Discovering, Embracing, and Using Black Female Spirituality: A Journey through Twentieth Century African American Literature from Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Zora Neale Hurston

By

Shelby Danielle Robertson

Honors Thesis
Department of English and Comparative Literature
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
2018

Approved:

_____________________________________________________
Dr. James Coleman
Abstract

This thesis analyzes the works of Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Zora Neale Hurston and focuses specifically on each author’s exploration of black women’s spirituality as a means of black female power within her work. Throughout my thesis, I choose to use the phrase “black women’s spirituality” to define my scope of exploring the use of spirituality in the lives of black female characters in Walker, Naylor, and Hurston’s works more clearly. Within The Color Purple, I analyze Walker’s exploration of black women’s spirituality through its ability to provide Celie with healing from her past, transcendence from her identity as an object for men, and the power to understand her worth as a woman deserving of pleasure and love. Within Mama Day, I analyze Naylor’s exploration of black women’s spirituality through her emphasis on the importance of Mama Day’s embracing her matrilineal heritage and the power that comes with Mama Day’s openness to ways of understanding that extend outside the realm of logic. Finally, within Jonah’s Gourd Vine, I analyze Hurston’s portrayal of black women’s spirituality through a comparative relationship between Lucy and Hattie that demonstrates equitable power among varying sources of and connections to spirituality and argues for the definition of black women’s spirituality to be found in its use of their spirituality.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction: Why Black Women, Why Spirituality, Why Now?** ........................................ 1

**Chapter One: Healing, Transcendence, and Identity: The Freedom of Inner Spirituality in *The Color Purple*** .................................................................................................................. 10

**Chapter Two: The Gift of the Matriarch: The Importance of Embracing Spirituality in *Mama Day*** ...................................................................................................................... 24

**Chapter Three: Not From Where, But How: Defining Spirituality by its Use in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*** .................................................................................................................... 39

**Conclusion: Walker, Naylor, and Hurston in Conversation** .................................................. 58

**Works Cited** .......................................................................................................................... 62
**Introduction: Why Black Women, Why Spirituality, Why Now?**

In scholar Hazel V. Carby’s essay “In the Quiet, Undisputed Dignity of My Womanhood: Black Feminist Thought after Emancipation” as depicted in her book *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, the author discusses the significance and the importance of the literary works by black female writers beginning in the twentieth century. Carby writes, “My basic premise is that the novels of black women should be read not as passive representation of history but as active influence within history…The novels of black women, like the slave and free narratives that preceded them, did not just reflect or ‘mirror’ a society; they attempted to change it” (Carby 95). At the start of the twentieth century, there was a shift in the portrayal of black female characters in black women’s literature that supports Carby’s charge to consider black women’s literature as an active influencer of culture. For instance, readers of black women’s literature can see this shift in Zora Neale Hurston’s works during the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston’s literature celebrates black culture and folklore and portrays black women on journeys of empowerment and self-discovery. Hurston became a trail blazer in the world of black women’s literature for her portrayal of black women in roles that extended beyond those of oppressed persons, which inspired works from future authors such as Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor among others.

Within this movement of activism through writing in twentieth-century black female literature, the demonstration of black female power is often associated with the presence of
black women’s spirituality. The exploration of black women’s spirituality in black women’s literature of the twentieth century works to demonstrate power through black female characters autonomously journeying to discover their own connections to spirituality and then choosing the way in which they will use this spirituality in their own lives and in the lives of others. The relationship between black women’s spirituality and black women’s power helps to transition black female characters out of their stereotypical portrayal as forever victims within oppressive circumstances and into the mold-breaking, truthful depiction of black women as the captivators of their own lives and the bearers of power through deeply spiritual connections.

This thesis analyzes the works of Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Zora Neale Hurston and focuses specifically on each author’s exploration of black women’s spirituality as a means of black female power within her work. Within *The Color Purple*, I analyze Walker’s exploration of black women’s spirituality through its ability to provide Celie with healing from her past, transcendence from her identity as an object for men, and the power to understand her worth as a woman deserving of pleasure and love. Within *Mama Day*, I analyze Naylor’s exploration of black women’s spirituality through the author’s emphasis on the importance of Mama Day’s embracing matrilineal heritage and the power that comes with Mama Day’s openness to ways of understanding that extend outside the realm of logic. Finally, within *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, I analyze Hurston’s portrayal of black women’s spirituality through a comparative relationship between Lucy and Hattie that demonstrates equitable power among varying sources of and connections to spirituality and argues for the definition of black women’s spirituality to be found in its use of their spirituality rather than their discovery of spirituality. This introduction will describe and define my use of terms and
phrases, which appear throughout the thesis in relation to each author’s work, as well as the various veins of black women’s spirituality Walker, Naylor, and Hurston portray. The chapters that follow this introduction will analyze in depth the implications of these terms in each author’s exploration of black women’s spirituality beginning with *The Color Purple*, followed by *Mama Day*, and concluding with *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*.

**Why “Black Women’s Spirituality”?**

Throughout my thesis, I choose to use the phrase “black women’s spirituality” to define my scope of exploring the use of spirituality in the lives of black female characters in Walker, Naylor, and Hurston’s works more clearly. When first reading *The Color Purple*, *Mama Day*, and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, I notice each author’s particular focus on black women and each author’s specific gift of spirituality to those black women within their created worlds. Walker, Naylor, and Hurston each portray black female characters who experience circumstances, oftentimes oppressive and painful, which are specific to the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the lives of black women including the following: rape, familial loss, violence perpetrated by men, a fracture in sisterhood, lesbianism, and rejection and silencing from white, male dominated societies. However, within each of these circumstances specific to black women, Walker, Naylor, and Hurston allow their black female characters access to spirituality that offers them a deep, overwhelming power to move beyond such circumstances. I find that in narrowing my scope to focus on black women’s
paths to discovering, embracing, and using their spirituality, and mirroring this narrowness in my terminology, I am able to designate the recipients of spirituality. While the phrase “black women’s spirituality” conveys who the spirituality is intended for and who obtains it, the phrase also leaves open the ability to discuss each author’s particular portrayal of spirituality, including the black women’s connections to spirituality, or the type of spirituality with which they identify, and their use of such spiritual connections.

_The Color Purple_

Although _The Color Purple_ explores Celie’s life through a series of letters to God, Walker does not anchor her novel in the traditional Judeo-Christian sense of God and one’s spirituality finding its foundation in the religious practices of attending church, praying, and reading the Bible. Instead, Walker anchors her novel in the rejection of the traditional Judeo-Christian understanding of God and spirituality and focuses her novel on Celie’s development of her own, unique god and spirituality through Celie’s ability to heal from her abusive past, to transcend her identity as an object for men, and to reclaim her right to her body and her identity as a woman worthy of love through the discovery of inner spirituality. As Celie’s journey through healing, transcendence, and reclaiming her identity is one of inward realizations and must be completed by her alone, I choose to term Walker’s example of black women’s spirituality as “inner spirituality.” Within my analysis of _The Color Purple_, I define “inner spirituality” as the power derived from the complete understanding of one’s
place in the world formed by one’s own ideas, experiences, and perspectives. For Celie, the start of her ability to redefine her own ideas, to find value in her own experiences, and to determine the truth of her own perspective begins to inform her place in the world and offer her power after she meets Shug Avery.

Along her journey to inner spirituality, Celie receives guidance, support, and reassurance from Shug, who already has embraced her individual path to inner spirituality. Shug’s role as a guide and supporter of Celie along her journey toward inner spirituality is the foundation for my description of Shug as a conduit of inner spirituality for Celie. I define Shug as a conduit of inner spirituality because she is the first and only person who introduces the reality of inner spirituality to Celie, which was previously hidden from her. As a conduit and possessor of inner spirituality at the time of her entrance into Celie’s life, inner spirituality flows forth from Shug throughout her relationship with Celie, which gives Celie hope and inspires her to continue striving toward the discovery of her own inner spirituality. Thus, Shug’s outer confidence reflecting her inner spirituality inspires Celie’s beginning the process of discovering her own inner spirituality, of finding her own voice.

*Mama Day*

In *Mama Day*, Naylor explores black women’s spirituality by placing emphasis on the importance of Mama Day’s embracing her matrilineal heritage as a way to access the spiritual power that flows through her family’s matrilineal genealogy. Additionally, Naylor
explores black women’s spirituality through Mama Day’s openness to ways of understanding that extend outside the realm of logic, which are rejected by Reema’s son and George who symbolize the privileged, logical thinking of white society. I use the phrase “matrilineal genealogy” to describe the history of Mama Day’s spirituality because Naylor spends the first pages of the novel visually, through a bill of sale and a family tree, and verbally, through oral storytelling from the Willow Springs’ residents, demonstrating the importance of Sapphira Wade. Sapphira Wade is the matriarch of the Day family, as she begins the family tree, and is the first individual to possess black women’s spirituality through the use and practice of hoodoo, which is then passed down through the women of the Day family.

For the Day women, I choose to use the phrase “supernatural spirituality” to describe the vein of black women’s spirituality that they practice because of their ancestral connections through Sapphira Wade to the hoodoo practices of conjures and potions. The phrase “supernatural spirituality” incorporates the reality that the hoodoo the Day women use often extends beyond the visual and physical realms, which means characters and readers alike must embrace ways of understanding beyond those of logic in order to participate in the world of Willow Springs.

Within *Mama Day*, Naylor’s narrative chronology illustrates the process of discovering the supernatural spirituality flowing through the matrilineal line of the Day family for five generations and the Day women choosing to use this supernatural spirituality even amidst the disbelief and rejection of others. In reference to the Day women’s relationship with discovering and using their supernatural spirituality, I use the term “embrace.” I have termed Naylor’s illustration of discovering and using spirituality “embracing” spirituality because, in order to bridge the gap between discovery and use, the
Day women must choose to validate and believe in the supernatural spirituality they have discovered, just as if it has become a part of themselves. Knowing the history of who possesses and uses black women’s spirituality demonstrates for the Day women the importance and power of spirituality, because it spans their generations by running through the female line; this knowledge of history gives the Day women an urgency to embrace their spirituality. Therefore, Mama Day’s connections with the other place and her interactions with Sapphira Wade enable her to access the power she possess and allows her to serve as a source of healing for her community.

*Jonah’s Gourd Vine*

In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Hurston explores two veins of black women’s spirituality not to promote the validity of one connection over another, but to demonstrate the importance of how women use their spirituality. The author focuses her exploration of black women’s use of black women’s spirituality through the characters of Lucy and Hattie. In her exploration of black women’s spirituality in Lucy’s character, Hurston demonstrates Lucy’s strong connection to God through her prayers, which work to inform other areas and aspects of her life, particularly her marriage. I have termed Lucy’s vein of black women’s spirituality “religious spirituality” because the phrase encompasses Lucy’s connection with spirituality through her relationship with God and her participation in the organized religion of the Christian church. Conversely, in her exploration of black women’s spirituality through
Hattie’s character, Hurston demonstrates Hattie’s strong connection with hoodoo that conjures power through her hoodoo mentor, An’ Dangie Dewoe. I have termed Hattie’s vein of black women’s spirituality “supernatural spirituality,” much like the Day women’s spirituality in *Mama Day*, because the phrase encompasses Hattie’s connection with her spirituality through the hoodoo conjuring of An’ Dangie Dewoe.

