussing belief and conversion. For the *osu*, as for anyone who does not fit into a societal mold, this new religion promised a new life and it delivered. Their lives were changed, and they became dedicated to the cause as a result.

Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, is the greatest indicator of such a philosophical and spiritual shift in character. Nwoye's "putative effeminacy" consistently tests his father's "rigid conception of masculinity and gender roles," as well as reveals his father's unwavering attitude towards the things he believes (Osinubi 163).Throughout the story, he is seen as his father's disappointment and regret, not fitting into the stereotypical mold expected of him regardless of how he might try. He is beaten for this endlessly and mocked by his father in the presence of many others in the clan. discontent with the way

things are allow him the space to ponder and explore other ideas, leading him to question his faith and eventually leave his life behind. Using Nwoye as a case study, his experiences, especially concerning his upbringing, give us direct access to his heart, showing us the minute details of what occurs inwardly in a conversion, as well as its aftermath.

Nwoye is a tender boy from the beginning, trending toward the emotional, "womanly" aspects of his clan. Although he "knew it was right to be masculine and to be violent, he still preferred the stories his mother used to tell," stories of virtue, stories of community (*Things Fall Apart* 53). He basked in the emotional and aesthetic portions of the clan's beliefs, gravitating towards story and music, rather than to the typical outlets expected of him, such as wrestling or discussing tribal wars. Despite his difference, Nwoye attempts to fit into the mold created for him, many times to escape beatings from his father or to simply make his father proud: "he feigned that he no longer cared for women's stories. And when he did this he saw that his father was pleased, and no longer rebuked him or beat him" (*Things Fall Apart* 54). For Nwoye, pretending to be something he is not provides him temporary safety and the illusion of belonging. These things are all that he knows, so he tries to make his life mirror others' lives. For him, belief is nothing but a performance, an act to be upheld. His experiences echo Saint Augustine: "I continued to lead my usual life, but I was growing more and more unsettled and day after day I poured out my heart" (Augustine 166). Having been disconnected from the aspects of his faith that he truly loved – the music and the art – he has lost a part of himself in the process. Rosita deAnn Matthews asserts that "feeling disconnected from what gives us life can make us feel as if we have lost ourselves, our very essence…

Losing your soul means you feel alienated from a larger source of power within you… Losing your soul means you may feel disconnected from life itself" (30). Having lost access to the poetry of his clan's religion, Nwoye has lost a part of himself, his agency, his way. Nwoye, lost in pretense, is left unsatisfied.

He does not possess the language or awareness to voice this dissatisfaction, so it exists silently, bubbling under the surface of his conscious. That is, it remains dormant until Ikemefuna is killed. When Ikemefuna is ushered away from Okonkwo's compound, "a deathly silence descended" and "Nwoye sat in his mother's hut and tears stood in his eyes" (*Things Fall Apart* 58). Nwoye, a boy who feels things deeply and sincerely, recognizes the ominous pall that overtakes his home and mourns the loss of his friend. As Okonkwo's son, he has been raised to respect the Oracle and the customs of the clan, but in the loss of Ikemefuna he can do nothing but weep, a "womanish" act, an act that would result in a beating should his father be home. His reaction signifies to him that something about his view of the world is off, is not Igbo, is not manly. His hurt isolates him from his family, his clan, and his beliefs. He has lost hope and has lost faith: "As soon as his father walked in, that night, Nwoye knew Ikemefuna had been killed, and something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow. He did not cry. He just hung limp" (*Things Fall Apart 61*). With the loss of the friend who understood him and loved him as a brother, he can no longer justify in his soul the things he believes. While his beliefs had not lined up with his personal experiences for some time, it all comes to a head with the killing of Ikemefuna; the reality of what had happened stunts Nwoye and isolates him emotionally.

Additionally, Nwoye's loss gives awareness to things he had been feeling for some time. There are many tribal customs that unsettle him, but he had been unable until this moment to trace the patterns of this discontent in his own life. For example, he recalls the ceremonial discarding of newborn twins. Twins in Igbo culture were an abomination to the earth goddess and thrown away in the Evil Forest in earthenware pots. When passing the forest one day, Nwoye "heard the voice of an infant crying in the thick forest... A vague chill descended on him and his head had seemed to swell, like a solitary walker at night who passes an evil spirit on the way. Then something gave way inside him" (*Things Fall Apart* 62). All meaning is lost for Nwoye in these moments and the faith he once held, no matter how loosely, slips away. These individual, fleeting moments swell into something that he can no longer ignore.

The introduction of the Christian religion to the clan is Nwoye's answer, his promise of escape. Christianity and its acceptance of all peoples and promises of hope, love, and joy speak to Nwoye on a deeply personal level. In it, he finds the things he had not been able to find elsewhere. This religion "captivated" him, heart and soul, speaking to him a language that the dogma surrounding him had never been able to do:

> It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul—the question of the twins crying in the busy and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled. (*Things Fall Apart* 147)

The art, the music, the poetry. These are the things that attracts Nwoye. Though art and music and poetry existed in his own clan's traditions before the entrance of Christianity, Nwoye was never was able to experience these things to the fullest because of the hardened heart of his father. After being kept away from the things his soul loved for so long, Nwoye responds joyfully to music's reentrance into his life. Even though the dogma and the theology are also being presented to him, he knows he does not understand those things, nor does he feel he needs to. He may not understand everything about this new religion just yet, but he knows what is important: that he has found nourishment for his soul, a soul that has been restless and weary for the majority of his life. Rosita deAnn Matthew speaks of this nourishment, beseeching, "as we journey through our lives, we must do all we can to save our souls by nourishing them… then we can transform despair to hope and find our true salvation… It will be then that we can begin to live every moment to its fullest" (39). Because Nwoye has found the thing that nourishes his soul rather than eats away at it, he is on a path to finding joy, meaning, purpose. His trauma and despair can become hope and peace. Armstrong writes that in the past, "people did not merely seek an experience of transcendence; rather, they wanted to embody and somehow become one with it. They didn't want a distant deity but sought an enhanced humanity… people want to 'get beyond' suffering and mortality and devise ways of achieving this" (8). Nwoye embodies this past sentiment. Because of the personal trauma he has experienced, he desires a belief that will allow him to go beyond his trauma, his suffering, his clan, his daily life. His new religion offers answers and an escape.

