

Modern Critical Views

ALICE
WALKER

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



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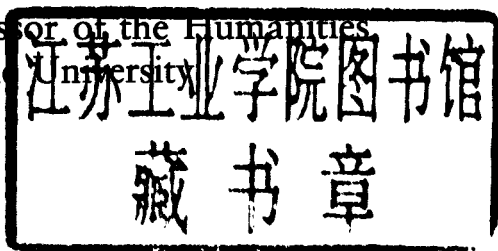
ALICE WALKER

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

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Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best criticism available upon the writings of Alice Walker. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am deeply indebted to Henry Finder for his customary erudition and judgment in helping me to edit this volume.

My introduction gently intimates that the critics of Alice Walker somewhat idealize the influence-relation between women writers, and black women writers in particular, following Walker herself in this regard. Peter Erickson begins the chronological sequence of criticism with a discussion of the family dynamic in Alice Walker's work, with an emphasis upon a daughter's guilt-obsessed relation to her mother.

Celebration of individual responsibility throughout Walker's writing is the subject of the study by Thadious M. Davis, while Barbara Christian, in contrast, commends Walker for teaching black women the absolute necessity of self-love.

In Keith Byerman's reading, there is an evolution from artistic celebration of folk-ways to very explicit polemic in Walker's work, an evolution that necessarily has in it elements of artistic loss. But in Mae G. Henderson's perspective, *The Color Purple* strongly "subverts the traditional Eurocentric male code which dominates the literary conventions of the epistolary novel." Whether this polemical assertion redefines and extends literary forms and traditions, as Henderson asserts, may not be the same matter as the redefinition of male-female relationships, but Henderson identifies the two.

Susan Willis relates the quest of returning to community in Walker's writings to the Southern Civil Rights movement, and suggests that Walker must be taken seriously as a revolutionary activist as well as a revolutionary writer. The emphasis moves back from politics to psychology in W. Lawrence Hogue's analysis of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*.

Both Dianne F. Sadoff and Deborah E. McDowell center their discussions

where I venture also in my introduction, upon the nature of the influence process in Walker's work. Tracing the influence of Zora Neale Hurston upon Walker, Sadoff shrewdly affirms that misprision, or strong misreading, is necessary even in the relations of women writers to one another, though these relations are different from those prevailing between male writers. McDowell, more idealizing than Sadoff, credits Walker with having helped to create a purely female aesthetic and even a black female aesthetic.

Voice, as my introduction suggests, is the crucial element in Walker's literary polemic, and the issue of voice is dominant in John F. Callahan's exegesis of *Meridian*, which he sees as the start "of the restoration of the reciprocal sense of language and experience that is essential if America is to resume a revolutionary course." Equally commendatory, Tamar Katz celebrates the risk-taking didacticism of *The Color Purple*.

Two of Walker's essays—"In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" and "One Child of One's Own"—and her short story, "Everyday Use"—are read by Marianne Hirsch as materials for our reimagining of "the conjunction of anger and love" in maternal subjectivity. The volume concludes with a searching appraisal of *The Color Purple* by Bell Hooks, who remarks on the conservatism of its narrative universe but recommends to us "those crucial moments in the text where the imagination works to liberate."

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Introduction

A contemporary writer who calls herself “author and medium” is by no means idiosyncratic, and Alice Walker certainly seems to me a wholly representative writer of and for our current era. The success of *The Color Purple* is deserved; Walker’s sensibility is very close to the Spirit of the Age. Rather than seek to analyze verse and fictional prose that is of a kind I am not yet competent to judge, or a speculative essay such as “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” which eludes me, I will center here upon Walker’s meditations upon her acknowledged precursor, Zora Neale Hurston. “There is no book more important to me than this one,” Walker wrote of Hurston’s masterwork, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Perhaps the only literary enthusiasm I share with Walker is my own deep esteem for that admirable narrative, about which I have written elsewhere.

Walker associated her feeling for Hurston with her similar veneration for famous black women singers, Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith. That association is a moving trope or defense, since Hurston, like Walker, was a writer and not a vocalist. Here is another tribute by Walker to Hurston:

We live in a society, as blacks, women, and artists, whose contests we do not design and with whose insistence on ranking us we are permanently at war. To know that second place, in such a society, has often required more work and innate genius than first, a longer, grimmer struggle over greater odds than first—and to be able to fling your scarf about dramatically while you demonstrate that you know—is to trust your own self-evaluation in the face of the Great White Western Commercial of white and male supremacy, which is virtually everything we see, outside and often inside our own homes. That Hurston held her own, literally, against the flood of whiteness and maleness that diluted so much other black art of the period in which she worked is a testimony to her genius and her faith.