Additionally, in reference to the way in which Lucy and Hattie use their spirituality, I use the phrase “African spirituality.” I choose to use the phrase “African spirituality” in my exploration of black women’s spirituality in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* because of Hurston’s focus on black female characters who identify as African American. I also choose to use the phrase “African spirituality” in my exploration of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* because of African spirituality’s intent focus on one’s use of spirituality, which coincides with Hurston’s focus on Lucy and Hattie’s use of their respective spiritualities. When Doctor Jacob Olupona discusses African spirituality in an interview with *The Harvard Gazette*, he says that African spirituality encompasses the way one’s practices and beliefs work to inform one’s interpretation and understanding of the world (Chiorazzi). Much like Hurston’s exploration of black women’s spirituality, African spirituality places little emphasis on the source of one’s practices and beliefs and places heavier emphasis on the ways one uses those practices and beliefs (Chiorazzi). When placing Doctor Jacob Olupona’s discussion of African spirituality in conversation with *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, I define African spirituality as follows: the way Lucy and Hattie use their respective connections to spirituality to interpret, to understand, and to make and to act on decisions that affect various aspects of their lives outside of the realm of spirituality. In particular, my analysis of African spirituality focuses on the ways Lucy uses her religious spirituality and Hattie uses her supernatural spirituality.
to interpret and understand their respective relationships with John and then choose a course of action to maintain or to alter that relationship.

When I reference the phrase “use of spirituality” in correspondence with Hurston’s exploration of black women’s spirituality, I am referencing the way in which Hurston chooses to focus on the use of spirituality in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*: the effect Lucy and Hattie’s spirituality has not only on them, but on those around them. Hurston defines Lucy’s religious spirituality positively as she uses it to interpret and strengthen her marriage with John through prayers to God, as well as to encourage John continually to grow in his roles as a husband, father, and Christian pastor. Hurston defines Hattie’s supernatural spirituality negatively as she uses it to alter John’s state of mind through hoodoo concoctions and to manipulate him into marrying her without any recollection. Through her equitable portrayal of the power Lucy and Hattie experience through their connections with their respective spiritualities, Hurston heightens the focus on defining spirituality through its use within the novel. Therefore, Hurston does not define Lucy’s religious spirituality positively because of her connection to Christian roots and Christian morals, nor does she define Hattie’s supernatural spirituality negatively because she lacks a connection to Christian roots and morals and, instead, has connections to conjures and potions. Instead, Hurston defines Lucy’s religious spirituality positively because she uses her spirituality to benefit John and subsequently her family and community. Hurston defines Hattie’s supernatural spirituality negatively because she uses her spirituality only to benefit herself and to manipulate John. Consequently, Hurston exposes the nature of Lucy and Hattie’s spiritualities by their differing practices of spirituality toward John and their effect on him.
Chapter One: Healing, Transcendence, and Identity: The Freedom of Inner Spirituality in *The Color Purple*

Alice Walker’s 1982 novel *The Color Purple* follows Celie’s life through a series of letters, which she first addresses to God and then to her sister, Nettie. While Celie addresses around half of her letters to God, the letters read more as journal entries listing the events of Celie’s day instead of beseeching prayers to God. The content of Celie’s letters aid *The Color Purple* in straying far from the label of religious or Christian and drawing closer to the label of exploring one’s inner spirituality. Within *The Color Purple*, I define inner spirituality as the power derived from the complete understanding of one’s place in the world formed by one’s own ideas, experiences, and perspectives. Walker marks her novel as one of inner spirituality through the development of Celie’s character in response to her relationship and sexual connection with Shug Avery, a glamorous blues singer. Before her relationship with Shug, as expressed in her letters to God, Celie understands her place in the world as an object for men because of the violence and abuse she has endured from the men in her life. After the development of her relationship with Shug, Celie begins addressing her letters to Nettie, discussing her newly established knowledge of her place the world, and signing the letters off with “Amen.” Through the alteration of format and content in Celie’s letters, Walker establishes Shug’s role as a conduit of inner spirituality, who helps Celie on her journey to discovering her own inner spirituality. As a conduit of inner spirituality, Shug helps Celie heal from her abusive past, transcend her identity as an object, and find her true identity in the power of reclaiming the areas of her life formerly dictated by violent men.
Before I begin analyzing Celie’s journey to discovering her inner spirituality, I must develop in my readers a deeper understanding of the implications of inner spirituality. I have defined inner spirituality as follows: the power derived from the complete understanding of one’s place in the world formed by one’s own ideas, experiences, and perspectives. My definition of inner spirituality is based heavily on Walker’s own description of spirituality in the Preface of my 2003 edition of The Color Purple, as well as an analytical focus on the transformation of Celie’s character throughout The Color Purple. Within the Preface of the 2003 edition of The Color Purple, Walker speaks to both of these elements of my definition of inner spirituality writing:

I would have thought that a book that begins with “Dear God” would immediately have been identified as a book about the desire to encounter, to hear from, the Ultimate Ancestor. Perhaps it is a sign of our times that this was infrequently the case. Or perhaps it is the pagan transformation of God from patriarchal male supremacist into trees, stars, wind, and everything else, that camouflaged for many readers the book’s intent: to explore the difficult path of someone who starts out in life already a spiritual captive, but who, through her own courage and 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. (Walker)

When pairing Walker’s description of Celie’s developing “the realization that she is a radiant expression” through “her own courage” with Celie’s journey in the novel, readers observe my definition of inner spirituality. For Celie to be able to realize her worth, she must develop
courage to begin the journey toward reclaiming her own thoughts, ideas, and experiences previously dictated by violent men. Within *The Color Purple*, readers observe Celie reclaiming these dictated areas of her life primarily by exploring her sexuality and sexual pleasures with Shug, whom she loves and who loves her, and by reestablishing her lost relationship with her sister, Nettie. The exploration of Celie’s sexuality with Shug and the reestablishment of her relationship with Nettie both offer Celie the opportunity to find her identity in experiences and relationships with individuals who unconditionally and purely love her.

Additionally, Walker’s excerpt from the Preface of the novel’s 2003 edition helps to develop my use of two other phrases in relation to Celie’s journey toward inner spirituality: Celie’s misperception of spirituality and Shug as a conduit of inner spirituality. First, I will address and define Celie’s misperception of spirituality because this concept comes first in Walker’s excerpt and in my analysis of Celie’s spirituality. When I use the phrase “misperception of spirituality,” I am referencing Walker’s description of Celie as a “spiritual captive” at the start of the novel. When readers first meet Celie, she has no personal connection to any form of spirituality and is only writing letters to God because she is forced to by an unknown, violent man in her life. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that not only is the only idea of spirituality that Celie is familiar with forced upon her by men, but the spiritual connection is with God— the Almighty man and Father-figure of the Christian religion. For Celie, this forced, insincere practice of writing letters to an all-powerful, male God forms the basis for her misperception of spirituality as she uses letters as a form of therapy rather than a form of spiritual connectivity. Celie uses her letters to God as a form of therapy because the men in her life have deprived her of the ability to discover her own
spirituality and feel worthy of such a discovery. If she were to discover her own spirituality, the men are afraid of the consequences they will endure on behalf of the power she will ultimately acquire through such spiritual connections. Therefore, my definition of Celie’s misperception of spirituality embodies her act of writing letters to God because she has not individually and willingly discovered, accepted, and believed in the presence of God.

Next, I will address Shug as a conduit of inner spirituality, which follows Walker’s and my discussion of Celie’s inner spirituality and misperception of spirituality. When I use the phrase “conduit of inner spirituality” in relation to Shug, I am referencing Walker’s inclusion of Celie completing her journey of inner spirituality with “the help of others.” When Celie first meets Shug, Shug already possess inner spirituality and has a strong understanding of her identity, her desires, and her capabilities. When observing Celie’s lack of inner spirituality, Shug begins to act as a guide for Celie along her journey to possessing her own inner spirituality. Shug does so primarily in three ways: aiding and encouraging Celie to explore her vagina with the intention of establishing her worthiness of pleasure and eliminating her identity as an object for men, helping Celie reconnect with Nettie and reestablish her identity as a sister, and challenging Celie to adopt her own views on spirituality rather than unwillingly adopting those forced upon her. Therefore, my definition of Shug as a conduit of inner spirituality involves Shug’s ability to inspire hope in Celie to continue the journey toward discovering inner spirituality on behalf of Shug’s confidence and sincerity.

Furthermore, it is important to understand my labelling of Celie and Shug’s relationship as one of a sexual connection, which is an extension of my definition of inner spirituality. When describing and defining inner spirituality, both Walker and I focus on the
self-imposed journey of the individual toward the establishment of their inner power. Walker’s depictions of Celie and Shug’s sexual relationship serve as a way for Celie to reclaim a loving, pleasure-filled experience from sex, which has been stripped from her by the rapes she has endured. Walker’s development of Celie and Shug’s relationship is intended to create an intimacy and love between these women that gives Celie hope for her future and that sparks her desire to begin the journey toward inner spirituality. Thus, I choose to define their relationship as sexual with the understanding that Walker does not intend for the audience to gain sexual pleasure from their interactions. Instead, Walker intends to show the depth of Celie’s pain and the power that intimacy and love have to heal such deep-seeded pain.

In order to understand the importance of Celie’s relationship with Shug in the development of Celie’s inner spirituality, one must first understand the significance and the implications of Celie’s letters to God. Before readers are privy to the content of the Celie’s letters to God, Walker sets up Celie’s relationship with God in two italicized sentences at the start of the novel: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (Walker 1). The language the perpetrator uses in this command is violent and threatening, as it solidifies for Celie if she is to discuss this event, currently unknown to the reader, with her mother, she will lose her. The intention behind such a command is to isolate Celie and keep her from ever disclosing the horrors done to her, which serves to ensure the safety and gratification of the perpetrator. Walker offers this command at the forefront of the novel to show readers that Celie’s decision to write to God is not based upon any sense of devotion to him or desire to pray to him. Instead, Celie’s relationship with God is solely based upon the lie that Celie is only allowed to talk to God and also based upon the isolation forced upon her
by some individual unknown to readers. Although readers are unaware of the individual who gave this command to Celie, the content of Celie’s first letter helps the reader infer the identity of the unknown individual. After sharing that her mother had left for a doctor’s visit in Macon, Celie writes that her stepfather “put his thing up against [her] hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold [her] titties. Then he push his thing inside [her] pussy” (Walker 1). Given the graphic and violent description of Celie’s stepfather raping her while her mother is away, readers can safely infer that he is the mysterious individual who gave the two-sentence command at the start of the novel. Through Walker’s inclusion of the two-sentence command and through Celie’s discussion of the rapes that she endures, readers form a foundation for understanding Celie’s misperception of spirituality before she meets Shug, which is dictated by the men who violate her. However, readers must recognize that Celie does not understand that her “relationship” with God is a misperception of spirituality until she meets Shug and Shug empowers her to reconstruct her ideas of spirituality.

Next, an understanding of Celie’s identity, or the way she views herself, before Shug’s arrival offers readers further insight into the importance of Shug’s role as a conduit of inner spirituality for Celie. Through Celie’s discussion of the violent rapes she endures on behalf of her stepfather, and later Mr._____, readers observe how Celie’s identity is shaped by the role these violent men force her to take. However, readers do not explicitly hear Celie state her perception of herself before Shug’s arrival until her conversation with Shug concerning her sex life with Mr._____. When Shug asks if Celie enjoys having sex with Mr._____, Celie says to Shug, “Naw. Mr.____ can tell you, I don’t like it at all. What is it like? He get up on you, heist you nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain’t there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do
his business, get off, go to sleep” (Walker 77). Celie’s description of her experiences with Mr._____ demonstrate her understanding of her own identity as an object for men. More specifically, when readers read this description in conjunction with Celie’s description of her rape by her stepfather, readers see that Celie understands her vagina as a man’s possession. Celie’s belief that her vagina is an organ of male pleasure and not her own is important to remember as Celie moves forward in her relationship with Shug.