The transition to new belief is not always an easy one, but it is one that brings fulfillment to the believer. New beliefs mean entering into a complete new way of life and taking on a new identity. Once believed, this is not always a quick and clean break from the old and embrace of the new. Rather, it takes time for one's actions and experiences to match the new fundamental beliefs. This is especially true for Nwoye, for he knows that embracing Christianity means exile from his family and from his clan at large. Officially joining the new church has major ramifications socially, as well as spiritually. For example, when Mr. Kiaga invited Nwoye to church for the first time, Nwoye instinctively wanted to go. His heart believed the things taught by the Christians and he had a desire to discover more. Yet, when he went to visit the church, he found it nearly impossible to bring himself to go inside:

> Nwoye passed and repassed the little red-earth and thatch building without summoning enough courage to enter. He heard the voice of singing and although it came from a handful of men it was loud and confident. Their church stood on a circular clearing that looked like the open mouth of the Evil Forest. Was it waiting to snap its teeth together? After passing and repassing by the church, Nwoye returned home. (*Things Fall Apart* 150)

Old habits and beliefs have a way of keeping hold of a believer, even once discarded and deemed untrue. While Nwoye wants to be a part of this church and is drawn, once again, by the poetry and the music, his clan's fear of and respect for the Evil Forest haunt him, keeping him back.

This lingering fear in the face of new belief is true of both Nwoye's individual experience in the novel and of Igbo Christianity in general. Igbo Christianity is marked

by a distinctive blend of Christian principles and of Igbo beliefs, especially the characteristic fear of the spirit world (Uwaegbute and Odo 351). In Igbo tradition, the spirit world is part of three distinct spheres, along with the sky and earth, that interact with each other to create daily experience, with the spirit world directly correlated with disaster and trial (Uwaegbute and Odo 335, 349). Humans that live and walk the earth are connected to the spiritual realm, meaning that the things that happen to them, good or bad, could be a direct cause of a spirit's wishes towards them (Nwoye 48). Igbo Christians, while believing the core teachings of the Bible, still fear this spirit world of Igbo tradition and believe in its power, for the spirit realm can have greater ramifications in one's life than the actions of other people (Uwaegbute and Odo 351). Nwoye's commitment to his new faith does not mean his old Igbo beliefs disappear; rather, they blend together, making a new type of Christianity, a new type of belief. His simultaneous belief and fear embody the painful melding of two cultures and what new traditions and beliefs are created in the process.

It is worth questioning what exactly it is that causes someone to finally break away from their old beliefs permanently. What changes must take place for a person to wholeheartedly believe something new? Taking Nwoye as an example, it seems that a confidence must grow, as well as a desire to break free from whatever force oppresses the believer. Eventually, Nwoye does see that his new beliefs far outweigh any familial or societal pressures. Nwoye "walked away and never returned" from his old life when confronted by his father (*Things Fall Apart* 152). His father beat him when he learned of his conversion and had to be stopped by onlookers. For Nwoye, this beating was his last. When faced with the realities of his lived experience, he sees that it is time to leave them

all behind. He may not understand everything about his new faith, but he knows that it frees him from the oppressive circumstances he had found himself in thus far. Every new convert reaches this conclusion at one time or another – the things that they leave behind pale in comparison with the new life they strive for. Dogma offers nothing when examined alongside authentic, genuine belief. There comes a point in every new believer that they are confident enough in their new identities to completely break free and enter into their new lives, fulfilled and regretless.

CHAPTER 2

Oh, Celie, unbelief is a terrible thing. And so is the hurt we cause others unknowingly.

The Color Purple, pp. 185

The Color Purple pushes readers towards accepting the spiritual in order to achieve freedom and wonder in one's own unique circumstances. Similar to the work done in *Things Fall Apart,* Walker's novel exemplifies a spiritual "pilgrimage" rather than a "lightbulb moment" concerning religious and spiritual belief, as well as the relationship between the two. Feminist and civil rights activist Audre Lorde writes that as we embrace this notion of the spiritual "as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes" (Gay 4). Throughout the novel, Walker agrees with this sentiment, as we see characters like Celie and Nettie become more confident of their place and purpose in life as they leave the rigidity of their religion behind them. They discover ways of belief that align with their lived experiences and learn to interact with these beliefs, allowing them to discover pure wonder and empowerment. This does not happen immediately nor without trial. Instead, it takes a lifetime full of different traumas and circumstances and revelations. The purpose of belief in one's life is to move from fear and oppression to confidence and freedom, literally and figuratively. Celie's journey in *The Color Purple* is an exemplification of both. In Celie's journey, the transformation from the religious to the spiritual can be traced by following her three distinct spiritual phases: Dear God, Dear Nettie, Dear Everything (Mercer 24). By closely analyzing Celie's journey to self-

discovery, we find that true belief has the power to free from oppression and help create an identity, giving one a purpose in even the bleakest of circumstances.

In the Preface to her 1992 edition, Walker writes that *The Color Purple* "remains for me that theological work examining the journey from the religious back to the spiritual," further affirming its importance to the realm of religious literature. Because Walker herself asserts that this novel's purpose is to reject religion and to embrace the spiritual, it is necessary to define what exactly differentiates the two. For the purposes of this examination, the "religious" fits in to the category we have thus far discussed as dogmatic, rigid, unwavering. The religious in *The Color Purple* traps individuals inside expectations that they cannot meet and provides no sense of hope or joy; it is comprised of rules for the sake of rules only, nonsensical, demanding. The "spiritual," on the other hand, is something that allows free feeling and free thought, celebrating growth and experience. The spiritual creates space for true ecstasy, as well as space for the believing individual to use experience to make sense of her own life circumstances healthily. Specifically, the spiritual in *The Color Purple* challenges us and gives room for us "to recover the details of our everyday existence in all their messiness in order to understand fully our humanity" (Gilkes 293). In the novel's preface, Walker explains that the book's intent is "to explore the difficult path of someone who starts out in life already a spiritual captive, but who, through her own courage and the help of others, breaks free into the realization that she, like Nature itself, is a radiant expression of the heretofore perceived as quite distant Divine." She affirms that belief is a journey that one must go on, and that the end goal, though it may not be the same for everyone, is to experience the Divine. What matters is simply that the believer finds the road to ecstasy and feels empowered by

the belief itself. Notice Walker's language here—those trapped under dogma are described as "captive," while those who have broken free are an "expression" of something great, something beyond themselves. In short, the religious and the spiritual are not technically two separate entities or belief systems – rather, they are two different sides of the same coin. One is more personal while the other is more institutional. One frees while the other imprisons. One creates wonder while the other creates confusion.

Dear God

The journey to new experiences of belief must begin with a deep exploration of the old beliefs that did not suit one's experiences. As exemplified in Nwoye's conversion in *Things Fall Apart,* one's own personal experiences can blind them to the potential joys their current beliefs could bring. Negative experiences and trauma within a religious framework hinder whatever good could have come from it. This sends a believer on a spiritual journey in an attempt to reclaim what had been taken from them or heal the wounds inflicted by others. Womanist thinker Rosita deAnn Matthews argues that most of the work an individual does in their life is to overcome trauma and spiritual injury to move towards spiritual healing and reclaiming of one's soul. She claims that "spiritual injury occurs when a tenet of faith or understanding of God or oneself is trespassed. Spiritual injury occurs when the opinion one has of God is tarnished or challenged, or if questions are not answered when asked… When it does occur, there can be susto, a loss of self, a loss of soul" (32). We see this kind of spiritual trespass in Celie in *The Color Purple* and her journey illuminates how a believer copes with this disruption in her life and what moving forward looks like.