As black women and as artists, we are prepared, I think, to keep that faith. There are other choices, but they are despicable.

Zora Neale Hurston, who went forth into the world with one dress to her name, and who was permitted, at other times in her life, only a single pair of shoes, rescued and recreated a world which she labored to hand us whole, never underestimating the value of her gift, if at times doubting the good sense of its recipients. She appreciated us, in any case, *as we fashioned ourselves*. That is something. And of all the people in the world to be, she chose to be herself, *and more and more herself*. That, too, is something.

The strength of this rhetoric is considerable, and has the literary force of a medium. Walker's tribute to Hurston bears an eloquent title: "On Refusing to Be Humbled by Second Place in a Contest You Did Not Design." To write a novel indeed is to enter a contest you did not design, and to *fashion yourself* certainly is the ambition of every novelist or poet aspiring to permanence. To write *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Meridian*, and *The Color Purple* is to have entered a contest Walker did not design, an agon with *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. No feminist critic will agree with that statement, which for them reflects my purely male view of literature. Yet we do not live forever. Do we reread *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or do we reread *The Color Purple*? And if we choose to reread both, do we repress the comparisons that the two novels provoke in regard to one another?

Walker's most poignant paragraphs on Hurston come at the end of her superbly personal essay, "Looking for Zora":

There are times—and finding Zora Hurston's grave was one of them—when normal responses of grief, horror, and so on, do not make sense because they bear no real relation to the depth of the emotion one feels. It was impossible for me to cry when I saw the field full of weeds where Zora is. Partly this is because I have come to know Zora through her books and she was not a teary sort of person herself; but partly, too, it is because there is a point at which even grief feels absurd. And at this point, laughter gushes up to retrieve sanity.

It is only later, when the pain is not so direct a threat to one's own existence that what was learned in that moment of comical lunacy is understood. Such moments rob us of both youth and vanity. But perhaps they are also times when greater disciplines are born.

This may not be Browning at the grave of Shelley, but it is close enough. The pain is familial, since the literary mother, like the poetic father, evokes in the ephebe all the terrible poignance of Freud's "family romances." Michael G. Cooke, writing on Hurston, states the particular dilemma of the black writer's quest for a voice:

What gives singularity to the black writer's burden in searching for a voice is the twofold factor of frequency and context. Either directly or in projection through a central character, black writer after black writer, generation upon generation, from Frederick Douglass to Alice Walker, evinces the problem of voice. And it is appropriate to regard the most outspoken black writers of the protest movement as bearers of the burden in another guise. Theirs is not so much a free voice as the forced voice of reaction and resentment.

The School of Resentment, which has many factions both critical and creative, does not regard voice as a problem, since the celebration of community necessarily decries individuated subjectivity while exalting collective roarings (or murmurings) as the more moral mode. I fear that influence and its anxieties do not vanish even in the presence of the most self-abnegating of ideologies or idealisms. Our most distinguished critics of Hurston evade this burden, but it is there nevertheless. Here is Elizabeth Meese on "Orality and Textuality in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*":

By extricating herself from cultural control, Janie/Hurston creates culture. Through the retelling of Janie's story, orality becomes textuality. Textuality is produced by Janie's learned orality, her participation in the oral tradition of the culture. She learns to be one of the people; thus, this is a story of her acculturation into black womanhood and her artistic entitlement to language. By chronicling Janie's development, Hurston transforms the status of narrative from the temporality characteristic of oral tradition to the more enduring textuality required to outwit time's effect on memory. In doing so, she presents feminist readers with a map of a woman's personal resistance to patriarchy, and feminist writers—in particular Alice Walker—with the intertext for later feminist works.