With an understanding of Celie’s identity, readers may begin to inquire about Celie’s view of men and how this view impacts her view of God. Within her chapter “Significance of Sisterhood and Lesbianism in Fiction of Women of Color,” scholar Uplabdhi Sangwan discusses the psychological implications of Celie’s identity, which directly relates to Celie’s perception of men and, ultimately, God. Sangwan says, “In The Color Purple, the sole purpose of a woman’s body, even for some black men, is to serve—sexual or physical. The Celie to whom readers are introduced at the beginning of the novel is trapped in the stereotypical role of a ‘mule’” (Sangwan 177). Sangwan’s description of Celie’s identity encompassing the stereotype of the “mule” reveals that Celie is not only an object of pleasure to these men, but that she is expected to surrender her body to the labors, or sexual needs, of the men, much like a farm animal. Readers see this very idea arise in Celie’s writing when she admits “most times I pretend I ain’t there,” which forces readers to realize her feelings of powerlessness in her ability to refuse these men their assumed right to her body. Celie’s experiences with violent men and her perception of men as possessors of her body helps to explain the tone of her letters to God. While it may seem odd at first that Celie is not more emotive or prayerful in her letters, the idea of a male, all-powerful God is surely one reason behind this reaction. As a powerful man whom Celie is forced into a relationship with, God
ultimately falls into the same category as the earthly men in Celie’s life. When readers place the psychological ideologies behind Celie’s identity as a mule in conversation with her forced relationship with a masculine God, there is a revelation concerning Celie’s lack of inner spirituality: Celie cannot obtain inner spirituality while her worldview, experiences, and identity are dictated by powerful, often violent men.

With Celie’s misperception of spirituality and her identity before Shug’s arrival both dictated by her violent experiences with men, Shug must begin her role as a conduit of inner spirituality by aiding Celie in reevaluating her place in the world. To begin this process, Shug first initiates her role as a conduit of inner spirituality by challenging Celie to alter her identity as an object for men through the experience of exploring of her own vagina. After Celie tells Shug of her negative sexual experiences with Mr.______, Shug responds to Celie by describing, in her own words, the anatomy of the vagina and the purpose each part possesses (Walker 77). Shug then urges Celie to “take this mirror and go look at [herself] down there” (Walker 77). When they both enter Celie’s room, Shug helps Celie take off her underwear, pulls up her dress, which reveals Celie’s vagina in the reflection of the mirror, and finally helps Celie find “the button” that she says is “the good part” of any sexual experience (Walker 77-78). When she discovers the magic “button,” Celie writes “I look at [Shug] and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me. Nothing much. But just enough to tell me this is the right button to mash” (Walker 78).

Within the trajectory of Celie’s changing identity, this scene with Shug is pivotal in the establishment of Celie’s inner spirituality, because it offers an identity in opposition with one dictated by the violent men in her life. Shug’s concern with Celie’s self-exploration, as well as the atmosphere she creates which allows Celie to explore her vagina at her own pace,
creates for Celie the first instance of a loving relationship and a sexual experience occurring at the same time. The discovery of “the right button to mash” that sends “a little shiver” shows Celie what a sexual experience should be like and that she should be the one who receives pleasure from such experiences. The importance of this scene in relation to Celie’s inner spirituality reveals itself when readers realize that this instance is the first time Celie finds pleasure in and has control over an experience, specifically a sexual experience. Arguably, this is the first instance in Celie’s lifetime where she feels loved and cared for by someone with whom she is sharing a sexual experience. Therefore, Shug first establishes herself as a conduit of inner spirituality by allowing Celie the opportunity to have a pleasure-filled sexual experience, which then allows Celie to heal from her abusive past and to reclaim her body and her identity.

Shug’s relationship with Celie allows Celie to begin transcending the label of an object and the stereotype of the “mule” figure and to begin entering into the identity of a woman who deserves to feel pleasure. Within her chapter “Creating Generations: The Relationship Between Celie and Shug in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple,” scholar E. Ellen Barker comments on Celie and Shug’s sexual connection saying, “Shug Avery… enables Celie to evolve into an independent, self-actualizing woman, no longer benignly accepting the emotionally crippling conditions that have enslaved her. While Shug does not give literal birth to Celie, she does give her spiritual rebirth, finally freeing her to enter ‘into creation’” (Barker 55). The sexual connection Celie and Shug share serves as the vessel for Celie’s spiritual rebirth because she is reawakened and reconnected to the spirituality that the actions of the violent men in her life forcefully isolated her from. Celie and Shug’s sexual connection allows Celie to experience the healing from her past, which is dominated by sexually violent
men; the reclaiming of her body and her entitlement to pleasure; the transcending of her identity as an object to that of a woman who is loved; and the reshaping of her place in the world through her introduction to inner spirituality.

Additionally, Shug establishes her role as a conduit of inner spirituality by her willingness to help Celie gain possession of the letters from her sister, Nettie, which develops Celie’s inner spirituality by allowing her to reclaim her identity as a sister. Within Celie’s first eleven letters, readers witness her marriage to Mr._____ and his unsuccessful advances toward Nettie, which results in Mr._____ forcing Nettie out of his house (Walker 17). Although she has to leave, Nettie promises to write to Celie saying “nothing but death can keep [her] from it,” but Celie informs readers at the close of the eleventh letter that Nettie never writes (Walker 18). As Shug and Celie grow closer, Shug witnesses the way Celie’s isolation, derived partially from her separation from Nettie, causes her to stand detached from any sort of inner spirituality. In order for Celie to continue to develop her inner spirituality, she must be reconnected with Nettie, which is the foundation for Shug’s growing relationship with Mr._____. Shug intentionally furthers her relationship with Mr._____ because she is aware that he is hiding Nettie’s letters to Celie and she desires to find where he is hiding them. Shug is successful in her intention with Mr._____ and is able to inform Celie that Nettie does indeed write letters, but upon their arrival, Mr._____ hides them in his trunk. Shug then persuades Celie that they should venture out to collect all the letters and read them (Walker 124). Shug’s partnership with Celie in finding the letters, helping her steam open the envelopes, and sorting them out by date guides Celie down a path of empowerment. Through Shug’s guidance and encouragement, Celie is able to find empowerment in reclaiming the letters, which are her rightful property, and in knowing that
her sister, another extension of herself and someone who knows the experiences of her sufferings, is in fact alive.

Once Shug guides Celie through the process of finding power in reclaiming and reestablishing her identity, Shug begins the final development in Celie’s journey toward harnessing her inner spirituality: challenging her misperception of spirituality. After finding and reading Nettie’s letters, Celie begins addressing her letters to Nettie instead of God. Within the second letter Celie addresses to Nettie, she begins by saying “I don’t write to God no more. I write to you” (Walker 192). Celie’s abrupt shift in language and tone within this letter leaves an astonishing and inquisitive atmosphere among readers concerning the cause of Celie’s acknowledgement of her misperception of spirituality. As a reminder, Celie’s misperception of spirituality is grounded in her forced relationship with God through letter writing. In the continuation of her letter, Celie describes a conversation between herself and Shug that offers a reason for this change. In the conversation, Shug questions Celie’s image of God, and in response Celie says her God is “big and old and tall and graybearded and white. He wear robes and go barefooted” (Walker 194). Celie’s description of God reveals that not only is her relationship with God dictated by someone other than herself, but so is her image of God, which is dictated by the image of God constructed by the white community. Shug’s response to Celie’s description conveys this very idea of Celie adopting another’s form of spirituality rather than discovering, accepting, and believing in her own inner spirituality. Then, Shug goes on to give an example by describing her own inner spirituality:
Here’s the thing, say Shug. 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. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, Lord. Feeling like shit… [God] don’t look like nothing, she say. It ain’t a picture show. It ain’t something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you’ve found it. (Walker 195).

Within her description of her own inner spirituality, Shug exemplifies for Celie the way inner spirituality allows her to understand her place in the world and how she is able to derive power from that understanding. Shug’s ability to say “the thing I believe” and describe a concept of God that is far from that of the white community’s concept of God demonstrates Shug’s firm foundation in her identity; Shug is sure of who she is and sure that she deserves to have a sense of spirituality that is unique to her. Additionally, Shug describes that her experiences with constructing her own ideas about God and her experiences with the development of her inner spirituality allow her to be happy. For Celie, Shug’s description of her own inner spirituality acts as a guide for understanding the path she must embark on to construct her own inner spirituality. Shug’s description of her own inner spirituality also acts as an inspiration for Celie concerning the fruit that constructing her own inner spirituality will bear.

Undoubtedly, Shug’s success as a conduit for inner spirituality is heightened by her vulnerability in sharing her own experiences, which readers witness through the alterations in
Celie’s letters as she chooses to commit herself fully to discovering, accepting, and believing in her own inner spirituality. The first alteration readers notice is Celie’s change in addressee from God to Nettie, which occurs in the aforementioned letter in which Celie recalls her spiritual conversation with Shug; Celie continues this change in addressee until the final letter of *The Color Purple*. The transition from addressing her letters to God to addressing her letters to Nettie reveals the seriousness in Celie’s discovery of her inner spirituality. Celie no longer feels the need to accept this forced-upon-her God as a source of therapy and comfort, but instead relies on her bond with her sister to transcend that void. Celie’s reestablished relationship with Nettie is important in the formation of her inner spirituality because her sisterhood allows her to know fully her identity as a sister, abandon her feelings of isolation, and enter into a relationship where she knows that she is unconditionally and purely loved.

Additionally, at the close of this letter, for the first time within the novel, Celie signs her letter off with “Amen” (Walker 197). The decision to sign off her letters addressed to her sister with “Amen” and not her letters to God shows where Celie’s true inner spirituality finds its dwelling place: where Celie knows that she is loved, understood, and accepted. Additionally, signing off her letters to her sister with “Amen” demonstrates Celie’s signal to the world that her decision is final: she is on the journey toward healing and transcendence where her identity and will are no longer dictated by the violent men in her life, because she is a woman who deserves to be the receiver of pleasure and love.

Through Walker’s intimate portrayal of Celie and Shug’s relationship, she demonstrates the importance of women specifically developing inner spirituality. The episodes of violence, the rapes, the domination, and the isolation that Celie experiences on
behalf of the men in her life are experiences specific to women and most importantly, in the world of *The Color Purple*, are experiences specific to black women. For Celie to begin the process of healing and transcendence, she must be accompanied by another black woman who is familiar with her past and present experiences and circumstances. Barker summarizes Celie and Shug’s relationship and its specific relation to women’s spirituality writing, “Shug has successfully guided Celie through the mirror stage of her development as a fully actualized, autonomous individual by helping her to discover her own body, by giving her the ability to love and see the creation in herself, and finally by giving Celie the capacity for speech” (Barker 62). Barker’s reference to Shug as a guide for Celie is important in understanding the world of black women’s spirituality that Walker constructs. While Shug may not share experiences in each specific part of Celie’s story, she is familiar with the feelings of oppression, isolation, and the detachment from any form of spirituality that Celie is experiencing when readers first enter the novel. Shug’s guidance on Celie’s journey toward inner spirituality not only helps Celie to redefine her identity, but also to understand that her experiences are not in vain because she can reclaim them and transform them into something valuable to her growth. On behalf of Walker’s construction of black women’s inner spirituality through the focused lens of Celie and Shug’s relationship, readers observe, for women, the importance of the journey toward discovering one’s inner spirituality is equally important to the harnessing of one’s inner spirituality.
Chapter Two: The Gift of the Matriarch: The Importance of Embracing Spirituality in *Mama Day*

Gloria Naylor’s 1988 publication of *Mama Day* tells the tale of the spiritually powerful women in the Day family beginning with the matriarch Sapphira Wade and concluding with the present day generation of Mama Day. The four characters that make up the focus of this paper are Sapphira Wade, Mama Day, Reema’s son, and George. Within the novel, Sapphira Wade serves as the foundation and the inspiration of supernatural spirituality in Willow Springs, which Naylor spends her time exploring and demonstrating to readers. Mama Day, a descendant of Sapphira Wade, serves as the current matriarch of Willow Springs and finds herself at the epicenter of the town’s supernatural power. Reema’s son and George serve similar roles as they symbolize Naylor’s conception of the “white” approach toward the supernatural spirituality that permeates the story of Sapphira Wade, Mama Day, and Willow Springs. Through the chronology of her narrative, Naylor compels readers to become immersed in and to understand the importance of embracing the matrilineal, supernatural spirituality of the Day family, which contrasts the intellectually driven approach of the white community embodied by Reema’s son and George. Naylor develops her full-immersion narrative, which focuses on the journey to embracing spirituality, through two key components: the meaning and the use of the term “18&23” and the descriptive experience of Mama Day and Bernice at the other place.