Celie's spiritual journey begins with a deep-rooted foundational belief in the traditional Christian God, a belief that promises healing but does not deliver due to deep spiritual and physical injury. In the novel's opening, we find Celie in crisis, with no one to turn to but the God she thinks will listen: "*You better tell nobody but God*" (Walker 1). The novel's format, letters either written by or addressed to Celie, allows a deep and intimate connection with Celie as she nakedly bears her innermost feelings and fears to the addressee— God. Celie's letters are aptly addressed to God for the first half of the novel, and her honesty in these letters give full view to exactly where she is at spiritually and emotionally. We as readers hear the unspoken prayers of a person in great need. In the opening pages of her story, Celie recounts her rape and impregnation from her father, the death of her mother, the loss of her two children, and the pieces of her life she's left trying to keep together. Rosita deAnn Matthews affirms the importance of giving voice, no matter the form, to this type of trauma, especially for African American women, saying, "The African American struggle is one of not just survival of body and mind but survival of soul as well… If we African Americans do not voice our pain, we inhibit it and it becomes a destructive force within us… Expressing your voice is a way to cleanse the soul" (31). Celie is demonstrating a deep need for survival through her letters, a survival first and foremost of her soul. Without giving some kind of language to the trauma, it would slowly destroy her. She writes to God because there is no one left for her to talk to and she ardently believes that God will listen to and be with her.

Giving voice to trauma, beyond a healing tactic for a believer's soul, can also help a believer focalize one's identity. When physical and spiritual injury occur, a believer can easily question their identity and feel as if their spirit lost its home. In this loss of self, a

believer must reconstruct what it means to live in their context and piece themselves back together. Celie does this by reaching out to God, young and impressionable, amid a crisis of identity, personhood, and belief. She cannot understand what has happened to her; it causes her to question her own very being. She writes in her very first letter to God: "Dear God, I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (Walker 1). Celie until this point identified as someone good, someone who does not get into trouble. She feels the need when writing to correct herself, for in her view she has now been tainted. She does not realize that what has happened to her is not her fault, and she feels shame. There is a marked mental shift in the way she writes, for she no longer thinks she can identify as good. She begins to write her letters to God as a type of affirmation, a way to make sense of what has just happened. She desperately wants for the things she believes or should believe to give her comfort and solace, to give her answers. Instead, she is left defeated, with a self-esteem that never truly recovers. Years later, when her sister-in-law asserts that "You deserve more than this," all Celie can answer is "Maybe so. I think" (Walker 21). It is not definitive. She is unsure. After the things she lives through, Celie is left believing that she deserves the life she has been given. Using Celie's experience as an example, it is easy to see how trauma negatively affects one's relationship with herself and with her beliefs, her God. When faith is simply adopted from ease and not sincerely accepted, there is no foundation when trials come, leaving one's foundation of self and of spirit shaky. There is no center for one's identity to make sense of the lived experiences occurring daily.

It is difficult for many believers to accept that the things they believe have no center and do not help justify the things going on around them. They cling onto tradition and ritual and empty promises in hope that the things they have so long had faith in will somehow begin to make sense. Celie is one of these believers— despite the lack of hope and confidence in her life, she still clings to the idea of God as a helper and a provider. While this may not provide her with the hope she desires, it does allow a focus for her anxieties and eases her sense of loneliness. After her mother dies, she feels a great responsibility to watch over her sister and take care of her, especially protecting her from the gaze of their father, but knows she can only do it "With God help" (Walker 3). This idea of God as a helper does give her the motivation to keep going, but it also plays into her lack of self-esteem and agency. She does not believe the power to survive resides inside of her; rather this power lies completely in outside forces. After Celie is forced to marry Mr. _____, her sister Nettie comes to visit her for a final time. Nettie begs Celie to keep fighting, to never give up, and to not let her new circumstances bury or defeat her. Celie responds: "But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive... It's worse than that, I think. If I was buried, I wouldn't have to work. But I just say, Never mine, never mine, long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along" (Walker 17). Alone, beaten, and weary, Celie sees no past nor future, nor a reason to fight her circumstances. She sees only how to make it through each day without giving up. Her attention here on spelling God references how important her letters are to her, as her written prayers are what give her sanity and bring her closer to the God she believes guides her each day. She solidifies this in her writing in her next letter, as she swaps her typical "Dear God" for "G-o-d," reminding both herself and the reader the reason for her diligence in writing

these letters (Walker 19). As long as she can spell G-o-d, God is with her. God protects her. She is not alone. Through her writing these letters to God, her belief becomes something external and something concrete; her belief, in this medium, keeps her moving and keeps her alive.

There is a comfort in holding onto the beliefs of society, that one grew up with, the things one is "supposed to" believe. Nominal believers many times have a clear desire to turn to God for some sort of hope, a sort of lifeline in difficult circumstances, but eventually one does begin to wonder if this faith truly works. Celie exemplifies this, as she desperately wants the faith she grew up with to work for her. The people Celie surrounds herself with choose many different paths concerning belief and salvation from their circumstances, but Celie consistently chooses faith in God: "Grady and me feel so down he turn to reefer, I turn to prayer" (Walker 119). Prayer is instinctual. The God she learned about from church and American culture of the time promise her salvation and escapism from the dismal life she lives. She sees God as a helper, as is evident through her letter writing, but does God truly help?

As one deals with their daily life in conjunction with their beliefs, there are often times small signs that the two do not line up. The radical decision to "jump ship" and place trust in something else does not happen abruptly, but over time. Small discrepancies, issues, and questions begin to arise in a believer that put a discontent in one's spirit. This is especially true for Celie as she continuously attempts to make God fit into her life. Though her definitive breakage from this religious past does not occur until much later in the novel, "true to life, there [are] plenty of hints early on that something [is] abnoring" (Mercer 24). Though she believes she is being guided by a divine being

and that she has no part to play in her own life story, these beliefs are continually being subliminally questioned or challenged. For example, after giving her stepson some bad advice, her beliefs physically keep her up at night. She does not know why she feels the way she does or what to do about it; she simply knows that the "rules" of her beliefs are haunting her. She writes:

> Dear God,
>
> For over a month I have trouble sleeping... At first I'd git up quick and drink some milk. Then I'd think bout counting fence post. Then I'd think bout reading the Bible.
>
> What it is? I ast myself.
>
> A little voice say, Something you done wrong. Somebody spirit you sin against. Maybe. (Walker 39)

Here, though she is used to feeling comfort from God and from her belief, she feels the weight of the belief on her. It disrupts her life and causes her deep distress. No matter what she does, the thought of any sort of sin committed is too great to overcome. Her belief rules her life, becoming borderline dogmatic in approach, shifting from personal and healing letters to the relentless pressure of perfection.

