

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE FICTIONAL WOMEN OF ALICE WALKER

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More than anyone the black woman *deserves* to be as free as she wants to be. And I hope the black woman will always be herself (imitative not at all and intimidated not at all), no matter what others about her choose to be. And only when she *is* free—this average black woman— can black people speak with truth of liberation for all. And only when she *is* free, can women in general speak of victory, however small.

Alice Walker¹

The imitation of white women and the intimidation by everyone has led black women to a serious crisis of identity. Black feminist therapist Eleanor Johnson has found that «self-hatred, in one form or another, is what brings Black women to therapy».² There is a sense of pain, of isolation, of fear of not living up to ones designated role in life:

«Not that I'm interested for myself, but could you tell me where they're giving the Black-woman test? Would you help me cram for it? There isn't much time.»³

Alice Walker confronts this self-doubt and self-hatred head-on in such a way that all women can recognize the problems they have to encounter on their way to adulthood. Although Daniel N. Maltz and Ruth A. Borker state that

the impossible task of trying to be both women and adults, which Lakoff sees as culturally incompatible, saps women of confidence and strength,⁴

Walker moves painstakingly from characters who fulfill this description to women who can at last break through the limitations that society has set upon them to become competent, fully realized individuals.

Though her whole oeuvre of fiction can be seen as a progression «From Can't to Can»,⁵ even within each separate book there is a decided movement toward affirmation and identity. Whereas Margaret of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*,⁶ tragically takes her own life, believing herself to be at fault for Grange's desertion, the other women in the novel demonstrate various levels of coping and of personal development. Josie, for example, survives physically but is psychically destroyed for she is a woman «whose self-respect has ceased to be a matter of moment to anyone, including herself» (*Grange*, p. 221). Mem, on the other hand, is physically destroyed by Brownfield but retains a self-assurance which annoys her husband till the very end. While her forgiveness is said to be her major weakness, «a stupid belief that kindness can convert the enemy» (p. 162), Mem never allows the degradation she suffers to diminish her own sense of identity and her commitment to her daughters. Though she relinquishes her dream of a better life («Never again did she intend to plant flowers in boxes or beds»; p. 112), she still faces life with «a grim determination», setting out once again to provide for her children until her own husband guns her down. Even then her sense of herself is in tact and this later continues to nag at Brownfield:

But what had *she* thought, his quiet wife, when he proved to be more cruel to her than any white man, or twenty? She was not a fighter, and rage had horrified her. Her one act of violence against him, which she must have considered an act of survival, brought her lower than before. Instead of rage she had had an inner sovereignty, a core of self, a rock, which, alas, her husband had not had. She had possessed an embedded strength that Brownfield could not match. He had been at the best times, scornful of it, and at the worst, jealous.

(*Grange*, p. 126)

Even Ruth is perplexed by her mother's inner strength:

Why had her mother walked on after she saw the gun? That's what she couldn't understand. Could she have run away or not? But Mem had not even slowed her steps as she approached her husband. After her first cheerful, tired greeting she had not even said a word, and her bloody repose had struck them instantly as a grotesque attitude of profound, inevitable rest.

(*Grange*, p. 122)

With the example of her mother whom she deeply loved, and the support of Grange who is totally dedicated to her «survival whole», Ruth becomes the prototype for the independent young women Walker will develop more fully later on:

I am not just a pitcher to be filled by someone else. I have a mind, I have a memory.

(Grange, p. 219)

Even so her fear that her female biology will confine her and force her to be something she does not choose for herself both echoes the plight of her mother and grandmother and foreshadows many of the women depicted in *In Love and Trouble*:

What scared her was that she felt her woman's body made her defenseless. She felt it could now be had and made to conceive something she didn't want, against her will, and her mind could do nothing to stop it. She was deathly afraid of being, as she put it, «had», as young girls were every day, and trapped in a condition that could only worsen. She was not yet at a stage where the prospect of a man and marriage could be contemplated with equanimity.

(Grange, p. 193)

Nonetheless, these fears are counterbalanced in the last part of the book in the image of Helen, a woman not only happily married but also happily pregnant and working side by side with her husband for a better future for their child. Helen is also possessed with an «inner core of sovereignty» though fortunately she has the support of her husband. Grange is intrigued:

He wanted to reach out and touch Helen, she was so calm. He felt her calmness *meant* something, and he wanted desperately to know what.

