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# **ALICE WALKER**

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## *A Critical Companion*

Gerri Bates

CRITICAL COMPANIONS TO POPULAR CONTEMPORARY WRITERS  
Kathleen Gregory Klein, Series Editor



**Greenwood Press**  
**Westport, Connecticut • London**

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## Series Foreword

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The authors who appear in the series *Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers* are all best-selling writers. They do not simply have one successful novel, but a string of them. Fans, critics, and specialist readers eagerly anticipate their next book. For some, high cash advances and breakthrough sales figures are automatic; movie deals often follow. Some writers become household names, recognized by almost everyone.

But, their novels are read one by one. Each reader chooses to start and, more importantly, to finish a book because of what she or he finds there. The real test of a novel is in the satisfaction its readers experience. This series acknowledges the extraordinary involvement of readers and writers in creating a best seller.

The authors included in this series were chosen by an Advisory Board composed of high school English teachers and high school and public librarians. They ranked a list of best-selling writers according to their popularity among different groups of readers. For the first series, writers in the top-ranked group who had received no book-length, academic, literary analysis (or none in at least the past 10 years) were chosen. Because of this selection method, *Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers* meets a need that is being addressed nowhere else. The success of these volumes as reported by reviewers, librarians, and teachers led to an expansion of the series mandate to include some writers with wide

critical attention—Toni Morrison, John Irving, and Maya Angelou, for example—to extend the usefulness of the series.

The volumes in the series are written by scholars with particular expertise in analyzing popular fiction. These specialists add an academic focus to the popular success that these writers already enjoy.

The series is designed to appeal to a wide range of readers. The general reading public will find explanations for the appeal of these well-known writers. Fans will find biographical and fictional questions answered. Students will find literary analysis, discussions of fictional genres, carefully organized introductions to new ways of reading the novels, and bibliographies for additional research. Whether browsing through the book for pleasure or using it for an assignment, readers will find that the most recent novels of the authors are included.

Each volume begins with a biographical chapter drawing on published information, autobiographies or memoirs, prior interviews, and, in some cases, interviews given especially for this series. A chapter on literary history and genres describes how the author's work fits into a larger literary context. The following chapters analyze the writer's most important, most popular, and most recent novels in detail. Each chapter focuses on one or more novels. This approach, suggested by the Advisory Board as the most useful to student research, allows for an in-depth analysis of the writer's fiction. Close and careful readings with numerous examples show readers exactly how the novels work. These chapters are organized around three central elements: plot development (how the story line moves forward), character development (what the reader knows of the important figures), and theme (the significant ideas of the novel). Chapters may also include sections on generic conventions (how the novel is similar or different from others in its same category of science fiction, fantasy, thriller, etc.), narrative point of view (who tells the story and how), symbols and literary language, and historical or social context. Each chapter ends with an "alternative reading" of the novel. The volume concludes with a primary and secondary bibliography, including reviews.

The alternative readings are a unique feature of this series. By demonstrating a particular way of reading each novel, they provide a clear example of how a specific perspective can reveal important aspects of the book. In the alternative reading sections, one contemporary literary theory—way of reading, such as feminist criticism, Marxism, new historicism, deconstruction, or Jungian psychological critique—is defined in brief, easily comprehensible language. That definition is then applied to the novel to highlight specific features that might go unnoticed or be understood



differently in a more general reading. Each volume defines two or three specific theories, making them part of the reader's understanding of how diverse meanings may be constructed from a single novel.

Taken collectively, the volumes in the *Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers* series provide a wide-ranging investigation of the complexities of current best-selling fiction. By treating these novels seriously as both literary works and publishing successes, the series demonstrates the potential of popular literature in contemporary culture.