Celie's experience begins to mirror Okonkwo's in *Things Fall Apart*, as she attempts to do what is right be her beliefs and her customs. Just as Okonkwo obsessively worked toward the things he deemed successful in the eyes of his community, Celie gives herself wholly to the church, working toward acceptance in the eyes of her community. She works dutifully for her church with little recognition, working for the sake of her beliefs, tiring herself, and shaking her confidence. She says:

I keep my head up, best I can. I do a right smart for the preacher. Clean the floor and windows, make the wine, wash the altar linen. Make sure there's wood for the stove in the wintertime. He call me Sister Celie. Sister Celie he say, You faithful as the day is long. Then he talk to the other ladies and they mens. I scurry bout, doing this, doing that. Mr. ____ sit back by the door gazing here and there. The womens smile in his direction every chance they git. He never look at me or even notice. (Walker 43)

Celie tries to earn her place in the church and work towards fulfillment, towards worth. On top of wrangling new her husband and his children to church under the watchful eye of others and trying desperately to be perceived as normal in this way, she stretches herself thin in making herself useful to the congregation at large. Yet, none of this pays off for her. The women in the church still illtreat her most of the time, her work is completely ignored by Mr. ___, and even the pastor, though he acknowledges what she does, shrugs it off and does not save time to see her completely. It seems as if Celie prays to and works diligently for someone who is complacent in inaction and ingratitude.

While foundational beliefs are sometimes not strong enough to hold a believer up when trials come, there are sometimes roadblocks that hinder the process of moving toward something new. Old beliefs are comfortable, familiar. They can be a form of escape, even when they do not make sense in one's context. In *The Color Purple,* Celie's traumatic past with her father is most the most striking discrepancy between her beliefs and her actual lived experience, as well as the clearest roadblock to her acceptance of something new. Her past is simultaneously the thing that challenges her beliefs and the thing that tethers her to them. By the age of fourteen, Celie has been raped, given birth to

two children and had them taken away, been beaten by every man in her life, and married off to a man that sees her as nothing more than a housekeeper. She has not come to terms with any of these things that have happened in her life, and clings to her beliefs and her prayers to help her get by. When explaining to Sophia that she never gets mad, Celie says, "Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what. Then after while every time I got mad, or start to feel mad, I got sick. Felt like throwing up. Terrible feeling. Then I start to feel nothing at all... I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last always" (41-42). Her belief in the Bible here is a sort of escapism for Celie; because of the straightforward way she perceives the Bible's rules, instead of allowing herself to feel the weight of the emotions regarding the people and circumstances who have caused her deep pain, she instead puts it out of her mind. She shrugs it off. She thinks of a better future, a heaven. Because the Bible tells her she must honor her father, feeling any other feeling besides honor, such as anger, resentment, horror, makes her physically ill. Her beliefs serve a purpose here and they do, in a way, protect her as she wants them too, but they do so in an unhealthy and unsustainable fashion. It is clear that the foundational beliefs she holds are not strong enough to last, and it is only a matter of time before life crumbles these beliefs before her eyes. Celie's past exemplifies the desperate need for an individual caught up in past beliefs to navigate the hurdles and roadblocks before they fall under the weight of their own failed belief systems.

When beliefs fail to justify one's own lived experience, the only way forward is to find something new to worship. Refocusing one's beliefs is an essential way to negotiate a path forward and to ensure positive momentum; without beginning to explore new

paths, the only thing to do is remain stagnant, which leaves a believer destitute, wrestling with their soul. It could be a person, an experience, an idea, anything that jars the soul enough to remind a person that there is a way forward better than whatever is happening in the present. Shug Avery's entrance into Celie's life gives Celie this new focus of worship, a transition that occurs seamlessly. Celie's spiritual foundation has already begun to splinter by the time Shug appears, but her appearance exponentially hastens Celie's awakening. Shug enters when Celie is most desperate and most alone, simply trying to survive, and she introduces her to life, to love, to joy. As Celie takes care of Shug when she first arrives at Mr. ___'s house sick, it is almost as if it is a truly ecstatic experience for her: "I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short" (Walker 49). Something about Shug awakens a religious feeling in Celie, an ecstasy, a poetry. Something that cannot be named. Celie cannot name it yet, she might not even be aware of its existence, but her attitude toward Shug mimics that of utter worship.

This worshipful attitude in her spirit confuses Celie, as the presence of a new inkling of aesthetic feeling towards something other than her God feels inherently wrong. On one hand, she still holds tight to her beliefs. They have not been totally toppled—she still writes to God, after all. But Shug tugs on a small part of her soul that deeply desires to be let loose and to make sense of the world. This duality complicates things in Celie's mind and leaves her rather unsettled. She worships Shug and connects her with sin. For example, Celie recounts that "I wash and comb out [Shug's] hair. She got the nottiest, shortest, kinkiest hair I ever saw, and I loves every strand of it. The hair that come out in my comb I kept," (Walker 53). Almost in the same breath, Celie watches Shug smoke

and hum, thinking, “What that song... Sound low down dirty to me. Like what the preacher tell you its sin to hear. Not to mention sing” (Walker 53). She is both infatuated with Shug and intimidated by her. Celie’s subconscious knows that the things she believes are hollow at their core, and her attachment to Shug implies that her being is yearning for something new to worship. Yet, her deep-rooted beliefs remind her of sin and judgement, causing her blossoming friendship with Shug to be potentially problematic for her conscience. Just to hear what Shug is singing is sin, let alone the act of singing itself. Celie acknowledges this duality, describing Shug as “Halfway tween good and evil” (Walker 57). Association with Shug Avery could mean damnation in Celie’s mind, but this damnation could also be worth something if it gives her someone to love—and maybe someone to love her in return.

Love is key for transformation in *The Color Purple,* as well as in life. Just as music, poetry, and art attract certain individuals to believe (think of Nwoye in *Things Falls Apart*), love also acts as a transformative phenomenon that can guide an individual to new beliefs and the experience of ecstasy. Love is the turning point, for it “transforms and empowers her, making her a formidable agent of divine love even in the midst of an abusive world” (Prevot 49). This concept of love is key to analyzing Celie’s transformation and Shug is the obvious catalyst. Shug enters into Celie’s life, thus far devoid of love, attention, or care, and breaths upon it her own essence, opening Celie’s heart to transcendence. She does this primarily through love and fellowship; as the two women grow closer, Celie’s life slowly begins to change for the better, if not immediately in situation or circumstance, in self-confidence, in attitude, and in outlook. Shug cares about Celie, gives her attention, watches out for her, educates her, and loves her as if this

is her only purpose. In Shug's words herself, "I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet" (Walker 211). Celie's previous beliefs could offer her no solace or comfort, but Shug gives these things willingly and often.