If one is presented with an intertext, does one pay nothing for the gift? Janie/Hurston creates culture but does Meridian/Walker? Again, here is that dynamic deconstructive duo, Barbara Johnson and H. L. Gates, Jr., rightly

praising *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for giving us (and Walker) “A Black and Idiomatic Free Indirect Discourse”:

Janie, in effect, has *rewritten* Joe’s text of himself, and liberated herself in the process. Janie “writes” herself into being by *nam-ing*, by speaking herself free. In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker takes this moment in Hurston’s text as the moment of revision, and creates a character whom we witness literally writing herself into being, but writing herself into being in a language that imitates that idiom *spoken* by Janie and Hurston’s black community generally. This scene and this transformation or reversal of status is truly the first feminist critique of the fiction of the authority of the male voice, and its sexism, in the Afro-American tradition.

That is admirably precise and accurate; *The Color Purple*’s Celie indeed writes “herself into being in a language that imitates that idiom *spoken* by Janie and Hurston’s black community generally.” The authority of the male voice, and its sexism, may well be subverted by Hurston (she herself would have disowned any such intention or accomplishment). But what has Walker subverted by imitating and so repeating a revisionist moment that she has not originated? No feminist critic will admit the legitimacy of that question, but it abides and will require an answer.

PETER ERICKSON

*"Cast Out Alone/to Heal/and Re-create/
Ourselves": Family-based Identity
in the Work of Alice Walker*

One of the major concerns of Alice Walker's art is the exploration of intra-family relationships. For a group of poems gathered under the heading "Surrounding Ground and Autobiography," Walker supplies the following preface: "To acknowledge our ancestors means we are aware that we did not make ourselves The grace with which we embrace life, in spite of the pain, the sorrows, is always a measure of what has gone before." The family dynamic in Alice Walker's work is a key part of the formative influence of "what has gone before." In Walker's first novel, the family configuration is defined by the child's special relationship to her grandfather and by the tension between father and grandfather. The use of the family as an imaginative structure—as a way of organizing experience—then undergoes an important change: the prominence of the grandfather as against the father in the first novel gives way in the second to an emphasis on a daughter's guilt-laden relation to her mother.

I. "I COULDN'T EVER EVEN EXPRESS MY LOVE!"

The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970), a novel which concerns three generations of a rural Southern black family, begins by demonstrating with a vivid matter-of-factness the family's entrapment in a vicious cycle of poverty. Permanently indebted to the white owner of the cotton fields in which he works, Grange Copeland seeks release in drinking, in violence against his wife, and in being "devoid of any emotion." Particularly convincing is the

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picture of Grange's submission as seen from the point of view of his son Brownfield, who has begun to work in the fields at the age of six:

While he stared at the hair one of the workers—not his father who was standing beside him as if he didn't know he was there—said to him softly, "Say 'Yessir' to Mr. Shipley," and Brownfield looked up before he said anything and scanned his father's face. The mask was as tight and still as if his father had coated himself with wax. And Brownfield smelled for the first time an odor of sweat, fear, and something indefinite. Something smothered and tense (which was of his father and of the other workers and not of mint) that came from his father's body. His father said nothing. Brownfield, trembling, said "Yessir," filled with terror of this man who could, by his presence alone, turn his father into something that might as well have been a pebble or a post or a piece of dirt, except for the sharp bitter odor of something whose source was forcibly contained in flesh.

To compensate for his emotionally absent parents, Brownfield dwells in the fantasy created by his "favorite daydream":

Brownfield's wife and children—two children, a girl and a boy—waited anxiously for him just inside the door in the foyer. They jumped all over him, showering him with kisses. While he told his wife of the big deals he'd pushed through that day she fixed him a mint julep. After a splendid dinner, presided over by the cook, dressed in black uniform and white starched cap, he and his wife, their arms around each other, tucked the children in bed and spent the rest of the evening discussing her day (which she had spent walking in her garden), and making love.

We are made to feel that Brownfield's vision is impossibly idyllic and that the gap between the actual family and the fantasy family is absolute. By the end of the first two masterfully compressed chapters, the family has disintegrated: his father disappears, his mother commits suicide, and Brownfield is left alone. Himself trapped in the vicious cycle, Brownfield never succeeds in establishing the secure family of his original daydream. Yet, at the conclusion of the novel, the cycle has been broken. Brownfield's futile dream of family happiness has become a more real possibility for his daughter Ruth. This possibility is supported by the historical change which the Civil Rights movement represents and is exemplified specifically by a black couple, the Civil Rights worker and his pregnant wife:

Quincy put his arm around his wife, his hand moving up and down her side. He held her loosely yet completely, as if she meant everything to him, and the glow in her eyes was pure worship when she looked up at him. Grange was touched almost to tears by the simplicity and directness of their love.