Kathleen Gregory Klein  
Southern Connecticut State University

## **Acknowledgments**

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## The Life of Alice Walker

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A godsend arose in Detroit, Michigan, in 1965 in the person of Dudley Randall (1914–2000). The deaths of four innocent little girls in a Birmingham, Alabama, bombed church in 1963 moved Randall to compose “The Ballad of Birmingham,” which he published as a broadside sheet and called a Broadside Press publication. His vision was to establish a publishing house that would reach unknown writers, create a sense of community, and build relationships. With \$12 and an unused bedroom where he set up printing equipment, Randall started Broadside Press, an alternative to mainstream publishing houses that denied access to people of African heritage. He became the inspiration for an extraordinary group of poets and writers who would leave their mark on the Black Arts movement and the turbulent Civil Rights era. Among the many whom he mentored, nurtured, and inspired were the then not-yet-famous Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000), Nikki Giovanni (Yolande Cornelia Giovanni), Haki Mahabuti (Don L. Lee), Ron Milner, Sonia Sanchez, and Alice Walker. Randall published Walker’s second poetry collection, giving her exposure to African American academics who introduced her poetry to their students. From there she went on to greater literary accomplishments.

The birthplace of Alice (Malsenior) Tallulah-Kate Walker is Eatonton, Georgia, a rural farming town of Putnam County, north of Macon,

Georgia, between Monticello and Sparta. She was born February 9, 1944, a Wednesday. If the line "Wednesday's child is full of woe" from the much-loved juvenile verse has any validity, it may apply to Walker, for she would become a woman of deep sensitivity, taking on causes and expressing through her art form all manner of things gone awry in the world. She is the eighth and last child and third daughter born to Minnie (Lou) Tallulah Grant Walker and Willie Lee Walker, who spent their married years eking out a living primarily as sharecroppers and laborers in a dairy. To compensate for financial shortages, Walker's mother worked in domestic service and as a seamstress. By the time Walker entered the world, her parents were older, had less vitality, less patience, and failing health. Thus, Walker often longed for the robust parental attentiveness that her older siblings had received. The absence of energetic parents sometimes caused her much internal struggle and pain.

Walker's brothers, Willie Fred (b. 1930), William Henry (b. 1934 d. 1996), James Thomas (b. 1935 d. 2002), Robert Louis (b. 1940), and Curtis Ulysses (b. 1942), and her sisters Mamie Lee (b. 1932) and Annie Ruth (b. 1937) assisted their parents in the fields planting, weeding, and picking the cotton and corn that they grew. Baby Alice, too young to be a farmhand and of little help, played gaily among her mother's morning glory vines, initiating herself to the wonders of Mother Nature. Later in life she reflected on the beauty of her mother's flower gardens, which she referred to as her mother's art, culminating in the essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" and the collection of womanist prose of the same title.

Walker had little contact with people on a day-to-day basis outside of her immediate family, except her parents' employers. This limited contact with strangers contributed to her escape into worlds of fantasy where she engaged in her favorite pastime, "people watching," intensely observing people's facial expressions and watching their actions. As a little girl she looked forward to the highlight of weekly trips into town on Saturdays with her parents and siblings to shop or attend the Saturday night picture shows to watch westerns, for she got to see and observe all the townspeople. She welcomed these trips also because they were an escape from the crowded, inferior housing in which her family lived. Walker loved the outdoors, spending time climbing trees and romping through the fields. Walker believes that her writing is rooted in the need to be surrounded by space and that the best writing topics come to her when she is taking a nature walk (*A Conversation with Alice Walker*).

One of Walker's fondest and most valuable memories from her childhood was the sense of community she felt from her family's membership

in the Wards Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church where she was baptized. This edifice was the sacred space for Christian rituals, prayers, and songs, and the place where the congregation welcomed the first Easter speech of an outgoing little girl who loved to recite before audiences as if her performance were a rite of passage or an initiation into a world of literary and creative forces. Walker, who sensed that members of the congregation believed that she was a pretty little darling, felt secure and affirmed in this church community (*My Life As Myself*). She lost her father, Willie Lee Walker, in 1973 from complications of diabetes, emphysema, and pneumonia and her mother, Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker, whom Walker called her most significant influence, to cardiac arrest in 1993. Their remains lie in Wards Chapel Cemetery along with other ancestors who inspired Walker through their storytelling and encouragement.