This type of loving kindness, especially when paired with Celie's worshipful attitude, could be traditionally viewed as Christ-like. She is not the typical Christ figure that emerges in literature— she performs no miracles, she does not sacrifice herself, she is not a martyr, she is not selfless, nor does she truly sacrifice herself in any way. She can be "hateful" at times towards others when confronted with situations or truths that do not please her (Walker 49). But for Celie, Shug fights for justice, is a safe place for Celie to find freedom from her past, loves unconditionally, and ushers in a new way to understand God. This mirrors the womanist idea of Christ "as one who identifies radically with [black women] and promises freedom, not only for them, but for all people" (Prevot 49). Shug brings Celie a new life, a life that promises freedom and empowerment, and shows her the way. Celie feels this before she has the words or understanding to identify it. She knows that with Shug around, her life has been given meaning:

> Life don't stop just cause you leave home, miss Celie. You know that.
>
> My life stop when I left home, I think. But then I think again. It stop with Mr. _____ maybe, but start up again with Shug. (Walker 81)

For Celie, Shug equals a new life. Her life stopped with her forced marriage to Mr. ____, but she knows Shug's appearances in her life equates to radical change. She feels it deep down in an unspoken part of herself. If Shug never had come to live with them, Celie's life would have remained monotonous and void of meaning. Shug breathes new life into Celie, and with Shug by her side she recognizes, "for the first time in my life, I feel just

right" (Walker 57). There is a comfort that accompanies Shug's presence, for she is a hiding place. She is, for Celie, a savior.

On one's journey to spiritual wholeness, finding love and safety opens the opportunity to work through past experiences and give voice to hurt, freeing one's spirit to new things. If past beliefs did not validate one's lived experience, freeing one's spirit from those things and allowing the spirit to explore what does validate one's self is necessary, affirming, worthwhile work. Breaking free of past expectations, believers "can find new forms of authenticity that do not require them to conform to any preconceived essences or models" (Prevot 5). In *The Color Purple,* Celie does this work with the help of Shug. Shug's presence as savior and hiding place allows Celie the space to work through the things in her life that until this point had remained unspoken, only between her and God in the form of her letters. She transfers this knowledge from God alone to Shug, a sort of confessional. When the two of them are alone one evening, Shug prods Celie about her children's father, and Celie divulges the horrors of her past. With Shug's attentive and loving ears, Celie processes all that had happened to her, as if the words had been waiting all this time to burst forth: "I start to cry too. I cry and cry and cry. Seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug arms. How it hurt and how much I was surprise" (Walker 112). Shug's arms become a confessional space, a space Celie needs to give a voice to her trauma so that she can begin to move forward. She confesses and expresses hurt, only to be graciously loved by Shug in return:

> My mama die, I tell Shug. My sister Nettie run away. Mr. ____ come git me to take care his rotten children. He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on

top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me, I say.

She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth. (Walker 112-113)

The things Celie had been too afraid to confide in others, Shug accepts with open arms and reminds Celie that she is loved, no matter what. Her love gives Celie assurance and confidence, reminding her that she has worth and value no matter her life circumstances. It is interactions like these that give Celie courage to move forward. A seismic shift occurs in Celie because of her openness and vulnerability with Shug and Shug's acceptance in return. In this space, Celie's self-confidence grows, and a massive weight is released from her, something that was never able to occur with her religion alone. This is how healthy relationships should impact a believer, as "relationships are broad-based ways of experiencing knowledge and life… amid the particular topics that affect our daily lives… and the attributes which pertain to ways of being" (Kirk-Duggan 177). Relationships like the one depicted in *The Color Purple* should positively effect a person's spirit, giving them different ways to experience life and knowledge, directly impacting how we live daily. When one's spirit is healthy, one's relationships thrive and they are more attune with the wholeness they desire.

Celie's relationship with Shug, as well as a build-up of traumatic experiences in her life, come to a head when Celie learns that her husband Mr. ____ has been hiding letters to her from her sister Nettie. She and Shug uncover the letters in Mr. ____'s trunk and begin to decipher them one by one—years' and years' worth of letters from someone Celie thought had abandoned her without a thought. Through these letters, Celie learns of

Nettie's experiences in Africa as a missionary, that her children are alive and well, that Nettie is their governess, and of Nettie's changing views of God given her new life's context. Reading these things in conjunction with her own changing views softens Celie's heart to the truth of other spiritual realities. Nettie, like Celie, writes letters as a form of prayer:

> I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as your thought your writing was. Well, now I know what you meant. And whether God will read letters or no, I know you will go on writing them; which is guidance enough for me. Anyway, when I don't write to you I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart. I am so *lonely,* Celie. (Walker 130).

Nettie, too, has lived through much hardship, but takes courage knowing that there is someone who will listen. She turns to God, but also voices fear that God will not accept her or her circumstances, echoing Celie's own experiences. They both feel a religious duty to a God they are not sure will listen. They instead must listen to those around them who love them, Celie for Nettie and Shug for Celie.

Additionally, Nettie also affirms the longing in Celie's heart for a religiosity that actually matches her lived experience, rather than remaining aloof. She writes to Celie about the prejudice in Bible publication and how this has changed her view of the religion altogether. She writes:

> All the Ethiopians in the bible were colored. It had never occurred to me, though when you read the bible it is perfectly plain if you pay attention only to the words. It is the pictures in the bible that fool you. The pictures that illustrate the words.

> All of the people are white and so you just think all the people from the bible were white too. But really *white* white people lived somewhere else during those times. That's why the bible says that Jesus Christ had hair like lamb's wool. Lamb's wool is not straight, Celie. It isn't even curly. (Walker 134-135).

For Nettie, the Bible has been used as a form of oppression and trauma, as its presentation has been untruthful. The Bible of the rural south has centered whiteness when whiteness is not apparent or necessary for the truths contained in the book, thereby erasing the experiences of an entire group of people. This displacement helps explain the identity crisis facing both Nettie and Celie in regard to their identities, a struggle shared by many of this time: "Men and women within the race struggle with their identities, seeking to understand how to be men, women, American, Black, and a variety of other things at once while remaining true to their true 'selves." (Dehghani 448). Discovering this reality allows Nettie to reclaim the Bible for herself and gives her new eyes to see the world around her, especially when she does missionary work in Africa. Nettie's revelations also give Celie the vocabulary to voice her own opinions about religion, as well as the example of what it looks like to take spirituality into her own hands.