In order to understand the importance of Naylor’s construction of black female spirituality within *Mama Day*, readers must first understand my use of the phrase
“supernatural spirituality” as it relates to the Day women. When I use the phrase “supernatural spirituality,” I am referring to the Day women’s ability to connect with their spirituality through hoodoo conjures and potions, which they access by their ancestral connections to Sapphira Wade. In the hoodoo tradition, a conjure woman, the strong and powerful female head of a family, possess the power to use conjures and potions, often involving natural products such as roots, flowers, and animal products, to care for those in her community. Within Naylor’s construction of Willow Springs, these hoodoo practices often extend beyond the visual and the physical realms, which charge the readers and the residents of Willow Springs to embrace ways of understanding beyond those of logic in order to participate in the world of Willow Springs. For Naylor, these ways of understanding often encompass the readers and residents’ ability to infer and to feel how the Day women connect with and use hoodoo. The ability to infer and to feel supernatural spirituality comes primarily through gaining an understanding of Sapphira Wade’s introduction and establishment of the practice of hoodoo in the Day family and experiencing the use of hoodoo first-hand through Mama Day. Therefore, in order to accomplish Naylor’s focus of becoming immersed in and embracing supernatural spirituality, readers must understand Sapphira Wade and Mama Day’s unique use of hoodoo.

While the present residents of Willow Springs did not witness Sapphira Wade’s hoodoo first-hand, they aid readers in gaining an understanding of her use of hoodoo through documentation and oral traditions. Through the information in Sapphira Wade’s bill of sale and her connection with the Willow Spring’s phrase “18&23,” both explored later, residents and readers observe Sapphira Wade’s purpose of using hoodoo through her conjuring of Bascombe Wade. The residents of Willow Springs tell readers one version of the event in the
year 1823 when Sapphira Wade uses her hoodoo power to conjure Bascombe Wade, thus altering his perception of reality and persuading him to complete the task of giving his land to one thousand enslaved African Americans. Sapphira Wade’s single act of conjuring Bascombe Wade for the benefit of those in her community sets the goal for her use of supernatural spirituality, which later inspires Mama Day’s use of supernatural spirituality.

Readers observe Sapphira Wade’s goal in using supernatural spirituality arise in Mama Day’s specific connection to hoodoo. Mama Day connects to her hoodoo power by traveling to the other place and connecting with Sapphira Wade, which gives her the power to aid the residents of Willow Springs with their specific needs. While at the other place, Mama Day exercises the power she gains from connecting with hoodoo by conjuring chicken eggs and using them as the vessel for aiding Willow Springs’ residents. For instance, readers can clearly see Mama Day’s goal in using her supernatural spirituality emerge in her eagerness to aid Bernice in the process of conceiving a child, which occurs when Mama Day takes Bernice to the other place and uses the conjured chicken eggs to impregnate Bernice successfully. As readers follow the influence of Sapphira Wade’s introduction of supernatural spirituality in the life of Mama Day, they witness the same goal emerge in both women’s use of hoodoo: to benefit those who are in desperate need of a voice, of representation, and of healing.

At the start of the novel, Naylor’s focus on the life and influence of Sapphira Wade develops a foundation for readers to begin understanding the historical significance of the matrilineal, supernatural spirituality specifically in the lives of the Day women. Before the narrator begins telling the story of Sapphira Wade, Naylor offers readers a visual demonstration of the significance of Sapphira Wade’s role within the Day family through the
inclusion of a family tree. The family tree depicts Sapphira Wade as the matriarch, followed by her seven sons, of whom Jonah Day is the last. The tree then depicts Jonah Day’s family of seven sons, of whom John-Paul is the last, and then depicts John-Paul as the father of Mama Day and her sister, Abigail. The tree then depicts Abigail as the grandmother of Cocoa, which makes her Mama Day’s grandniece. While one could easily overlook Naylor’s entry as a helpful guide to understand the dynamics and relationships within the Day family, its greater purpose is found as a guide to understand the importance of familial history in the present. This interpretation of Naylor’s inclusion of a family tree is solidified by the contents of the following page, which depicts the bill of sale transferring Sapphira Wade as property to Bascombe Wade. The closing statement within the bill of sale reads, “[Sapphira] has served on occasion in the capacity of midwife and nurse, not without extreme mischief and suspicions of delving in witchcraft” (Naylor 1). While the content of the family tree allows readers to visualize the matrilineal genealogy of the Day family, the bill of sale allows readers to understand the supernatural spirituality that flows through this matrilineal genealogy, thus marking its importance.

Then, Naylor proceeds with Mama Day’s opening lines, which work together with the genealogical documents at the novel’s start to establish the role of readers in the process of embracing supernatural spirituality. Naylor writes, “Willow Springs. Everybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade. A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her” (Naylor 3). At the start of the novel, the narrator is unknown to readers, but the narrator’s presentation of Sapphira Wade assures readers that the narrator is a member of the Willow Springs’ community; thus, readers can trust their descriptions and narration. Within scholar Margaret
Earley Whitt’s chapter entitled “Mama Day,” in her book *Understanding Gloria Naylor*, Whitt addresses the intricate introduction Naylor composes for readers writing, “Narrative prose, however, is not the beginning of this book, and it is essential that the reader remember this point in order to embrace the world view that Naylor creates in this highly original, magical masterpiece” (Whitt 114). Whitt’s interpretation of Naylor’s choice of narrative chronology at the start of *Mama Day* is important because it acknowledges the role of the readers. While the readers are aware that Sapphira Wade and Mama Day both use the medium of conjures and potions to help others in their community, readers are unaware of how Sapphira Wade and Mama Day apply those mediums to others. For readers and residents alike, the supernatural spirituality that Sapphira Wade harbors and passes down to Mama Day cannot be discussed and understood through verbal communication but lives somewhere between the realm of the nonverbal and unseen. Therefore, Naylor has strategically constructed *Mama Day* to place readers in a position of embracing the unknown and confusing in order to understand the Day women’s journey to embracing their own supernatural spirituality. At the start of the novel, this process of embracing supernatural spirituality is often difficult and one that demands a rejection of logic for readers. However, at the novel’s close, Naylor’s construction of *Mama Day* proves its importance by creating an atmosphere of empathy for the women of the Day family by the readers and challenging the readers’ preconceived notions of how to interpret information.

Once the readers’ role is established, Naylor focuses on the power and importance of black women’s supernatural spirituality to shape culture and understand through the use of the phrase “18&23.” When telling the story of Sapphira Wade, the narrator describes how Sapphira Wade’s supernatural spirituality is culminated in the year 1823 in one of two ways:
marrying Bascombe Wade, having seven sons with him, murdering him and escaping death; or persuading Bascombe Wade to deed his slaves all of Willow Springs in one thousand days, poisoning him, and having seven sons with unknown persons (Naylor 3). While the proper version of Sapphira Wade’s story is unknown, the understanding of Sapphira Wade’s possession and use of supernatural spirituality is fully known by her power over Bascombe Wade. The current community of Willow Springs often uses the phrase “18&23,” based upon the date of Sapphira Wade’s supernaturally charged episode, to describe events in their lives that extend beyond the verbal and visual realms. The narrator offers an example of the use of “18&23” saying, “But who don’t know that old twisted-lip manager at the Sheraton Hotel beyond the bridge, offering Winky Browne only twelve dollars for his whole boatload of crawdaddies—‘tried to 18&23 him,’ if he tried to do a thing?” (Naylor 4). Within the narrator’s example, readers come to an understanding from the context given that the manager is in some way threatening Winky Browne if he tells anyone about the way he has been treated. Although the meaning of “18&23” is still not fully known, its allusion to some form of threatening makes it clear that this phrase holds power for the residents of Willow Springs. The question then becomes what kind of power “18&23” possesses.

At first, the narrator’s use of the phrase “18&23” to describe the hotel manager’s actions may seem odd because readers have no strict definition for the phrase, thus the phrase bears no true meaning for readers. Within scholar Lindsey Tucker’s essay “Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day,” Tucker interprets the meaning of “18&23” saying that it “replaces [Sapphira’s] name but circulates within the signifying practices of the island as a power-making word…[the islanders] are speaking of conjure power” (Tucker 153). When reviewing the ways in which Sapphira Wade
manipulates Bascombe Wade, the use of “18&23” begins to reveal itself, as Tucker describes it, by explaining the presence of a powerful, overwhelming force or person that the Willow Springs natives are too scared to mention by name (Tucker 153). When applying this phrase to the instance of the crawdaddies, readers can understand that the ill-will of the hotel manager toward Winky Browne is too awful for the speaker to say directly, so the speaker uses the phrase “18&23” as its replacement. Through the relationship between this use of “18&23” and Sapphira Wade’s story, Naylor supports the importance of black women’s supernatural spirituality because she demonstrates its power to shape the future population’s culture and way of understanding.

However, in order to understand the cultural and communal importance of “18&23” in reference to black women’s supernatural spirituality, readers must understand its role within their journey to embracing supernatural spirituality. The question then becomes how does Naylor place readers in a position of understanding the use of “18&23” when they are not residents of Willow Springs and are not familiar with the influences of supernatural spirituality? When describing Naylor’s narrative phenomenon concerning the reader’s understanding of “18&23,” Whitt says:

The reader is quickly immersed in this new world where a story needs to be told to the stranger-reader about a subject that exists in the nonverbal part of memory, readers find themselves rereading, returning to the earlier pictorial display, and eventually trusting the language, which does not make logical sense, will eventually do so… Naylor’s gift to the reader is that she ushers in a world which must be
accepted on its own terms; the reader is the one who must come around and learn to experience [this] world. (Whitt 115)

For Naylor, the importance of the readers’ relationship with “18&23” is that they decide to acknowledge, seek to understand, and finally embrace the use and the meaning of such supernaturally charged verbiage on their own terms. In the crawdaddies example, readers witness this sequence of events taking place as they first acknowledge that the use of “18&23” is taking the place of another phrase or word. The readers then begin to understand that the use of “18&23” carries an importance within Willow Springs as Naylor gives various examples of its use in conversations. Finally, readers begin to embrace the use of “18&23” when they reread the narrator’s explanation of the importance of the year 1823 in the life of Sapphira Wade paired with the intentionally placed documents at the novel’s start. With the Willow Springs map, the Day family tree, and Sapphira Wade’s bill of sale at the start of the novel, Naylor offers her readers the tools needed to grasp their newfound reality upon entering *Mama Day*. Therefore, Naylor charges her readers to take ownership of their journey through Willow Springs by researching and investigating the origins of the “18&23” terminology, which finds its foundation in the matrilineal line of the Day family, thus revealing its importance. In this way, Naylor places readers on their own journey to embracing the Day women’s supernatural spirituality, which intentionally mimics the journey the Day women themselves take to embrace their spirituality. First, the Day women have to acknowledge the rumors of Sapphira Wade’s conjure power as stated in the documents written by white men. Then, they have to seek to understand the role this conjure
power plays and how Sapphira Wade finds it. Finally, they have to embrace their matrilineal heritage as conjure women and choose to practice this tradition.