(Grange, p. 240)

In this section, too, Helen describes the strength and dedication of her own mother, a «Mama» of the Civil Rights Movement, representative of those forebearing black women who served as role models not only for young black women but for the young white women who joined the Movement as well. Thus, the progression from physical and mental annihilation to the affirmation of self-worth and self-confidence is early established in Walker's work.

Whereas this movement is manifested through the development of several different women who pertain to three different generations in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, in her second novel, *Meridian*⁷, the process is consolidated in the main character. Although *Meridian* comes from a long line of strong black women who sacrificed themselves to the well-being of their families, *Meridian* is not willing to undergo this abnegation of her own being and is therefore afflicted throughout her

young adulthood with feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Though she perceives her mother's life as sterile (a woman who makes paper flowers instead of cultivating real ones —always a sign of creativity in Walker—and useless prayer pillows that could only fit one knee), Meridian is initially thwarted by her own family. Unable to conform to her mother's wishes, Meridian sees her own special value ignored by her parents and brothers, symbolically set out in the short chapter entitled «Gold» (*Meridian*, p. 43). Seeing her family devoid of any interest in the bar of gold (her own worth as an individual) she has discovered, she buried it under the magnolia tree, digging it up occasionally to look at it, «until finally she forgot to dig it up.»

Ruth's fear of being trapped by her own body becomes reality in Meridian when at age 17 she finds herself entrenched in roles that ill-suit her special personality:

A drop-out from high school, a deserted wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law.

(*Meridian*, p. 70)

Locked into a situation she despises, even to the point of considering suicide (p. 63), Meridian dispassionately observes the stunted development of other young girls as they stumble toward adulthood, a process which Annis Pratt defines as «unnatural»:

The socially unacceptable status of Eros as a natural force in the human personality automatically places woman in a puzzling double bind. On the one hand she experiences Eros as an aspect of her natural maturation; on the other hand such an experience for a woman is considered «unnatural». The gender norms for feminine behavior that should provide signposts to adulthood are obscured, destroyed, or reversed.⁸

Certainly the ambivalence described by Pratt coincides with Meridian's observations:

She watched the young girls, their bodies just forming into women's bodies. Watched how they bent against the wind or held their books in a gesture of defense, almost of shame. Certainly of fear. Then, in the slightly older ones, there was the beginning pride in their bodies, so that they did not bend against the wind —wind real or wind imaginary— but stood with their breasts as obvious as possible so that the boys, galloping alongside and past them in herds —neighing, in their incoherent, aimless laughter and banter, like young ponies— looked boldly at them and grinned and teased and brought embarrassment and pleasure to the young girls.

(*Meridian*, pp. 69-70)

Meridian is perceptively aware, however, that these girls are protected from a view of real life by their own fantasy in themselves, moving «in the dream of happy endings: of women who had everything, of men who ran the world» (p. 70). Meridian knows this herself because she too has been there, but now faced with reality instead of cinema, she finds that her life, now defined by others, is over.

Presented with the opportunity to continue her studies, Meridian makes a conscious decision to break with the meaningless pattern of her life and grow into real adulthood as a whole person. She does so at a heavy price, however, for as Pratt writes,

The greater the personal development of a hero, the more true she is to herself and the more eccentric her relationship to the patriarchy. A quality of consciousness that is essentially antisocial characterizes the most admirable heroes.

Not only is she eccentric by patriarchal standards, but also her ambivalence over her own choices tortures her with guilt. She is plagued with nightmares over giving away her son (p. 187), and later over having induced a young girl, Anne, to come march with her, and whose screams on being mistreated in jail haunt Meridian (p. 92), as well as with guilt over merely having been born (p. 123). She hears her own voice urging her to suicide and the spiritual degeneration within herself results in severe headaches and sickness (pp. 87-88).

Meridian's one venture back into the patriarchal norm is her falling in love with Truman, yet the results are disastrous: again she is abandoned, and again she is trapped by her female biology. The pain of an illicit abortion is added to the hurt of being abandoned for a white woman:

He had gone back to the last of the exchange students, the one she had liked, Lynne Rabinowitz. It was for this reason, among other, that he never knew she was pregnant. On her way to have an abortion she saw them riding across campus in his father's new red car. From a distance, they both looked white to her, that day. Later, as the doctor tore into her body without giving her anesthesia (and while he lectured her on her morals) and she saw stars because of the pain, she was still seeing them laughing, carefree, together. It was not that she wanted him any more, she did not. It enraged her that she could be made to endure such pain, and that he was oblivious to it. She was also disgusted with the fecundity of her body that got pregnant on less screwing than anybody's she had ever heard of. It seemed doubly unfair that after all her sexual «experience» and after one baby and one abortion she had not once been completely fulfilled by sex.