Alice Walker uses Nettie's letters not to discredit Christianity or God or religion, but uses them as a way to show how God works, whatever that means to a specific person. Similar to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in how the characters' experiences of God neither confirm nor deny a specific religion or belief-system, Nettie's letters reveal that "God" is always working, no matter what form he takes. For example, Nettie reveals that the two children she watches over are Celie's children that had been taken away by her

father. She says that their parents, Samuel and Corrine, believe that God sent the children to them. She writes to Celie:

> I wanted to say, "God" has sent you their sister and aunt, but I didn't. Yes, their children, sent by "God" are your children, Celie. And they are being brought up in love, Christian charity and awareness of God. And now "God" has sent me to watch over them, to protect and cherish them. To lavish all the love I feel for you on them. It is a miracle, isn't it? And no double impossible for you to believe. (Walker 133)

By the use of quotations marks, Nettie implies she is not so sure it is really the Christian "God" that made this happen, but it is a miracle nevertheless. No matter what God is, God put Celie's children under Nettie's care, thereby ensuring that they are loved and protected. It is a way for Nettie to stay positive in her circumstances and cling onto hope. With this miracle, she is able to see the world in wonder. This view of God is vocalized again in Nettie's letters when she writes of African customs regarding worship and religion. The interpreter Joseph told Nettie all about the Olinka worship of the roofleaf, telling stories of old. He says, "We know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God?" (Walker 154). This stays with Nettie and "makes perfect sense" to her, influencing the way she interacts with religion, the Olinka, and her own beliefs for the rest of the novel (Walker 154). Different beliefs make sense in different contexts for different peoples— who is to determine which belief is correct?

It is with this knowledge that Celie writes her last letter to God. Both Shug and Nettie's letters cause Celie to look deeply into her own life and question the reality in which she lives and to whom she prays to. For Celie, Nettie's proclamation "Pa is not our

pa!" is the friction needed for Celie's spiritual match to ignite (Walker 176). Immediately after this discovery, Celie writes her last letter to God, rejecting the religion she has practiced for so long, and determining that no one has been listening to her pleas: "Dear God... I feels daze. My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa. You must be sleep" (Walker 177). Because she is no longer able to justify the things in which her hope had been placed for so long, Celie succumbs to the belief that no one has actually been listening to her. The object of her hope turns out to be nonexistent. When her reality turns on its head, she realizes that her foundation is weak and can offer no rest for her soul, no restitution for her life. With this realization, Celie closes the chapter on God and forges forward into the unknown, allowing her spirit to lead unencumbered by dogma or tradition or expectation. She begins her journey to freedom, to ecstasy.

Dear Nettie

Audre Lorde writes that the "deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy… does not have to be called marriage nor God not an afterlife" (Gay 33). In a person's journey to belief, they search for this knowledge, for this joy. Lorde reminds us that this does not need to look like a specific belief or tradition; rather, it is the capacity for joy and ecstacy that belief brings that is important for the believer's spiritual health. This same notion is what Celie explores in her move away from organized religion and dogma. As she rejects her traditional beliefs, she attempts to discover what "God" is to her now. She still feels the presence of something greater, but it no longer has a name. She loves Shug, she loves her sister, she finds herself contentment in making pants, she even comes to terms with Mr. _____ (and finally gathers the courage to call him by his

first name, Albert). Yet, it takes a while for Celie to learn that these relationships, loves, and joys can stand in the place of "god" in her life. Her letters to Nettie depict clearly her journey to arrive at this conclusion. Through her letters to Nettie, she determines just exactly what her "capacity for joy" truly is.

In the aftermath of her walk away from God, Celie opens her mind to many possibilities of what religious experience could look like for her moving forward. She first wants to disavow God completely: "Dear Nettie, I don't write to God no more. I write to you. What happen to God? Ast Shug. Who that? I say" (Walker 192). In her anger and frustration with religion, her initial instinct is to completely turn away. However, she comes to learn it is truly just the dogma that had been ruling her life that she feels such opposition to. Shug reveals to Celie that harm that accompanies traditional religion, saying, "Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God" (Walker 193). God cannot exist in church in a traditional way because everyone experiences him differently. Those who follow organized religion and dogmatic ritual lose sight of the experience of actually finding God themselves. Shug depicts those who believe in the power of the church as simply waiting around, hoping for God to show up simply because they were told church is where they could find him. Church is a place people come together to construct and share a God they create; but because this God is inauthentic and constructed simply out of expectations, it falls short every time. God is something they should instead be bringing in with them through their own unique experiences and views of the world. Shug introduces a notion to Celie that

religion can be whatever she wants to make it—this is the only way she can truly find God and the peace that she has so long been searching for.

Echoing the Christian ideas of testimony and evangelism, Shug tells Celie of her own experiences away from "the old white man" and toward a more fulfilling spiritual experience, hoping that Celie will join her in this journey. Shug lives a full life; she lives in wonder and wants for nothing. This vulnerable self-revelation of Shug's inner self exposes the source of Shug's joy and offers it as a desirable spiritual option. Shug explains:

> Here's the thing... The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for... I believe God is everything... Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and by happy to feel that, you've found it. (Walker 195)

She then explains to Celie in details the steps she took to become more aware of nature and of her place in it and move away from the idea of God, the old man in heaven. Celie, frazzled, spiritually dislodged, and hurting, is given a road map to transcendence and ecstasy by Shug, a map she intends to follow. Shug in this moment is a prophet, a teacher; she paves the way for Celie to find true enlightenment and freedom. It is necessary in many instances of crises of faith that one ask for help to find their way again. For many, the path to finding a new faith is through the stories, the language, the faith of another. Celie is no different and has Shug to thank for her fresh outlook on the world around her.

Like Nwoye in *Things Fall Apart*, Celie demonstrates that leaving one's past behind is never an easy feat. Dogmatic beliefs can have a strong foothold in one's spirit, so strong that no matter how much you reject them, they still have a way of holding on. Celie experiences this wavering of her new faith, unable to completely latch onto her new God while her old still haunts her. She describes her journey as hard and notices that her old God is angry that she wants him to leave her alone. She also sees a correlation between the God she left behind and the husband who has dominated her for years. In a type of prayer she observes:

> Well, us talk and talk about God, but I'm still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blad of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?). Not the little wildflowers. Nothing... But this hard work, let me tell you. He been there so long, he don't want to budge. He threaten lightening, floods and earthquakes. Us fight. I hardly pray at all. Every time I conjure up a rock, I throw it. Amen (Walker 196-197)

Characterizing herself as "adrift," Celie wanders the in-between of belief and unbelief. She knows that God holds nothing for her, but moving away from him towards something else proves a difficult mental task. It takes a reorientating of the heart and mind; it takes seeing the world with newfound appreciation. This is true of any kind of conversion—believing in something is just the first step among many. Once something is believed it is true and it is held dear, but that belief must turn into action to be completely solidified. A belief travels from the head to the heart to the hand. It is logical, then

emotional, then physical. Celie makes the decision to turn to a new way of thinking about faith, but is stuck somewhere in the in-between, trying to put this new faith into action.