Once Naylor establishes the readers’ role in embracing the supernatural nature of Willow Springs through the use of “18&23,” she establishes the absurdity of bypassing and dismissing such an understanding through the character of Reema’s son. When first describing Reema’s son, the narrator says “Look what happened to Reema’s boy—the one with the pear-shaped head—came hauling himself back from one of those fancy colleges mainside, dragging his notebooks and tape recorder… all excited and determined to put Willow Springs on the map” (Naylor 7). The narrator continues to explain how Reema’s son returns to Willow Springs with an obsession to discover the etymology of “18&23,” but refuses to ask any of the Willow Springs’ natives about the phrase (Naylor 8-10). Naylor’s presentation of Reema’s son encompasses the intellectually driven approach toward understanding that is embodied within white communities. In her essay “The Whole Picture in Gloria Naylor’s Mama Day,” scholar Susan Meisenhelder references Naylor’s use of intellectually and logically driven black characters to represent the white community. In reference to Cocoa, Mama Day’s grandniece, and George, Cocoa’s boyfriend, Meisenhelder writes:

George, orphaned in the Urban North, has grown up in an institution run by whites… Through the relationships that develop between these two characters, one the product of a white world, the other of an emphatically black one, Naylor deals with the issue of maintaining black cultural identity in the face of attempts by the white world to order, control, and define black people. (Meisenhelder 113)
Although Meisenhelder’s analysis focuses on George’s “white” approach to Willow Springs, Meisenhelder’s analysis of the impact of the “white” approach can also be applied to Reema’s son. The narrator reveals to readers that Reema’s son has just returned from college, which can be thought of as a predominantly white institution that teaches students intellectually based analysis and the importance of logic within an argument. Through the description of Reema’s son’s actions upon his return to Willow Springs, the narrator seeks to show how not to approach Willow Springs and, for the readers, how not to approach *Mama Day*: rather than seeking a logical explanation, readers should do what Reema’s son did not and listen to the natives of Willow Springs. At the close of the novel’s introduction, the narrator says:

And [Reema’s son] coulda listened to them the way you been listening to us right now. Think about it: ain’t nobody really talking to you…But you done heard the legend of Sapphira Wade, though nobody here breaths her name. You done heard it the way we know it, sitting on our porches and shelling June peas… Pity, though, Reema’s boy couldn’t listen, like you. (Naylor 10)

Through the narrator’s direct address to the readers, Naylor demonstrates to readers the way in which the novel should be read: “It is not important to twist every odd quirk that lacks credibility into logical meaning. The schools only teach one way of learning… Willow Springs offers alternatives” (Whitt 121). Naylor strategically uses the example of “18&23” to allow the readers to practice their ability to embrace the supernatural spirituality of Willow
Springs, which, coupled with the wrongfulness of Reema’s son’s approach, ensures that the readers are well prepared to continue their journey through Willow Springs.

Following her “18&23” example of supernatural spirituality, Naylor truly tests the readers’ process of adapting to and embracing the supernatural spirituality of Willow Springs through the sensory description of Mama Day and Bernice at the other place. Prior to this episode, Bernice, one of Cocoa’s childhood friends, is struggling to conceive a child and Mama Day, the true conjure woman of Willow Springs, is aiding and coaching her through this journey. In this abrupt, four paragraph episode at the center of the novel, Naylor offers readers a fully immersive experience into the ways of Mama Day’s supernatural spirituality as they become first-hand observers to her hoodoo practice and Bernice’s experience.

Throughout this episode, Naylor’s prose shifts from narrative style with a subject, verb, and object to a style that places heavy emphasis on the readers’ senses and their ability to feel the prose. For instance, when describing the final steps of Mama Day’s process, Naylor writes, “Nine openings. She breathes through two, hears through two, eats through one, and two below her waist, and the two for the life she longs to nurse. Nine openings melting into the uncountable, ‘cause the touch is light, light. Spreading each tiny pore on each inch of skin” (Naylor 140). Although the narrator does not name the woman that Mama Day is seeking to help at the other place, when reading this experience readers know that the “she” the narrator refers to is Bernice. The readers are certain of this reference because the narrator describes how “she” is longing to nurse life and readers know that Bernice is eager to conceive a child. However, the readers’ logical understanding of the narrator’s description is certainly flawed because they begin to ask: how do nine openings melt, and what is the “uncountable,” and to whose touch is the narrator referring?
Therefore, Naylor’s inclusion of this seemingly illogical episode forces readers to assume the process of acknowledging, understanding, and embracing Mama Day’s powerful supernatural spirituality and, thus, that Bernice’s experience lives beyond the visual and physical realm. When describing the readers’ interaction with Naylor’s sensory-filled prose, Whitt explains:

In Faulkner-like prose, Naylor spins out the scenario of Bernice and Mama Day at the other place…Naylor casts the conception scene by using disembodied parts… To think that [Bernice’s husband] has a viable part in his wife’s conception, however, veers towards a logical rendering of Bernice’s pregnancy—and that would be “across the bridge thinking”…. At the other place, it easily follows that chicken’s eggs are all that are necessary to create the child that Bernice will carry. (Whitt 139-141).

Through Whitt’s analysis of Naylor’s prose, readers become aware that in order to understand the importance of this episode they must first acknowledge Mama Day’s supernatural spirituality, which is manifested through her hoodoo use of chicken’s eggs. An acknowledgement of Mama Day’s supernatural spirituality is inevitable because of the overwhelming sensation of Naylor’s disembodied prose; there is no other explanation for such emotions, feelings, and descriptions than Mama Day’s powerful supernatural spirituality. Next, readers must seek to understand Mama Day’s power and ability as a supernatural force with the ability to conceive a child for Bernice through the use of a hoodoo-conjured chicken’s egg. As Whitt states in her analysis, to disregard such understanding would be logic-based, or “across the bridge” thinking, which readers know
from Reema’s son cannot and should not exist in Willow Springs. Once readers lend themselves to acknowledging and understanding the supernatural spirituality of Mama Day, their alignment with Bernice’s character within this episode allows them an imminent embracing of the overwhelming power the Day women possess. Naylor’s brilliant construction of this four-paragraph experience allows readers first-hand experience with the truth that not everything lives in the realm of the visual and physical but can reside in the nonverbal and in the unseen and be just as real.

Once again, Naylor does not simply leave readers with an understanding of the importance of Mama Day’s ability to embrace her supernatural spirituality but strengthens this understanding of the validity and importance of black female spirituality through George’s dismissal of such experiences. As previously discussed in reference to Reema’s son through Meisenhelder’s analysis, George represents the logically driven “white” approach to such topics as spirituality and the unseen. Much like Reema’s son, George is unable to acknowledge, understand, and then embrace the supernatural spirituality of Willow Springs and Mama Day, and he ultimately rejects such notions of spirituality. In continuity with Bernice’s episode involving the supernatural power of Mama Day, readers observe George’s rejection of such power come to fruition when Mama Day asks him to take part in her supernatural conjuring processes. Mama Day asks George to enter the chicken coup at the other place and bring her back whatever he finds in order to help Cocoa, whom Ruby, an evil conjure women, has hexed (Naylor 299-302). George enters the chicken coup, albeit reluctantly, to do as Mama Day asks, but once he enters, readers see the process of acknowledging, understanding, and embracing break down. Although he is reluctant in his entrance into the chicken coup, George’s decision to enter the coup physically demonstrates
his acknowledgement of some power that Mama Day obtains to help Cocoa. However, readers begin to see the dismantling of his understanding and his inability to embrace Mama Day’s supernatural spirituality because of his need for logic and his pride.

Through his inner thoughts while inside the chicken coup, readers witness these logic-driven and pride-stricken ideologies surface when George says, “But there was nothing to bring her… Could it be that she wanted nothing but my hands… There was nothing that old woman could do with a pair of empty hands… All of this wasted effort when these were my hands, and there was no way that I was going to let you [Cocoa] go” (Naylor 300-301). In response to George’s thoughts on his task, Meisenhelder writes, “Unable to abandon his intense masculine individualism, however, George perverts this ritual [Mama Day’s task] by acting another white male role. Refusing to believe his hands are all he is to bring back, frustrated by what he (like the white world) sees as only ‘mumbo-jumbo’” (Meisenhelder 121). George finds fault in his ability to understand Mama Day’s supernatural spirituality because of his inability to shed the need for logic and for saving Cocoa on his own. However, as readers who have experienced first-hand Mama Day’s supernatural spirituality at work, they know that understanding and embracing Willow Springs and Mama Day for who they truly are cannot take place in the presence of logic, but within the realm of the nonverbal and unseen. When placed in conversation with Reema’s son and George’s rejection of Sapphira Wade, Willow Springs, and Mama Day’s supernatural spirituality, Naylor’s full-immersion narrative persuades readers into a response of disappointment. The readers’ reaction of disappointment reveals the success of Naylor’s narrative in painting an understanding of the importance of black female spirituality, as readers are ready to stand in defense of Mama Day’s supernatural spirituality on account of all they have witnessed and experienced.
Altogether, Naylor’s fully immersive narrative and her examples of “white” approaches to the supernatural spirituality found in *Mama Day* allow readers to acknowledge, understand, and embrace the importance of matrilineal, supernatural spirituality within the Day family. When placing *Mama Day* in conversation with modern society, we begin to see the positive implications Naylor’s narrative holds outside of Willow Springs. Within modern society, when beginning the process of understanding, the privileged way of understanding is often the “white” approach that Naylor offers within *Mama Day*: the logical approach. However, through her focus on an urgency for readers to embrace supernatural ways of understanding, Naylor has subverted modern society’s privileged, logical way of understanding. Additionally, it is interesting to note that Naylor’s portrayal of the “white” approach to understanding is embodied by men, thus adding another layer to her in-depth subversion of privileged ways of understanding. Within *Mama Day*, the characters that embody supernatural spirituality and carry it through blood lines are only the Day women, which not only elevates the status of women within the novel, but specifically black women. By doing so, Naylor provides her readers with an empathetic approach toward her construction of supernatural black female spirituality, as readers feel the pain Willow Springs’ residents and Mama Day experience upon Reema’s son and George’s rejection of such “illogical” ways of knowing.
Chapter Three: Not From Where, But How: Defining Spirituality by its Use in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*

Zora Neale Hurston’s debut novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, published in 1934, intimately explores the spirituality of its black female characters. The novel primarily centers on the character of John Buddy Pearson, a black man in the American South, and introduces other characters through their affiliation with him. Hurston specifically focuses on the black female characters of Lucy and Hattie during their respective marriages with John. However, Hurston does not explore these women solely through their relationships with John, but most importantly through the one important trait they have in common: spirituality. In her exploration of Lucy and Hattie, Hurston does not discuss spirituality in terms of the morality of one religion or denomination over another. Instead, Hurston discusses spirituality in terms of the way Lucy and Hattie seek to connect with and use their spirituality in their marriages. *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* demonstrates a wide spectrum of spirituality as Lucy finds her connection with her spirituality through a relationship with God, which she seeks to use to strengthen her marriage, and Hattie finds her connection with her spirituality through the supernatural power of hoodoo, which she seeks to use deviously to establish her role as a wife. Hurston’s focus on the ways Lucy and Hattie use their spirituality specifically in their roles as wives establishes her discussion of spirituality as specific to black women. In her exploration and discussion of black female spirituality, Hurston offers an intimate, thorough look into defining the preeminence of Lucy and Hattie’s spirituality by their use of spirituality, not the source of their spirituality.
Throughout my analysis of Hurston’s exploration of black female spirituality in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, I use three specific terms to describe the ways Lucy and Hattie connect with their spirituality: religious, supernatural, and African spirituality. In using these terms, I am not intending to argue for the importance of defining Lucy and Hattie’s spirituality by its source or their connection with spirituality. Instead, I use these terms to demonstrate that black women connect with their spirituality in unique and diverse ways and to further the readers’ understanding of how each one uses her spirituality. In describing Lucy’s spirituality, I use the term “religious spirituality,” which defines Lucy’s connection with spirituality through her relationship with God and her participation in the organized religion of the Christian church. Lucy uses her religious spirituality to interpret and strengthen her marriage with John through prayers to God, as well as by encouraging John to grow continually in his role as a Christian pastor. In describing Hattie’s spirituality, I use the phrase “supernatural spirituality,” which defines her connection with her spirituality through the hoodoo conjuring of An’ Dangie Dewoe. Hattie uses her supernatural spirituality to alter John’s state of mind through hoodoo concoctions and have him marry her without any recollection.