(Meridian, p. 112)

Now completely through with the dictates of society as to what she is and what she should do, Meridian sets out to find herself and in so doing helps others along the way. In this sense she becomes a Christ figure, or a saint who, once cleansed of sickness and self-doubt, becomes an inspiration and model for others, male and female. The last chapter of the novel entitled «Release» deals at once with her spiritual renewal and with Truman's acceptance of the quest for total personhood that she passes on to him:

She was strong enough to go and owned nothing to pack. She had discarded her cap, and the soft wool of her newly grown hair framed her thin, resolute face. His first thought was of Lazarus, but then he tried to recall someone less passive, who had raised himself without help. Meridian would return to the world cleansed of sickness. That was what he knew.

(*Meridian*, p. 227)

Left behind by Meridian, Truman takes her position in the community, her house, «her cell», her cow, her cap with the visor, and the «conflict in her own soul which... must now be borne in terror by the rest of them» (p. 228).

The progression from the «Suspended Woman» to the «Assimilated Woman» to the «Emergent Woman»¹⁰ is also obvious in Walker's short stories when her two collections are compared. For the epigraph for *In Love and Trouble*¹¹ Walker has chosen a quotation from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*—

...People have (with the help of conventions) oriented all their solutions toward the easy and toward the easiest side of the easy; but it is clear that we must hold to what is difficult; everything in Nature grows and defends itself in its own way and is characteristically and spontaneously itself, seeks at all costs to be so and against all opposition.

—yet in this first collection of stories her women are inevitably thwarted in their efforts to be individuals.

Roselily, surrendering her independence to respectability, feels old, «yoked» (p. 6). «A squeeze around the flowers in her hands chokes off three and four and five years of breath» (p. 4). Myrna of «Really, *Doesn't Crime Pay?*» feels «crippled, deformed» (p. 19) and has «the heart of a slave» (p. 16). These women know as the father in «The Child Who Favored Daughter» knows that «resignation is a kind of dying» (p. 44), yet their choice is limited to this living death, suicide or madness. Though the mother of «The Child Who Favored Daughter», like Margaret of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, chooses suicide and the child herself

chooses death over renunciation of her independence, in five of these thirteen stories the women go through bouts of madness. Myrna, betrayed by both Mordecai Rich and her husband Ruel, has a mental breakdown and tries to murder Ruel with one of his chain saws (p. 12)¹². Mrs. Jerome Franklin Washington III who deludes herself that she is both lovely and fashionable in order to keep up some self-respect (p. 27), goes mad trying to discover the reason for Jerome's betrayal (pp. 30-33), eventually destroyed by the revolution that is supposed to save her (p. 34). «Daughter's» madness, too, ends in death; she is «impaled on one of the steel-spike fence posts near the house» (p. 39). Though Hannah Kemhuff recovers from her breakdown by returning to the church (p. 67) and John's mother of «Entertaining God» overcomes hers by dedicating herself to the black cause, restrictions imposed on their lives by racism, sexism and colorism, take a heavy toll on their psyche.

Notwithstanding the disastrous effects on these women, Walker nonetheless affirms the need of each to be whole individual human beings in spite of all the obstacles in their path. The young girl of «Daughter» is defined as a black-eyed Susan, a designation Mary Helen Washington will later use as the title of her anthology of short stories by and about black women:¹³

A slight, pretty flower that grows on any ground; and flowers
pledge no allegiance to banners of any man.

(*In Love*, p. 45)

Madness also overtakes the mother of the narrator of «How Did I Get Away With Killing the Biggest Lawyer in the State? It Was Easy» (in *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*¹⁴) on seeing herself committed to an insane asylum by the very child she is trying to protect. Though she tries to get herself out, by the time she has a lawyer, the treatment and mistreatment she has received have left her drained:

And Mama's old lawyer told the judge how Bubba's daddy had tried to buy him off. And Bubba got up and swore he'd never touched me. And then I got up and said Mama was insane. And do you know what? By that time Mama *was* insane. She had no mind left at all. They had given her shock treatments or something... God knows what else they gave her. But she was as vacant as an empty eye socket. She just sort of hunched over, and her hair was white.