True belief is something gradual, so the in-between space that one navigates is something to be celebrated. Embracing the journey toward transcendence allows the mind and heart to be open to transformation, resulting in growth and epiphany. For many, this transformation equates empowerment in their lives, freeing them to break away from oppressive and traumatic structures and run toward fulfillment. Russel writes that "women who love themselves, regardless will be able to love just about everything else, even the struggle to name oppression and to change it" (262). New believers, full of new life and love for themselves and for those around them, can see their situations with different eyes and, through their new beliefs, find confidence to change things that need to be changed. For Celie, this growth takes true form when she finally breaks free from the oppressive structures in her life and claims agency through her voice. Spiritual freedom comes for Celie from and through marital freedom— her new belief gives her the self-confidence to stand up to Mr. ____ and allows her more freedom through her separation from him. She asserts just this by exclaiming, "It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation" (Walker 199). Through officially leaving her old life and ways behind, in the form of her abusive husband, Celie can wholly accept her new beliefs and be fully encompassed by them. Mercer writes that "Celie has rebelled overtly and dramatically at the oppressive religious and marital structure that had kept her in misery" (25). This dramatic rebellion releases her from the weight of her past responsibilities and shackles and opens her soul to ecstatic possibilities. While the foundation had been laid for new belief to grow and the first seedlings of belief had begun to sprout in Celie, it was not

until she was completely free of outside influence that she could completely give herself over to her new way of life. After declaring her freedom and starting an incredible fight between the men and the women gathered at the table, she experiences a moment: "Shug look at me and us giggle. Then us laugh sure nuff. Then Squeak start to laugh. Then Sofia. All us laugh and laugh. Shug say, Aint' they something? Us say um *hum*, and slap the table, wipe the water from our eyes" (Walker 201). This moment, though small, transcends herself and bonds her with her community.

When true belief is working in the believer, it will completely transform and transcend one's life, no matter what form this takes or how long the journey is to get there. Celie's journey was long, but she finally comes to a place where she feels at peace with the world around her and in control of how she handles the situations thrown her way. Once she feels this peace, she is free to feel the connections between herself and the women that surround her. Kirk-Duggan suggests that this type of relationship and love is what we should strive for in our formations of belief. She says, "we quilt complex relationships creatively toward wholeness, then becomes a witness to the awesomeness of God, the power of creation, the gift of life" (189). While belief itself comes from within, love and community are the cornerstones that hold it up. By relating to others and experiencing community, a believer moves towards finding wholeness and experiencing whatever they see as "god." This community, this love, this laughter— *this* is ecstasy.

Dear Everything

True spiritual enlightenment comes from within. Once a person can admit and find solace in themselves as a god-figure, as themselves as one with everything, true ecstasy occurs, and believing individuals find their path toward transcendence.

Understanding that God and belief are not concepts limited to one specific tradition or dogma allows space for growth and for freedom: “God is different to us now... More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone—a roofleaf or Christ—but he don’t. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us” (Walker 257). If one’s approach to belief is tied solely to an unmovable, rigid set of traditions or expectations, those beliefs will become stale and lose their appeal over time. Belief is something alive, something active. It should always be on the move in a believer’s life. Rejecting the rigid and embracing the adaptable gives freedom to the believer, a freedom that must be found and fought for on one’s own.

Celie discovers this throughout her journey in *The Color Purple.* In finding a new way of viewing the world that made her life make sense, she also finds freedom from everything that had weighed her down. Mercer asserts that “religiously interpreted, the finals scenes [of the novel] are heaven,” and it seems that he is correct (25). In her very last letter, Celie proudly claims her new beliefs, writing, “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (Walker 285). In the reader’s last moments with Celie, he sees her completely reborn. She was once hurt, abused, oppressed, and fearful. She is now joyful, healing, loved, and optimistic. She is at one with the world around her and makes this known through her proclamation of God as everything—everything around her, everything she loves, everything that brings her joy. In these last moments, she is content with her family after healing the broken bonds that existed there, and she is reunited with Nettie. Though she has lived through trauma and hardship, she used these things to create a new belief system for herself that could take the pieces of her broken life and transform them into something transcendent. As she

writes “dear everything” and thanks this “everything” for bringing her sister home, she is elevated to a level of joy never possible with her old spirituality. She once again experiences true transcendence through love—the love she has for others and the love others have for her in return.

Love and Wonder

The Color Purple reminds us that the road to belief is a journey, a journey wrought with spiritual baggage and religious dogma and personal trauma that one has to sift through. Sifting through this baggage is anything but fun, but it is necessary to make sense of where one comes from to determine the path forward: “we are products of our history, but our spiritual journeys also make us shapers of history – historical subjects – who have the power to challenge and reshape the world” (Gilkes 293). Belief allows for empowerment and change through the tangible lived experience of the believers. The things believed do not need to come from a massive epiphany or a life-changing event. Rather, beliefs are formed through letters, laughter, little discoveries here and there, the relationships in one’s life. Finding the belief and finding one’s fulfillment through the journey is more important than any singular belief or to “get it right.” To be human means to live a unique life, and one’s beliefs should impact that unique life for the better, allowing the believer pure joy. Mr. _____ gives voice to this concept in a distinctive way, a way that summarizes perfectly how belief encapsulates humanity at its core:

I start to wonder why us need love. Why us suffer. Why us black. Why us men and women. Where do children really come from. It didn’t take long to realize I didn’t hardly know nothing. And that if you ast yourself why you black or a man or a woman or a bush it don’t mean nothing if you don’t ast why you here, period... I think us here to

wonder, myself. To wonder. To ast. And that in wondering bout the big things and asting bout the big things, you learn about the little ones, almost by accident. But you never know nothing more about the big things that you start out with. The more I wonder, he say, the more I love. (Walker 282-283).

All of life is wonder. All of life is love. Life is a journey to these things and belief is the principal tool. No matter how beliefs shift and change, they help us make sense of the world around us, especially concerning the issues that affect our daily lives. As humans, we know nothing; life is a journey where we continuously discover and adapt accordingly, growing and changing. This is the beauty of belief, a beauty that novels like *The Color Purple* allow us to discover. While every person will live different lives, experiences different things, and believe different things, all of these things combined allow us to connect with the world around us, bringing us to a truly transcendent place.

CONCLUSION

By diving into *Things Fall Apart* and *The Color Purple,* theology's need for language becomes clear. In these two stories, spiritual journey is centered in an identifiable way, making it easy to grasp and to emulate in a reader's real-life experience. Literature exposes the downfalls of dogma that may be harder to see in a quotidian context when the rules and rituals of religion are riddled with daily distraction. A story like Nwoye's or Celie's could expose a reader to a healthy reevaluation of her beliefs, and inspire her to find transcendence wherever she may find it. Characters like the ones found in these two novels remind us that ordinary people, no matter what culture, country, race, sexuality, gender, or religion they identity with, are in themselves stories. People are art. People are music. People are scripture. People are theology.

While it may seem heretical at first glance, upon closer evaluation, accepting ordinary people as embodied theology makes sense. Feminist theologian Joann Wolski Conn writes of dogmatic religion as a "memory in emptiness," for it "brings emptiness at the realization of [its] profound inadequacy," as well as bringing pain when it is revealed to restrict and oppress (257). Theology alone is dry and dying. It can easily be misconstrued to bring pain and confusion, an agent of oppression. Spiritual maturity comes through a person letting go of the things that hold them back, the things that "[block] wider truth and deeper union," and instead looking for the things that guide them toward love and ecstasy (Conn 257).Theology alone lacks the language to bring this kind of real meaning into someone's life—what truly brings the meaning behind theology to a believing individual is the lived experience. Hence, a believer living daily life in light of his beliefs creates a theology simply by existing, living, and breathing.