Finally, in reference to both Lucy and Hattie, I use the term “African spirituality.” Within African cultures, spirituality encompasses the way one’s practices and beliefs work to inform one’s interpretation and understanding of the world (Chiorazzi). Much like Hurston in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, African spirituality places little emphasis on the source of practices and beliefs and places heavier emphasis on the ways one uses those practices and beliefs (Chiorazzi). When placing this understanding of African spirituality in conversation with *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, I use African spirituality to define Lucy and Hattie’s use of their
respective spiritualities to interpret and to understand various aspects of their lives, as well as to make and to act on decisions that affect various aspects of their lives outside the realm of spirituality. In particular, my analysis of African spirituality focuses on the ways Lucy uses her religious spirituality and Hattie uses her supernatural spirituality to interpret and to understand their respective relationships with John and then to choose a course of action to maintain or to alter their relationships.

Hurston exemplifies this use of African spirituality in the way that Lucy and Hattie do not confine their use of spirituality to one particular realm of life. For instance, Lucy does not solely use her religious spirituality when attending church services, but instead uses her religious spirituality to inform her role as a woman, a wife, and a mother. Similarly, Hattie does not solely confine her use of supernatural spirituality to practicing hoodoo conjures with An’ Dangie Dewoe, but instead uses her supernatural spirituality to inform her wants, desires, and title as a wife. Through Lucy and Hattie’s specific use of their respective spiritualities to interpret, understand, and shape their identities as wives, Hurston demonstrates that they are unknowingly creating a connection to their heritage of African spirituality. Hurston’s inclusion of this subtle relationship between Lucy, Hattie, and African spirituality provides evidence for her argument that the source of one’s spirituality is not as important as the use of one’s spirituality.

When I reference the phrase “use of spirituality” in correspondence with Hurston’s exploration of black women’s spirituality, I am referencing the way in which Hurston chooses to focus on the use of spirituality in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine: the effect Lucy and Hattie’s spirituality has not only on themselves, but on those around them. Hurston defines Lucy’s religious spirituality positively as she uses it to interpret and strengthen her marriage
with John through prayers to God, as well as by encouraging John continually to grow in his role as a Christian pastor. Hurston defines Hattie’s supernatural spirituality negatively as she uses it to alter John’s state of mind through hoodoo concoctions and to manipulate him into marrying her without any recollection. While Hurston’s portrayal of Hattie’s use of supernatural spirituality is negative, it is important to acknowledge that Hurston does not give any background as to why Hattie uses her supernatural spirituality in this way. As a Christian reader myself, I understand that Lucy is basing her positive use of religious spirituality on the Christian moral of thinking of others first, as embodied in Jesus Christ. However, to understand the background of Hattie’s self-centered use of supernatural spirituality, readers must place this use of supernatural spirituality in conversation with Mama Day’s use of supernatural spirituality in *Mama Day*. Within *Mama Day*, readers observe Mama Day using her supernatural spirituality to the benefit of all around her who are in need of help, including Bernice and Cocoa. However, Hattie uses her supernatural spirituality to manipulate John, at times making him physically ill, to achieve her desire of being his wife. When analyzing these two uses of supernatural spirituality, more specifically these two uses of hoodoo, readers see that there is a dichotomy present in supernatural spirituality: the possessor’s choice between using her supernatural spirituality for good or evil, which is categorized by the effect of the use on others. Therefore, Mama Day’s use of supernatural spirituality aligns with the good and Hattie’s use of supernatural spirituality aligns with the evil, thus rendering a negative portrayal.

Although Hurston portrays Lucy’s religious spirituality positively and Hattie’s supernatural spirituality negatively, she makes it clear that both women possess the same amount of power; they simply use that power in different ways. Through her equitable
portrayal of the power Lucy and Hattie experience through their connections with their respective spiritualities, Hurston heightens the focus of defining spirituality through its use within the novel. Therefore, Hurston does not define Lucy’s religious spirituality positively because of her connection to Christian roots and Christian morals, nor does she define Hattie’s supernatural spirituality negatively because she lacks a connection to Christian roots and morals and, instead, has connections to conjures and potions. Instead, Hurston defines Lucy’s religious spirituality positively because she uses her spirituality to benefit John and subsequently her family and community. Hurston defines Hattie’s supernatural spirituality negatively because she uses her spirituality only to benefit herself and to manipulate John. Consequently, Hurston exposes the nature of Lucy and Hattie’s spiritualities by their differing practices of spirituality toward John and their effect on him.

At the start of the novel, Hurston immediately immerses readers in observing the use of black female spirituality in order to familiarize them with their role as observers of spirituality throughout the remainder of the novel. When describing the opening scene, the narrator says, “God was grumbling his thunder and playing the zigzag lightning thru his fingers. Amy Crittenden came to the door of her cabin to spit out a wad of snuff. She looked up at the clouds” (Hurston 1). By beginning the novel with “God” and associating the revelation with Amy, John’s mother, Hurston is notifying readers that they are entering into a world where black women acknowledge the reality and importance of spirituality. Following the narrator’s introduction of Amy’s spirituality, Hurston demonstrates for readers the way Amy uses her religious spirituality to interpret and understand the immediate world around her. After noticing the storm, Amy calls to her husband, Ned, and says, “Better call dem chaps in outa de cotton patch” (Hurston 11). Amy’s ability to understand the brewing storm
in correspondence with her religious spirituality, which is a process that encompasses African spirituality, establishes an urgency to call her children inside because she knows the intricate power the Creator of the storm harnesses. In addition to an ability to understand the world, Amy’s use of an imperative verb, directed toward her husband, illustrates the courage and independence she receives from her use of her spirituality. To understand the importance of Amy’s use of an imperative verb, readers must gain a better understanding of the role of black women during and after the Civil War Era. In her article “From Slave Women to Free Women: The National Archives and Black Women’s History in the Civil War Era,” Scholar Noralee Frankel establishes the dually oppressed position of black women during the Civil War Era. Frankel states that there was a “Clear gendered division of labor in the household. Women discuss cooking, washing, and mending clothes… men obtained the main responsibility to provide for and protect their families” (Frankel). Therefore, Amy’s use of the imperative verb “better call” defies the socio-cultural norms that defined the gender dynamics of this time period in two ways: extending her power into the realm of protecting her family and cutting short the children’s time in the cotton patch, which limits the family’s income for that day.

While Hurston’s decision to pair “God” and “Amy” as the novel’s first words demonstrates the importance of spirituality in the lives of the black women in the novel, Hurston’s decision intricately to establish Amy’s use of spirituality reveals Amy’s ties to African Spirituality. Given the context of the sentence and the description of God’s actions, readers observe how Amy’s connection with religious spirituality is used as a lens to understand and interpret the occurrences in the world, such as thunderstorms. However, Amy’s use of her religious spirituality to interpret and to understand the thunderstorm as one
created by God is not simply a Christian-based idea, but also encompasses Amy’s connection with her African spirituality. In an interview with Anthony Chiorazzi for The Harvard Gazette, Doctor Jacob Olupona, a professor of indigenous African religions in Harvard’s Divinity School and a professor of African and African-American studies in Harvard’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences, speaks on African spirituality and its role in the lives of those who practice. He says, “African Spirituality simply acknowledges that beliefs and practices touch on and inform every facet of human life, and therefore African religion cannot be separated from the everyday or mundane. African spirituality is truly holistic” (Chiorazzi).

Although Amy’s use of African spirituality seems to be unknown to her, Hurston’s emphasis on the way spirituality informs multiple aspects of Amy’s life reveals the importance of the connection between black women’s spirituality and African spirituality in Jonah’s Gourd Vine. While Amy’s understanding of God’s control over the thunderstorm is rooted in the use of her religious spirituality, her ability immediately to alter her interpretation and understanding of her role as a wife and mother in response to the storm is rooted in the use of African spirituality. Through this relationship between Amy’s unique, personal connection with spirituality informing and seeping into her everyday life, readers observe the “holistic” nature of African spirituality that Dr. Olupona describes. Although the remainder of the novel follows Lucy and Hattie, it is important to note that Hurston begins her novel uniting the forces of Amy’s unique, personal connection to her spirituality and African spirituality, as this pairing becomes an important feature within the novel.

Hurston begins expounding upon this relationship between black women’s religious spirituality and African spirituality through the character of Lucy, John’s first wife. Lucy offers the first fully immersive experience as readers witness her religious spirituality from
her introduction to her death. Although Lucy’s introduction lacks an overt connection to spirituality, it is important to analyze because it provides greater insight into the depth of her religious spirituality later in the novel. Readers first encounter Lucy when John is passing by a schoolhouse on his way to Massa Alf Pearson’s place to find work (Hurston 15). While all of the other girls run away from John in fear of their teacher catching them talking to a boy, Lucy remains in John’s presence, even running after him, and shouting, “Whyn’t you come to school too?” (Hurston 15). Within Lucy’s brief introduction, she exhibits two very distinct traits that set her apart from the other females within the scene: her decision to remain in John’s presence despite the threat of punishment if caught, as well as the tone she takes when talking to John. In her decision to remain in John’s presence, Lucy actively defies the socio-cultural expectation of separation between young men and women that is exhibited in the scolding she receives from her teacher because of her interaction with John (Hurston 15). Additionally, Hurston’s italicization of the word “you” establishes the tone of Lucy’s question and demonstrates her disregard for the implications of the gender ideologies that accompany the socio-cultural expectations of her time. As mentioned previously in conjunction with Amy’s character, the gender ideologies of this time place women within the domestic sphere, while they place men within the social sphere and the workforce. (Frankel). The italicized “you” places emphasis on John as “other” because he is not enrolled in school, thus creating an elevated, independent status for Lucy in comparison. In each element of her character, Lucy proves that her actions, unlike those of her peers, are not driven by the external forces of socio-cultural norms and gender ideologies. Therefore, Hurston places readers in a position of questioning the origin of Lucy’s defiance of the socio-cultural norms of her time as one of an internal force rather than an external force.
Upon Hurston’s revelation that the internal force influencing Lucy is her religious spirituality, readers observe how the steadfast nature of Lucy’s faith provides her with an endurance in times of oppression. After Lucy’s marriage to John and their move to the house servant’s quarters on Massa Alf Pearson’s property, John begins initiating and participating in multiple affairs with Mehaley and Big ‘Oman (Hurston 81-86). Following the readers’ awareness of John’s affairs, Hurston includes a prayer that Lucy prays to God immediately after the scene of John with Mehaley and before the scene of John with Big ‘Oman. Lucy prays, “And oh, Ah knows youse uh prayer-hearin’ God… You heard me when Ah laid at hell’s dark door and cried three long days and nights… you know Ahm uh po’ child, and uh long ways from home. You promised to be uh rock in uh weary land—uh shelter in de time uh storm. Amen” (Hurston 84). Hurston’s instant transition from John’s seductive conversation with Mehaley to Lucy’s vulnerable prayer is not coincidental because it demonstrates the importance of Lucy’s relationship with God, as He is the first person in whom she confides when expressing her despair. Additionally, Lucy’s use of language within her prayer demonstrates the importance of her relationship with God, as she is able to find the endurance to carry on amidst her suffering. Lucy remarks that God heard her when she “laid at hell’s dark door and cried three long days and nights,” which carries with it the idea that if God heard her at that low moment he will surely hear her in her current lowness (Hurston 84).