(*Good Woman*, p. 25)

The narrator her self is shaken from her own complicity by her mother's death and takes justice into her own hands, killing Bubba. Though this action is not only illegal but also unreal in terms of actual viability, it does

indicate the beginning of a willingness in Walker's characters to take charge of their own lives. Walker moves in her second collection of stories toward portraits of women who very much fit the description given by Patricia Graham of the modern women: active, attractive, ambitious, and ambivalent.¹⁵

The protagonist of «The Abortion», for example, is a young woman whose economic and social position allows her to avoid the biological trap. Nonetheless, the changes in the circumstances that surround her first abortion while she was still in college as opposed to the one she undertakes in this story are accompanied by changes in her emotional attitude toward what she is doing. Whereas the first time the illegal abortion cost her \$1,000 and caused her to be sick for a year, the now-legalized modern abortion has «entered the age of the assembly line» (p. 69). Where on the one hand she is pleased to notice the depersonalization of the patients, she is less pleased to note that the anesthesia is insufficient and that the doctor takes no notice of her complaint. Though the modern-day version is safer, quicker, and more efficient, it is still shown to be a lot more problematic than many advocates will allow.

Imani finds to her dismay that aborting the second time does not bring with it the initial sense of freedom she had enjoyed in college:

Her first abortion, when she was still in college, she frequently remembered as wonderful, bearing as it had all the marks of a supreme coming of age and a seizing of the direction of her own life, as well as a comprehension of existence that never left her: that life —what one saw about one and called Life— was not a facade. There was nothing behind it which used «Life» as its manifestation. Life was itself. Period. At the time, and afterwards, and even now, this seemed a marvelous thing to know.

(*Good Woman*, pp. 67-68)

In fact, after all these years she finds that she has progressed but little:

Still not in control of her sensuality, and only through violence and with money (for the flight, for the operation itself) in control of her body.

(*Good Woman*, p. 69)

It is the ambivalence she feels toward this abortion that will finally destroy her marriage to Clarence.

Another woman apparently in control of her own sensuality is Annie of «Laurel». Although willing to brave the racist hostility toward an interracial couple during the week she and Laurel are together in Atlanta, Annie is unprepared to confront the consequences of that short

relationship when Laurel, having lost part of his brain in an accident, decides he wants to renew it. On the one hand Annie feels she is being forced to pay for her emotional dishonesty: she never expected the relationship to last any longer than the moment itself (p. 110), although she acts as if she is crushed to learn he has a wife. On the other hand, however, she fears that she might succumb again to her feelings of lust just for the adventure of it, much like the protagonist of «The Lover». Whereas the latter has no feelings of guilt at wanting both adventure and security, however, Annie is still wondering by the end of the story if she had, in fact, done the right thing by refusing to go back to Laurel.

Sarah of «A Sudden Trip Home in the Spring» is another woman who must work through her feelings of ambivalence —toward herself and toward her dead father— before she can assume her full humanity. At the beginning of the story she feels like the small girl whose face is nestled in the shoulder of a man on a red SNCC poster. «Sarah often felt she was the little girl whose face no one could see» (p. 126). Not really fitting in with her white friends at college, yet estranged from her roots because of her unhappy relationship with her father, Sarah changes with the help of her brother and her grandfather from an insecure little girl uncertain of her own identity to a woman who is sure of herself and her relationship to others and feels able to confront life's difficulties as a strong independent individual:

Stare the rat down, thought Sarah; and whether it disappears or not, I am a woman in the world. I have buried my father, and shall soon know how to make my grandfather up in stone.

(*Good Woman*, p. 137)

Self-doubt and self-hatred also figure strongly in Anastasia's personality in «Source». Confused by her parents and colorist attitudes of other black and white people, she imitates first one and then another idol, loses herself in drugs and then fanatical religion, and then finally comes to accept herself as an individual, independent of her color and race, and is on her way to becoming a native American.

In a way her development is underlined by that of the women Irene teaches, women who «found it difficult to take an active part in their own instruction» because «they doubted their own personal histories and their own experience» (p. 142). They find Irene's insistence that «they acknowledge their own oppression, as blacks *and* as women» threatening and are hard-pressed to find their own individual identity, so confined have they been and for so long.