Viewing literature as a vehicle to grasp onto theology both affirms that theology is a lived experience and gives theology the language necessary for it to be understood. Feminists remind us how important it is to ground theology "in the lived reality of struggle and advocacy" as a way of "bringing heaven down to earth" (Russel 262). Literature can do just this. Life is full of trials and tribulations, with specific groups facing more persecution and oppression than others. When considering these traumas in conjunction with belief, new forays toward ecstasy make themselves clearer. Literature sheds light on these new pathways toward transcendence, as they expose the realities of lived experience in an authentic way. What otherwise may be inaccessible or difficult to understand is clear in literature through the three-dimensional characters and situations on the page. In this way, literature shows us the way to experience, bringing heaven to us through story.

Ultimately, the power of literature lies in its ability to bring us closer to the divine and in the examples it provides of spiritual journey. Through the stories we read and characters we encounter, we are reminded of the profound beauty and complexity of the world and of the living theology that comprises what we believe. Through novels such as *Things Fall Apart* and *The Color Purple,* theology becomes something greater than an abstract concept; it becomes a living and active thing, shaped by the way living people interact with each other and with the world. There is complexity in the human experience; we are storytelling, story-living animals. Literature enables us to break down this complexity, dive deep into what it means to believe, and explore meaning in our own lives. The human religious experience has always had an intrinsic connection to art because, fundamentally, the human religious experience *is* art.

REFERENCES

Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1978, pp. 1–15.

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart.* Penguin Classics, 2006.

Achebe, Nwando. "Balancing Male and Female Principles: Teaching About Gender in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart." *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2002, pp. 121-143.

Agbiji, Obaji M., and Ignatius Swart. "Religion and Social Transformation in Africa: A Critical and Appreciative Perspective." *Scriptura: Journal for Biblical, Theological and Contextual Hermeneutics*, vol. 114, Oct. 2015, pp. 1–20.

Armstrong, Karen. *Lost Art of Scripture*. Nielsen Anchor, 2020.

Augustine. *Confessions of Saint Augustine*. Harperpress, 2021.

Augustine, Nwoye. "An Africentric Theory of Human Personhood." *PINS [Psychology in Society]*, vol. 54, 2017, pp. 42–66.

Ballantyne, Tony. "Religion, Difference, and the Limits of British Imperial History." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2005, pp. 427–55.

Bellah, Robert N. *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*. University of California Press, 1991.

Conn, Joann Wolski. "Toward Spiritual Maturity." *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective,* edited by LaCugna, Catherine Mowry, HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.

Copeland, Shawn M. "A Thinking Margin: The Womanist Movement as Critical Cognitive Praxis." *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society.* Edited by Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M., New York University Press, 2006.

Dehghani, Mahdi. "Identity and Religion in Alice Walker's the Color Purple." *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, Dec. 2014, pp. 448–54.

"Ephesians 2: English Standard Version." *Blue Letter Bible,* https://www.blueletterbible.org/esv/eph/2/10/t_conc_1099010. Accessed 4 Feb 2023.

Forster, E.M. *Aspects of the Novel*. Harcourt, Inc., 1927.

Gay, Roxane, editor. *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde*. W. W. Warton and Company, 2020.

Greeley, Andrew M., editor. *Sociology and Religion: A Collection of Readings*. HarperCollins College Publishers, 1995.

Gilkes, Cheryl Townsend. "A Conscious Connection to All That Is: The Color Purple as Subversive and Critical Ethnography." *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation*, edited by Townes, Emilie Maureen. Orbis Books, 1997.

Hardtke, Thomas, et al. "Introduction." *Religious Experience Revisited: Expressing the Inexpressible?,* edited by Hardtke, Thomas, et al. Boston, Brill, 2016, pp. 1-11.

Hopkins, Dwight N. "Lies Above Suspicion: Being Human in Black Folk Tales." *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society.* Edited by Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M., New York University Press, 2006.

Ikwubuzo, Iwo. “Elements of Traditional and Christian Religions in Written Igbo Poetry.” *Interface Between Igbo Theology and Christianity*. Edited by Njoku, Akuma-Kalo and Uzukwu, Elochukwu, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014.

James, William. *The Varieties of the Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature.* Las Vegas, International Alliance Pro-Publishing, 2010.

Kalu, Ogbu U. “Gender Ideology in Igbo Religion: The Changing Religious Role of Women in Igboland.” *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale Di Studi e Documentazione Dell’Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente*, vol. 46, no. 2, 1991, pp. 184–202.

Kirk-Duggan, Cheryl A. “Quilting Relations with Creation.” *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society.* Edited by Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M., New York University Press, 2006.

Lauster, Jörg. “How to do Transcendence with Words? The Problem of Articulation in Religious Experience.” *Religious Experience Revisited: Expressing the Inexpressible?,* edited by Hardtke, Thomas, et al., Boston, Brill, 2016, pp. 15-29.

Matthews, Rosita deAnn. “Overcoming Susto: Restoring Your Soul.” *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation*, edited by Townes, Emilie Maureen. Orbis Books, 1997.

Mercer, Calvin. “Walker’s Critique of Religion in ‘The Color Purple.’” *Sage*, vol. 6, no. 1, Summer 1989, pp. 24–26.

Mitchem, Stephanie Y. *Introducing Womanist Theology.* Orbis Books, 2002.

Osei-Nyame, Kwadwo. “Chinua Achebe writing culture: Representations of gender and tradition in Things Fall Apart.” *Research in African Literatures,* vol. 30, no. 2, 1999, pp. 148-164.

Osinubi, Taiwo Adetunji. “Micro-Politics of Buttocks: The Queer Intimacies of Chinua Achebe.” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 47, no. 2, Summer 2016, pp. 162–85.

Porter, Andrew. *Religion Versus Empire? : British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914*. Manchester University Press, 2004.

Prevot, Andrew. *Theology and Race: Black and Womanist Traditions in the United States*. Brill, 2018.

Russel, Letty M. *“*Lavender Celebrates Purple*.” Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society.* Edited by Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M., New York University Press, 2006.

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012.

Sicari, Stephen. *Modernist Reproductions: Poetry as Theology in Eliot, Stevens, and Joyce.* Liverpool, 2022.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.

Uwaegbute, Kingsley I. and Odo, Damian O. “An Existential-Psychological Reading of Romans 8:35–39 in the Context of Igbo Christianity.” *Neotestamentica*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2018, pp. 333–57.

The Bible. English Standard Version*,* Ligonier Ministries, 2019.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Penguin Books, 2019.

Vita

Name	*Elizabeth Ann Walker Thomae*
Baccalaureate Degree	*Bachelor of Arts, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Majors: English & Professional Writing*
Date Graduated	*May, 2019*