After Lucy’s prayer, Hurston exhibits the continual strengthening of Lucy’s use religious spirituality when she boldly confronts John about his affair with Big ‘Oman. Lucy says to John, “If you loves her bes’, John, you gimme our chillun and you go on where yo’ love lie” (Hurston 88). When discussing Lucy’s relationship with John in her chapter “Lucy
in _Jonah’s Gourd Vine_,” scholar Pearlie May Fisher Peters writes, “For [Lucy], the experience of loving totally and speaking one’s mind freely functions as a basic survival element in [her] development to maturity and happiness in marriage” (Peters 113). For Lucy, loving totally is a principle well-rooted in her Christian religion as exemplified by Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross. Within Hurston’s portrayal of Lucy’s use of religious spirituality, readers see Lucy loving totally in her willingness to sacrifice her own happiness with John for his potential happiness with Big ‘Oman. What is interesting about Hurston’s portrayal of Lucy’s use of spirituality is the way in which her ability to speak her mind encompasses both the use of religious spirituality and African spirituality. Within Christianity, the principle of speaking one’s mind is rooted in the principle of honesty and respect. Readers see Lucy exemplifying such love and respect when she addresses John about his love for Big ‘Oman without the presence of vindictiveness.

Additionally, Hurston offers readers various instances where reflections of Lucy’s religious spirituality fuel her responses to John’s sins against her, as well as her responses to difficult circumstances. For instance, when John returns home after missing the birth of their newborn child and ensures Lucy that he is now a man who is going to take care of her, Lucy responds, “Good Lawd, John, dat’s all justice been beggin’ righteous tuh do—be uh _man_” (Hurston 95). For scholar Gary Ciuba, to understand fully the importance of Lucy’s reaction to John’s actions, one must see the implications of John’s actions. In his article “The Worm Against the World: The Hermeneutical Challenge in Hurston’s _Jonah’s Gourd Vine_,” Ciuba writes, “John actually sins against the community of his own flesh and blood. He deserts Lucy in childbirth, abandons his infant daughter as she nearly dies of typhoid… Such unnaturalness to kin violates the holy spirit of natural supernaturalism” (Ciuba 127). When
combining Lucy’s response with Ciuba’s analysis, one begins to see that Lucy’s response comes from a deep place of hurt because her husband has actively defied the very principle she uses to identify herself: her spirituality. Within Lucy’s response, readers witness the culmination of the effects of her religious spirituality through her use of prayer-like diction and the italicization of “man.” Lucy’s use of the phrase “Good Lawd,” as well as her use of the words “justice” and “righteous,” create a tone similar to a litany, wherein Lucy is crying out for change in response to John’s claim. Additionally, the italicization of “man” once again signals the rejection of the socio-cultural ideologies surrounding the men and women of the time. Lucy is signaling that John’s actions toward her are not what she would classify as “manly” because he is not providing for and protecting their family, and thus his actions are “other.”

Furthermore, Hurston’s final depiction of Lucy on her deathbed solidifies the importance of Lucy’s use of her religious spirituality. When questioned by Sister Clarke concerning the state of her faith at the time of her death, Lucy responds, “You know Ah ain’t never been one to whoop and holler in church, Sister Clarke, but Ah done put on de whole armor uh faith. Ah ain’t afraid tuh die… Ah done died in grief and been buried in de bitter waters, and Ah don’t rose agin from de dead lak Lazarus. Nothin’ kin touch mah soul no mo” (Hurston 131). In Lucy’s response, readers observe the power she derives from her religious spirituality because it allows her to understand her life and position in the world through the lens of her faith. Through her religious spirituality, Lucy is able to obtain the strength to transcend her earthly sufferings and cast her mind fully on the glory of her faith, which leaves her fearless in the face of death. Hurston’s continual depictions of Lucy using her religious spirituality to strengthen herself; John’s role as a husband, father, and preacher; and
her relationship with God successfully offers readers a positive view of Lucy’s use of religious spirituality.

When analyzing Lucy’s use of her spirituality, there are some scholars who believe that Lucy compromises the presence of African spirituality because of her reference to Christian terminology. One such scholar, Anthony Wilson, writes in his article “Spirituality and Modernity in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*” that Lucy’s orthodox Christianity causes disruptions in the tradition of African American spirituality (Wilson 65). However, when readers reflect back on Hurston’s presentation of Lucy’s spirituality in conjunction with Dr. Olupona’s description of African spirituality they see the fault in this argument. Dr. Olupona is adamant in his responses that religious and African spirituality do not exist autonomously saying, “For starters, the word ‘religion’ is problematic for many Africans because it suggests that religion is separate from other aspects of one’s culture, society, and environment… Religion informs everything in traditional African society, including political art, marriage, health, diet, dress, economics, and death” (Chiorazzi). Therefore, religious spirituality and African spirituality can be used together to contribute to one’s way of knowing and understanding the culture, society, and environment around them. Readers explicitly observe this relationship with Lucy as her religious spirituality and African spirituality work together to create a holistic approach to her life, which readers witness in her ability to use her spirituality outside the realm of Christianity and within the realm of wifehood and motherhood.

Within Hurston’s exploration and discussion of Lucy's religious spirituality, she also establishes Lucy’s subconscious use of African spirituality in the way Lucy uses her relationship with God to inform her role as a woman, a wife, a mother, and her transcendence into death. First, Hurston exemplifies Lucy's use of African spirituality through the content of
Lucy's prayer amid John's extramarital affairs with Mahaley and Big 'Oman. Within her prayer, Lucy conveys that she knows the Lord has been with her in previous times of need, as well as the truth that the Lord will be a rock and shelter for her in a storm. By praying to God, Lucy establishes her belief that the Lord is listening to her and through her rhetoric she interprets and understands that the Lord supports her, cares for her, and loves her especially in times of need. Lucy's ability to use her religious spirituality to interpret and understand her relationship with God informs her role as a woman because she understands her importance and worth lies beyond her marriage to John. Then, Hurston exemplifies Lucy's use of African spirituality through her use of religious spirituality when confronting John about his treatment of her and their children. Throughout her confrontation, Lucy uses her ability to love John totally, while also speaking her mind regarding her feelings of abandonment, both of which are derived from her religious principles. Within these scenarios, Lucy demonstrates that her religious spirituality informs her role as a wife and a mother by allowing her to interpret what she needs and how she should be treated, which is followed be an understanding that she needs to stand as an advocate for herself. Finally, Hurston exemplifies Lucy's use of African spirituality through the use of her religious faith to acknowledge and accept her transcendence into death. Lucy's ability to respond to Sister Clarke with full knowledge of her future death, yet with speech that is infused with Biblical truths reveals Lucy's ability to use her spirituality to interpret her current physical state, understand that she is going to die, yet maintain an unwavering optimism that is rooted in the promises of the Christian afterlife.

Following her positive portrayal of Lucy’s use of religious spirituality, Hurston quickly shifts her portrayal of the negative use of black women’s spirituality, which is
signaled by Hattie’s jarring introduction. Hattie, one of John’s rumored lovers, is first introduced to readers through word of mouth when Lucy confronts John about his involvement with Hattie (Hurston 119). After their discussion, John denies the affair and continues preparing the communion sermon for Sunday service at Zion Baptist Church. Lucy believes his confession and supports his sermon writing with her spiritual knowledge and advice. The close of this scene between John and Lucy becomes jarring as Hurston shifts her perspective from the intimacy of John and Lucy’s relationship to the foreshadowing of its ruin by Hattie. Readers first observe Hattie in the home of An’ Dangie Dewoe, a hoodoo conjure woman, scheming to manipulate John into wanting her. When An’ Dangie Dewoe gives Hattie the instructions for hexing John, Hattie responds with, “Ah know you got de power” (Hurston 126). Hattie’s response to An’ Dangie Dewoe exposes her reliance on the manipulative power of a supernatural individual to use her own spirituality and fulfill her requests. Hurston’s immediate shift to Hattie’s spirituality being grounded in the ability to cause destruction opposes Lucy’s spirituality, which is grounded in the omniscient and omnipotent gifts of her faith and inspires the restoration of others.

In order to understand the importance of this shift, one must understand the background of Hattie’s hoodoo spirituality. Unlike Lucy’s spirituality, which focuses on supporting others and growing in her own spirituality, Hattie relies on the destructive forces of An’ Dangie Dewoe. In her article “Writing Vodou into Literature: Exploring Diasporic Religious Symbols and Lore in Zora Neale Hurston’s “Sweat” and Jonah’s Gourd Vine,” scholar Tammie Jenkins describes hoodoo as a way for “practitioners [to] work toward obtaining and exercising their ‘own personal power’ in all aspects of their lives and social interactions” (Jenkins 218). Jenkins then goes on to describe Hattie’s seeking help from An’
Dangie Dewoe saying, “The ritual was designed to cause marital discord between John and Lucy” (Jenkins 221). The contrasting nature between Lucy’s selfless, self-empowering use of religious spirituality and Hattie’s selfish, reliant-on-others use of supernatural spirituality that Hurston introduces creates a jarring atmosphere. Hurston purposefully creates this jarring atmosphere between the use of Lucy and Hattie’s spiritualities because it contributes to her argument for finding the importance of black women’s spirituality in its use, rather than its source.

Additionally, the placement of Hattie’s introduction, appearing after Lucy and John’s reconciliation and before Lucy’s death, enhances the negative portrayal of Hattie’s use of supernatural spirituality by creating an atmosphere of insensitivity. When readers are leaving Hattie and An’ Dangie Dewoe, An’ Dangie Dewoe tells Hattie “’Member now, you done started dis and it’s got tuh be kep’ up do hit’ll turn back on yuh” (Huston 126). Hurston’s placement of An’ Dangie Dewoe’s reminder proves the insensitivity of Hattie’s use of supernatural spirituality because Dewoe reveals that Hattie began manipulating John long ago and must continue the process if she aims to be successful. Although valid from the previous revelation alone, Hattie’s insensitivity is enhanced by Hurston’s use of dramatic irony. Huston uses dramatic irony through the readers’ awareness that John and Lucy reconcile their relationship in the same moment that Hattie is intensely seeking to destroy their relationship. Furthermore, the meaning behind An’ Dangie Dewoe’s reminder becomes more menacing as Hurston transitions into the following chapter’s first line where the narrator states, “Lucy was lying sick” (Hurston 127). Once again, readers are shocked and left with an understanding of the negative use of Hattie’s spirituality as Hurston forces readers to question Hattie’s involvement with Lucy’s illness. In Hattie’s use of the
supernatural, was Lucy the subject of her hexing in an attempt to make it easier for Hattie to be with John? Or was John truly the subject of her hexing and Lucy’s illness merely a coincidence? From Jenkin’s study of Hoodoo, readers know the history of hoodoo is traditionally rooted in the manipulation, destruction, and demoralization of another for one’s own gain. Therefore, one’s questioning of Hattie’s role in Lucy’s death is valid. However, Hurston’s strategic decision to leave the answers to these questions ambiguous furthers her agenda to have readers analyze and find the importance of black women’s spirituality through their use of spirituality rather than the source. Readers are fully aware of Hattie’s manipulative intention to be with John and her strategic use of her supernatural spirituality to complete this aim, but there is no indication that her connection to supernatural spirituality is the root of such manipulative and destructive desires.