For her part Irene, attractive, and certainly ambitious and active, is besieged by ambivalent feelings about her own station in life. Though

never doubting her own capacity for success and self-fulfillment, she finds it difficult to identify with the black bourgeois:

«You see, my great fear in college was that I could hardly avoid becoming an ordinary bourgeois success. I was bright, energetic, attractive with never a *thought* of failure, no matter *what* sociologists say. Those students who were destined, within ten years, to know the names of the designer of their shoes and luggage, to vacation in Europe once a year and read two best sellers every five —while doing a piss-poor job of teaching our children— scared the hell out of me. That life, not the proverbial ‘getting pregnant and dropping out of school’, represented ‘the fate worst than death.’»

(*Good Woman*, pp. 165-166)

Though her dilemma is not resolved by the end of the story, she nevertheless has taken a step in the right direction by acknowledging it and the conflict it creates in her. This ambivalence, so apparent in the stories of *You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down*, is ultimately overcome by the women in *The Color Purple*¹⁶ as they support each other in their quest for identity and autonomy.

Walker has stated that she «would like to see (women) liberated from the ideas that their men have of them»,¹⁷ and that she has a strong suspicion that «there must be for women a new and self-given definition. (She fears) that many people, including women, do not know, in fact, what *Woman* is». ¹⁸ Through the female characters in *The Color Purple*, the author explores what it means to be a woman in the eyes of men and what «woman» means to herself. Just as Walker has Meridian throw off those roles to which she has been confined at an early age, so she conscientiously strips Celie of every factor by which male-oriented society judges a woman, combining every major crisis in a woman's life in a question of ten letters (or roughly five years), which read, as one reviewer has said, «like a kick to the stomach»: ¹⁹ Celie is raped repeatedly, incestuously as she thinks; her «father» refuses to let her attend school, even though she loves it, because of her pregnancy; her mother dies; her two children are taken from her each at only a couple of months old, leaving her breasts full of milk running down her front; she is beaten, becomes barren and is given to a man in marriage who treats her like a slave. And just to make sure she keeps quiet about his role in all of these calamities, her «father» warns her future husband that she lies. Soon after she loses sight of her sister Nettie whom she fears dead. Celie's value as a woman in a man's world is literally annulled: she is not pretty, nor well-educated, not allowed to be a mother to her natural children, unable to reproduce yet already «spoilt» for a husband. Albert laughingly taunts her the day she finally decides to leave him:

Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman.
Goddam, ...you nothing at all.

(Purple, p. 187)

Having reduced Celie to zero in men's eyes, Walker begins to disclose her possibilities for personhood through a redefinition of terms. In order to do this though, «You have to git men off your eyeball before you can see anything at all,» as Shug says (p. 179). Through Shug and Sofia and progressively through Celie, Mary Agnes and Nettie, Walker begins to unfold this redefinition of terms. For example, although Celie has been raped and repeatedly mounted by her husband, Shug calls her a virgin (pp. 79 & 107) because she has never reached orgasm, a radical break from the masculine interpretation of sex. Under Shug's guiding hand, Celie's numbness begins to thaw, but before she can grow into a completely mature human being, Celie must move from self-doubt to self-acceptance. When Shug leaves her for a last fling with Germaine, Celie is thrown into misery once again:

Sometimes I think Shug never love me. I stand looking at my naked self in the looking glass. What would she love? I ast myself. My hair is short and kinky because I don't straighten it anymore. Once Shug say she love it no need to. My skin dark. My nose just a nose. My lips just lips. My body just any woman's body going through the changes of age. Nothing special here for nobody to love. No honey colored curly hair, no cuteness. Nothing young and fresh. My heart must be young and fresh though, it feel like it blooming blood.

I talk to myself a lot, standing in front the mirror. Celie, I say, happiness was just a trick in your case. Just cause you never had any before Shug, you thought it was time to have some, and that it was gon last. Even thought you had the trees with you. The whole earth. The stars. But look at you. When Shug left, happiness desert.

(Purple, p. 229)

The announcement that Nettie's ship has been sunk serves to push her into even deeper depression:

Well, your sister too crazy to kill herself. Most times I feels like shit but I felt like shit before in my life and what happen? I had me a fine sister name Nettie. I had me another fine woman friend name Shug. I had me some fine children growing up in Africa, singing and writing verses. The first two months was hell though, I tell the world. But now Shug's six months is come and gone and she ain't come back. And I try to teach my heart not to want nothing it can't have.