Willie Lee Walker, one of the first African American men to vote in Eatonton, wanted his children educated and was an instrumental force in the construction of Putnam County's first school for African American children, although racist white men burned it down. Walker's parents enrolled her in school at the age of four to circumvent the hard labor of the fields. School officials quickly advanced this precocious child to the first grade. Four years after settling into academic life in the little country school, Walker experienced a tragic accident that interrupted her daily routine.

At the age of eight in 1952 tomboy Walker and her brothers played a game of cowboys and Indians—she was the Indian, complete with bow and arrow. Her brother Curtis, using a BB gun that had been a Christmas gift, accidentally shot her with a pellet in the right eye. The injury caused blindness and the development of a white film and the formation of a glob of scar tissue over the sightless eye. The disfigurement was quite distinguishable, and Walker viewed the eye as a deformity, which had a great impact on her life. Her grades suffered and she developed a sad countenance, often feeling ashamed and suicidal. The victim of constant teasing from classmates because of the unsightly eye, her confidence and her belief that she was pretty vanished. Believing that her eye was permanently disfigured, Walker retreated inward, no longer wanting to explore the wide-open spaces of nature, but instead focusing more on reading and writing than on her surroundings. She dreamed of death and ways to accomplish it, considering falling on swords or slashing her wrists. For hours on end she sat reading, undisturbed. People gave her gifts of books. She discovered the European classical authors, reading them over and over again. Her mother felt that reading and writing were medicinal

for Walker. This single event, the mishap with the BB gun, more than any other, established her future endeavor. More than 30 years later Walker writes about the life changing injury in "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self."

Walker's parents neither sternly reprimanded her brother Curtis for his carelessness with the BB gun nor blamed themselves for purchasing it. To her dismay, they instead sent her away to live with her grandparents, since she was the victim of constant ridicule from the neighboring children where the family had moved. A year would pass before she rejoined her family as a member of the household. This parental decision stirred up anger within Walker, for she felt that she had not been the one to err and, therefore, was unjustly punished as the innocent victim. Prior to this incident she imagined herself a scientist, pianist, or painter, but these aspirations were replaced with feelings of alienation. She used to scrape together the weekly cost of piano lessons, 50 cents, by selling eggs given to her by her mother until there were no more eggs to sell and she had to forego the lessons. However, the BB gun occurrence became the impetus for Walker to focus on reading and writing, a pastime that was cheaper than piano lessons. To lift herself out of the slump she began to keep a journal. As she scribbled her emotions on paper, her feelings of sadness, alienation, and suicide lifted from her over time, causing her to feel healed, eventually renewing her zest for life. The journal became a pivotal instrument in her life because she could analyze her feelings from day to day and ascertain the extent of her emotional recovery. Miraculously, keeping the journal helped her to feel whole, a feeling that would later become a very important aspect of her creative art. She still adheres all these years later to the practice of journal writing.

Although the problem causing the disfigurement and deformity, a cataract, was corrected by Massachusetts General Hospital physician Dr. Morris M. Henry (Dr. O. Henry in Walker's "Beauty") on a visit to her brother Bill in Boston—she was his children's babysitter during summer vacations—when Walker was 14, she never regained vision in her right eye.

Walker loved her father, "a fat funny man with beautiful eyes and a subversive wit," but viewed him as a man with shortcomings, namely, sexism. Her father acknowledged the systemic entanglement of racism that trapped him and his family, but he was blind to his own web of sexism. Walker saw him as someone indoctrinated into the patriarchal culture of sexism, incapable of fighting it, refusing to release it. This all-encompassing sexism caused him to treat his wife and his daughters

differently from the way he treated his sons. Her father believed that the role of a wife was to cook, clean, and care for children; male children never washed dishes or swept floors; the wife and female children did that. Why? The answer was simply that boys did not do household chores because they were boys. Girls, however, performed house labor and adhered to certain restrictions. They had to be enclosed, shielded, and kept from doing active things. Needless to say, Walker challenged the wisdom of her father.