After John’s marriage to Hattie, Hurston finalizes the negative portrayal of supernatural spirituality through the dialogue between John and Hattie, as well as Hattie’s response to John’s claims. When discussing his marriage with Hattie, John asks, “Hattie, whut am Ah doin’ married tuh do?” (Hurston 142). As Hattie tries to evade John’s question by questioning his love for her, John skeptically replies, “You know so well Ah ain’t wanted tuh marry you. Dat’s how come Ah know it’s uh bug under dis chip” (Hurston 143). While Hurston typically uses a black female character’s own words to demonstrate the power of her spirituality, within the context of Hattie’s character Hurston often uses the words of others to define her supernatural spirituality. Hurston’s use of John’s words within this scene are significant because they reveal Hattie’s disintegrating ability to use successfully her supernatural spirituality. Unlike Lucy, who, by strengthening her own spirituality throughout her lifetime, proves her spirituality as a positive influence by inspiring courage,
independence, and strength, Hattie’s ability to use her supernatural spirituality is diminishing, which is signaled by her failing marriage with John. When John says to Hattie that he knows there is “uh bug under dis chip,” he is revealing to Hattie and to readers that he is all too aware of the questionable influences of Hattie’s spirituality involved in his marriage (Hurston 143).

Within Hurston’s exploration and discussion of Hattie’s supernatural spirituality, much like with Lucy, she establishes Hattie’s subconscious use of African spirituality in the way Hattie uses her hoodoo to inform her role as a woman and a wife. First, Hurston exemplifies Hattie’s use of African spirituality through Hattie’s relationship with An’ Dangie Dewoe. Whenever Hattie visits An’ Dangie Dewoe, she is seeking to learn a new conjure or hoodoo recipe to fulfill her wants and desires to be with John. Through her relationship with An’ Dangie Dewoe and her increasing knowledge of supernatural spirituality, Hattie is able to interpret her non-existent relationship with John and understand the need to use her hoodoo to gain his affection. Through this use of hoodoo, Hattie informs her wants and desires by allowing herself to see the capability that she holds when harnessing her hoodoo power. Finally, Hurston exemplifies Hattie’s use of African spirituality through Hattie’s ability to interpret the changes in her marriage with John and understand the need to practice conjures on him continually to keep him satisfied with her. Therefore, Hattie’s hoodoo is used to inform her role as a wife by allowing her to observe the weaknesses in her marriage, because as her hoodoo power wears off, John reveals his disappointment with Hattie and his longing for Lucy. Thus, Hattie’s hoodoo also informs her role as a wife by allowing her to observe the dishonesty within her marriage to John as she is concealing her use of hoodoo, which in turn conceals John’s true feelings about her.
After John’s discussion with Hattie, Hurston persuades readers to reflect on the importance of defining spirituality by its use by comparing the outcome of Lucy and Hattie’s use of spirituality in their marriages to John. Lucy’s religious spirituality prompts her to cast her fears on the Lord and courageously and lovingly confront John about his sins against her, their family, and his church congregation, thus positively using both religious and African spirituality. However, at the close of John and Hattie’s discussion, Hurston reveals Hattie’s negative use of supernatural spirituality and African spirituality when the narrator discloses Hattie’s thoughts. The narrator says, “Hattie lay tossing, wondering how she could get to An’ Dangie Dewoe’s without arousing suspicion. ‘Wonder is Ah done let things go too long, or is de roots jus’ done wore out and done turn’d back on me?’” (Hurston 144). When placed in an oppressive situation, Hattie quickly turns to the use of her supernatural spirituality to mask the problem, which in turn results in manipulation of John’s perception of reality. For readers, Lucy’s religious spirituality is regarded positively because she uses it to the benefit of many: for herself, by strengthen her own spirituality; for her children, by encouraging her husband to be a better father; and for her marriage, by lovingly demonstrating her commitment to John and asking him to demonstrate the same. However, Hattie’s supernatural spirituality is regarded negatively because she uses it toward the destruction of others: arguably Lucy, as readers are later informed that Hattie has been performing conjures in John’s family long before her marriage to him; and John, as she uses her hoodoo to manipulate his perception of reality, which causes him to fall in love with her and marry her unknowingly.

Within *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Hurston’s discussion and exploration of black female spirituality is interesting because of the way she aids readers in their understanding of the
importance of Lucy and Hattie’s use of spirituality. Hurston leaves readers with an overwhelming understanding of the ways in which spirituality of any sort can be used to the benefit or the destruction of others, and therein lies the importance of spirituality. The contrasting characterizations that develop between Lucy, Hattie, and their uses of spirituality aides readers in their understanding that religious spirituality and supernatural spirituality are not innately good or bad ways to connect to one’s spirituality. Instead, the effects that Lucy and Hattie’s use of spirituality have on others defines the nature of their use of spirituality as positive or negative. Additionally, readers observe Hurston taking her discussion and exploration of black female spirituality one step further by encompassing elements of African spirituality. Through Hurston’s focus on Lucy and Hattie’s use of their respective spiritualities to inform various aspects of their lives and to interpret and to understand their place in society, Hurston reassures readers that these women have not lost touch with their African heritage even in the Civil War Era South. When combining her focus on the use of spirituality and the presence of African spirituality, Hurston is creating a space where black women obtain the utmost power: the power to connect to their spirituality as they choose, the power to use their spirituality as they choose, and the power to define their spirituality as they choose.
Conclusion: Walker, Naylor, and Hurston in Conversation

An in-depth analysis of the role of black women’s spirituality in *The Color Purple*, *Mama Day*, and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* reveals the importance of these three novels in particular because of the way the narratives converse with one another, and I strategically choose their ordering in this thesis for that reason. Beginning with Walker, readers embark on the first phase of the journey toward black women’s spirituality: discovering spirituality. Regardless of the type of spirituality, Walker shows readers through the transition in Celie’s character the importance of discovering spirituality for the benefit of one’s ability to heal, transcend, and discover her true identity. Furthermore, Walker demonstrates the importance of discovering spirituality in the way Celie’s possession of power and self-assurance, which are derived from her discovery of inner spirituality, drastically increases along her journey.

Following *The Color Purple*, Naylor’s *Mama Day* focuses on the second phase of the journey toward black women’s spirituality: embracing spirituality. Naylor’s narrative bridges Walker and Hurston’s narratives by connecting the discovery and the use of spirituality. Through the relationship between Sapphira Wade, the history of the Day women, and Mama Day’s continuation of this legacy, Naylor reveals the power held within the female bloodline. Specifically, Mama Day’s embracing of black women’s spirituality places her in a leadership position within Willow Springs as the powerful conjure woman known to heal. In her portrayal of Mama Day’s immense power, Naylor once again adds to Walker’s depiction of black women’s spirituality by strengthening the power black women receive as they proceed.
along their journey toward spirituality. Additionally, Naylor’s exploration of black women’s spirituality depicts Mama Day further along in her journey toward spirituality than Walker’s Celie, and thus in possession of more power. Because Mama Day is further removed from the oppressive circumstances that more clearly define Celie, she is better able to rely on her own strength to confront them.

Finally, following *Mama Day*, Hurston’s *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* focuses on the third phase of the journey toward black women’s spirituality: the use of spirituality. When we enter the world of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Lucy and Hattie have already discovered and embraced their connections to spirituality through their adherence to prayer and hoodoo. Hurston takes her depiction of this final phase of black women’s journeys toward spirituality one step further by arguing for the nature of black women’s spirituality being defined by the effect it has on others once put into motion by the possessors. For Lucy, this decision renders a positive depiction of her spirituality because she uplifts and encourages John. Conversely, for Hattie, this decision renders a negative depiction of her spirituality because she manipulates and deceives John.

While placing these three texts in conversation with one another does in fact create a linear progression of spirituality for black women and the power they derive from such spirituality, it also reveals an interesting element in relation to Hazel V. Carby’s perspective of black women’s spirituality discussed in the introduction. Carby charges readers to read black women’s texts as active influencers of the culture in which they are written and read. When readers examine these texts chronologically by publication, this perspective comes to life. Publishing *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* in 1934, Zora Neale Hurston was ahead of her time as she was the forerunner to write about the final phase of black women’s journeys to
spirituality. Rather than writing about the discovery of black women’s spirituality, Hurston’s decision to focus first on its use demonstrates for black women of the Harlem Renaissance and beyond the ultimate power that comes with the use of their spirituality. Hurston’s nature to write on this subject matter ahead of her time is what led Walker to deem her the foremother of black women’s literature in her essay “Looking for Zora” found in her collection of essays In Search of our Mother’s Gardens.

Following Jonah’s Gourd Vine, Walker’s 1982 publication of The Color Purple speaks to the influence literature has concerning black women as she decides to write a novel beginning the journey that Hurston’s depiction of black women’s spirituality finishes. While Hurston’s depiction of black women’s spirituality is strong and evokes great power, Walker chooses to show the state of black women before their introduction to black women’s spirituality as depicted in Celie’s state at the novel’s commencement. Additionally, in the relationship Walker depicts between Celie and Shug, readers can observe elements of Walker’s desired relationship with Hurston. For Celie, Shug serves as a conduit of inner spirituality who initially introduces her to the reality of black women’s spirituality and guides her along her path to her own discovery. With Walker’s regarding Hurston as the foremother, who guides her through her journey in writing, readers can see correlations between Shug and Hurston and Celie and Walker. Hurston, going before Walker in her writing of black women’s spirituality, serves as a conduit of black women’s spirituality for Walker by guiding her along her journey of discovering spirituality for herself and writing about such a discovery, as Walker documents in her Preface.

Finally, following The Color Purple, Naylor’s 1984 publication of Mama Day works to bind together Walker and Hurston’s focus on the discovery and the use of black women’s
spirituality by depicting how they work together. Naylor’s novel gives a glimpse of
discovering black women’s spirituality through Sapphira Wade and using black women’s
spirituality through Mama Day’s role as the Willow Springs’ healer. However, Naylor spends
most of her novel exploring the in-between, which means focusing on the black women’s
need to wrestle with the implications of choosing to validate and embrace such spirituality.
For Mama Day, these implications involve her potential loss of Cocoa to the world of white
society, the rejection of Reema’s son and George, and combating those who use spirituality
toward the detriment of others, like Ruby does toward Cocoa. The ways in which these black
female authors seek to add to each other’s bodies of work and complete the narrative
surrounding black women’s spirituality proves Carby’s perspective true: black women
writers are creating texts that must be read as active influencers of modern culture.
Works Cited


Whitt, Margaret Earley. “*Mama Day.*” *Understanding Gloria Naylor*, University of South Carolina Press, 1999, pp. 113–152.