Ruth's potential for a positive version of family has previously been encouraged by her grandfather, Grange, who ultimately makes possible her escape from the negative family syndrome: "You're special to me because you're a part of me; a part of me I didn't even used to want. I want you to go on a long time, have a heap of children." Much of the interest lies in seeing how the novel makes the leap from the pattern of destructive family relationships to the positive image of family at the end—how, for instance, the novel moves from the hopelessness of Brownfield's "favorite daydream" to the hope embodied in Quincy and Helen.

It is difficult to keep in full view the novel as a whole. The style of narration is deceptively simple. Each element is in itself simple, but the steady accumulation of detail creates a complicated effect of density and generational depth. The novel's forward movement is swift, inexorable, and yet—paradoxically—casual and imperceptible. The numerous shifts of situation through the course of the novel give it an epic-like sweep which makes it seem hard to maintain one's bearings and to keep track of developments as an entire sequence. One crucial event, however, clearly defines the shape of the novel by dividing it in two. This key turning point occurs when Brownfield murders his wife Mem and his father Grange takes away his daughter Ruth. Grange's intervention is briefly foreshadowed in part 4, chapter 17, where his return from the North coincides with the birth of Ruth; but the relationship between Grange and Ruth does not begin until part 7, chapter 31, at the approximate center of the novel. Only with the gradual growth of their relationship does a firm basis for hope emerge. Prior to this decisive midpoint of the novel, we witness a series of false escapes from despair. Tantalizing hopes are raised to be regularly and cruelly punctured. The narrative logic of alternating hope and despair requires the reader to "Expect nothing. Live frugally / On surprise" (*Revolutionary Petunias*) in a less optimistic sense than the second half of the novel permits.

After his father has abandoned the family and his mother has died, Brownfield sees that the cycle which destroyed his parents is in danger of repeating itself in his own life: "He knew too that the minute he accepted money from Shipley he was done for. If he borrowed from Shipley, Shipley would make sure he never finished paying it back." However, he avoids one

trap only to fall into another. His journey to "new freedom" leads to a "local Negro bar and grill": "His mother and father had come to such places, perhaps this same one, and when they had fought and argued in public it was usually among the kind of people who would frequent such a place." It is later made clear that Brownfield's parents had fought in this very same place and that Brownfield has inherited the prostitute/lover whom his father had visited every Saturday as part of his weekly binge. A renewal of hope follows when Brownfield meets and marries Mem, who is educated and "life-giving." But family history is soon destined to repeat itself:

That was the year he first saw how his own life was becoming a repetition of his father's. . . . His crushed pride, his battered ego, made him drag Mem away from school-teaching. Her knowledge reflected badly on a husband who could scarcely read and write. It was his great ignorance that sent her into white homes as a domestic, his need to bring her down to his level! . . . His rage could and did blame everything, *everything* on her.

The next revival of hope occurs when Mem asserts herself against Brownfield. "Her big dream" has been "to buy a house," to escape "moving from one sharecropper's cabin to another." Initially, she is "unable to comprehend that all her moves upward and toward something of their own would be checked by him." Parts 5 and 6 deal with Mem's successful efforts to find a house and a job, and with her loss of them. It is impossible not to feel the elation of Mem's announcement: "We got us a new house," she said, as if she were dropping something precious that would send up delightful bright explosions. "We got us a new house in town!" she whispered joyously." Her determination in opposing Brownfield's resistance to her plan is also exhilarating. Though desperate and painful, her threatening Brownfield with the shotgun in chapter 25 is seen as a necessary step. Her ultimatum gives the feeling that a new start is possible: "If you intend to come along I done made out me some rules for you, for make no mistake it's going to be my house and in my house what the white man expects us to act like ain't going to git no consideration." This fresh start is nevertheless immediately undercut by Brownfield's desire for revenge. He gloats when they lose the house and are forced to move to a dilapidated cabin. However, Mem's determination persists: "I'm going to git well again, and git work again, and when I do I'm going to leave you," she announces. Consequently, Brownfield shoots her. This climactic destruction of hope paradoxically signals the beginning of the first substantial hope in the novel. Although the process of revenge is once again set in motion—Brownfield "was thinking of his father's attachment to Ruth

and of how perfect a revenge it would be if he could break it"—this time Brownfield's plot fails. In the final chapter, Grange protects Ruth by shooting Brownfield, as if to cancel Brownfield's shooting of Mem. The relentless conversion of hope into hopelessness is ended.