Walker's reunification with the family after having lived with her grandparents for a year manifested within her a newly emboldened spirit. She challenged her father's system of values and beliefs. The two clashed for years until she left home to attend college. Walker later acknowledged that she had to reexamine herself for long periods in order to reconcile herself with her father. She had to realize that her father could not fathom the injustice of his attitudes. To him his actions were normal everyday life actions, not to be opposed. Walker decided to focus on his other qualities that she loved about him, those things that were difficult to see when her attention was on his not seeing her as a person, not seeing her for who she was, seeing her only as a girl. When she focused on his good qualities and reached out to him as daughter to father, she embraced him warmly (*My Life As Myself*). Because Walker felt that she was always in search of a father figure, she spent a few adult years reuniting and reconciling with him, affirming the father that she loved and admired. However, she understood him better after his death in 1973 than she ever did while he was alive. Her own home was Walker's introduction to patriarchal power. Her relationship with her father and her disdain of sexism appear thematically in her art and her political activism.

Minnie (Lou) Tallulah Grant Walker, whom Walker described as "a large, soft, loving-eyed woman," was her greatest support system, her storytelling inspiration. She loved her mother dearly. Two specific events, cherished memories of her mother, caused Walker to see her in greater depth. The first event took place at her father's funeral in 1973. Her mother looked at him for the final time, her husband for a lifetime now silenced by death, and spoke with civility—no smiles, no tears, no regrets—as if he were standing next to her, "Goodnight Willie Lee, I'll see you in the morning." Hearing her mother's words made Walker realize that the secret to the healing of emotional wounds was forgiveness (*A Conversation with Alice Walker*).

The second event took place at the bedside of Walker's dying mother approximately 20 years later. Walker felt complimented when her mother looked at her and told her daughter that she was "a little mess, ain't you."



Walker took this to mean that her mother acknowledged and sanctioned her rebellious and subversive nature, that the polite, respectful, good girl image that she displayed in the presence of family was just a mask. Walker, believing that her mother approved of the unmasked Walker, the one who had been there all the time, thanked her mother for letting her know that she approved before she made her transition from life to death (Gussow). In honor of her mother, Walker published a collection of poetry entitled *Goodnight Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning* (1979). Further testament to the love, honor, and respect that Walker had for her mother is the fact that forgiveness became a central point of Walker's life, fiction, and poetry.

Walker's brothers treated her with cruel, somewhat typical male sibling jesting. She grew up with four of them but played mostly with the two who were two and four years older than she, Curtis and Robert. Her oldest brother, Fred, who showered her with lots of hugs and kisses when she was a toddler, left home when Walker was three years old. When Curtis caused the injury to her eye, he and Robert were more concerned about themselves than they were about going to their parents for help. Dreading physical discipline they pleaded with Walker not to reveal all the facts to their parents. Since they played on a tin roof of a makeshift garage, they asked her to say a protruding wire pierced her eye; she, in severe pain, agreed to the fabrication. Her final vision out of her right eye was a tree growing under the porch that she saw through the slats, its branches climbing beyond the porch's railings reaching to the rooftop. Not knowing the actual events that led to the accident, the parents treated the eye injury homeopathically. Placing lily leaves around her head, her father worked to bring down the fever she developed. Her mother nourished her with soup to no avail, for her appetite was gone. When the eye became infected, Walker's parents made an appointment with the physician, only to be told that they were too late. The bad news was that she would have permanent loss of sight in her right eye, and that the sympathetic eye would deteriorate as well. Fortunately, she retained sight in her left eye. Curtis, guilty because he was responsible for the eye injury, became her protector against the incessant teasing from other children. He came to her defense often, so often that he began to boast about his heroism. Glad to have his support initially, Walker soon tired of his bragging. Today, one of Walker's brothers, Fred, retains a home base in Eatonton for himself and all family members, Grant Plantation, the ancestral home of Minnie (Lou) Tallulah Grant Walker. This home is the gathering place of all the siblings and their descendants whenever they visit Eatonton.