Though it is reserved for the second half of the novel, the relationship between Grange and Ruth constitutes the emotional heart of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. This relationship, the most fully developed in the book, is lovingly and often humorously described. Grange's association of Ruth with "innocence" and "miracle," the sanctity of family bonds rescued from the threat of degradation, and the air of improbability are reminiscent of Shakespeare's late romance, with the grandfather-daughter tie substituted for father-daughter pairing. In Walker's novel, the relationship between grandfather and daughter is strongly redemptive. Ruth saves Grange; Grange, in turn, saves her. Ruth is the source of Grange's "third life": "[H]e had wanted her so much he could not believe himself capable of such strong emotion" "[H]ere is a reason to get yourself together and hold on." Grange nurtures Ruth and, in the end, defends her independence at the cost of his life. The sense of redemption is qualified by the price which has to be paid for it. The novel's conclusion is compelling because it lies somewhere between a happy ending and a melodramatic catastrophe. We cannot help feeling joyful about the fact that Ruth's future is assured, but this emotion is mixed with the realization that her future is based on a sacrifice of whose complexity she is not fully aware.

Beyond suspense about the outcome in terms of plot, there is the drama of Grange's moral predicament. His problem is to coordinate and reconcile his past with his present devotion to Ruth. Thus he summarizes the three stages in his life: "The white folks hated me and I hated myself until I started hating them in return and loving myself. Then I tried just loving me, and then you, and *ignoring* them much as I could." His first life culminates in the "murder" of his wife as he admits to his son: "[Y]our ma'd be alive today if I hadn't just as good as shot her to death, same as you done your wife." His second life opens with the "murder" of a pregnant white woman who has just been deserted by her male companion (the murder is not a literal one in that it consists of the woman's choosing to drown rather than be saved by a black person):

. . . in a strange way, a bizarre way, it liberated him. He felt in some way repaid for his own unfortunate life. It was the taking of that white woman's life—and the denying of the life of her child—the taking of her life, not the taking of her money, that forced him to want to try to live again. He believed that, against his will, he

had stumbled on the necessary act that black men must commit to regain, or to manufacture their manhood, their self-respect.

Grange moves beyond this position when he finds a more positive source of identity in his relationship to Ruth. His third life begins with his commitment to her and ends with the murder of his own son.

Grange is unable to explain himself fully to Ruth because he cannot communicate the whole story of his life:

And Grange knew he would never tell her of his past, of the pregnant woman and his lectures of hate. . . .

She was not to know until another time, that her grandfather, as she knew him, was a reborn man. She did not know fully, even after he was dead, what cruelties and blood fostered his tolerance and his strength. And his love.

What could he tell his granddaughter about her sadly loving, bravely raging and revengeful grandmother? . . .

The strangely calm eyes of the old man looked across the fence to rest on his granddaughter. He marveled that, knowing him so well, she knew nothing of that other life. Or even of the dismal birth of her own father.

In the end, Ruth is sheltered from the suffering of Grange's sacrificial death: "He had been shot and felt the blood spreading under his shirt. He did not want Ruth to see. Other than that he was not afraid." The reader is forced to recognize that Ruth's awareness and the reader's awareness diverge. Ruth's experience of Grange and of Brownfield is restricted to a relatively simple dichotomy of good and evil. The reader's wider perspective includes some sympathy for Brownfield and the knowledge of Grange's guilt in, for example, exploiting Josie for Ruth's salvation.

The issue of justice in the novel turns on one's evaluation of the distinction between Grange and Brownfield. Brownfield's effort to regain his daughter makes a forceful claim on our sympathy: " 'But *you was no daddy to me!*' he said to Grange, 'and I ain't going to let you keep my child to make up for it' " This partially valid (though also twisted) logic is reinforced when we recall the moment early in the novel when Grange abandons his family:

Brownfield pretended to be asleep. . . . He saw Grange bend over him to inspect his head and face. He was him reach down to touch him. He saw his hand stop, just before it reached his cheek. Brownfield was crying silently and wanted his father to touch the