(Purple, p. 235)

Yet somehow throughout all these obstacles Celie continues to grow as a human being, as a woman. She keeps her love for Nettie alive even though spiritually, and learns to accept Shug's independence as a part of her, and even to love her for it. Even though she feels she has lost what she most loves, her newly acquired confidence allows her to maintain close relationships with others. Walker might have reasonably left Celie at this stage in her life, having brought her development to its completion. Nonetheless, in an ending that some reviewers have criticized as being too pat,²⁰ Celie is reunited with Shug and all of her family in an emotional denouement. Walker has stated that she wanted to make her characters happy, and illogical or not, the final scene brings together the most important elements in a woman's life: family, friends, home, independence, autonomy, self-expression and self-confidence. This ending may be intellectually dissatisfying to many readers but it strikes a responsive emotional chord in many women who would desire just this kind of happiness.

Though the development of Celie's sense of self and of worth is the main focus of the novel, the other women in different ways, come to greater knowledge of themselves in their quest for autonomy and identity. Sofia, highly assertive and independent from the beginning, learns to control the high spirit which gets her into trouble, and accept Harpo's limitations even as she renews the marriage. Shug comes to acknowledge her selfishness in her relationships with others and consequently grows more aware of herself as she begins to take in account the feelings of the people around her. Even though she knows Celie does not understand her leaving with Germaine, Shug demonstrates that she is ready to do so even though she knows her own folly:

But Celie, she say. I have to make you understand. Look, she say. I'm gitting old. I'm fat. Nobody think I'm good looking no more, but you. Or so I thought. He's nineteen. A baby. How long can it last?

He's a man. I write on the paper.

Yeah, she say. He is. And I know how you feel about men. But I don't feel that way. I would never be fool enough to take any of them seriously, she say, but some mens can be a lots of fun.

Spare me, I write.

Celie, she say. All I ast is six months. Just six months to have my last fling. I got to have it Celie. I'm too weak a woman not to.

(Purple, p. 220)

Although recognizing the pain she is causing Celie, Shug is honest enough with herself to clearly admit what she is doing and how much it means to her.

Mary Agnes also evolves from being Harpo's insignificant «Squeak» to taking the directives of her life in her own hands. Though Harpo insists that he provides her with everything she needs, she answers only that «I need to sing» (p. 183). The turning point in her personal development is when she insists on his calling her Mary Agnes, not «Squeak». Celie has indicated much earlier that she should make Harpo call her by her real name,

Then maybe he see you even when he trouble.

(Purple, p. 85)

but it is not until she returns from her attempt to get Sofia out of jail that she becomes aware of her importance to others:

Harpo say, I love you Squeak. He kneel down and try to put his arms round her waist.

She stand up. My name Mary Agnes, she say.

(Purple, p. 95)

Later when Harpo tries to impede her going to Memphis with Shug to start her career, she returns to this affirmation of her identity as an independent individual:

Listen Squeak, say Harpo. You can't go to Memphis. That's all there is to it.

Mary Agnes, say Squeak.

Squeak, Mary Agnes, what difference do it make?

It make a lot, say Squeak. When I was Mary Agnes I could sing in public.

(Purple, p. 183)

As for Celie's sister, Nettie weathers the years isolated from Celie and despairing of reaching her even by letters. In spite of this loneliness she fills her life with dedicated service to others, even though she, like Samuel and Corrine, is brought to the realization that much of her life's work has been in vain. Ironically she acknowledges her love for Samuel just at the moment he is acknowledging his own failure. Having grown and accepted herself as a flawed human being, her love for him can be grounded in maturity and not in infatuation. In this sense Nettie's heterosexual love inversely parallels Celie's love for Shug though both arrive at a stable loving relationship by the end of the novel.

To a large degree Walker's struggle to bring her fictional women to independence, self-confidence, autonomy, *wholeness*, has mirrored a process in which she herself has been involved (and indeed in which all women are involved to some degree or another). Blinded in one eye as a

child, she suffered from an inferiority complex over the ugly scar that marred her left eye. The pain is for the most part released and washed away when her daughter, then three years old, noticing the imperfection for the first time, remarks that she has «a world» in her eye. Finally comprehending the vision of her own daughter and what her blind eye has meant to her *self*, Walker experiences the joy of self-acceptance, which she has passed on to her major characters of *The Color Purple*, illustrated by a dream.

As I dance, whirling and joyous, happier than I've even been in my life, another bright-faced dancer joins me. We dance and kiss each other and hold each other through the night. The other dancer has obviously come through all right, as I have done. She is beautiful, whole and free. And she is also me.

«Woman» must be many things to many people, but first and foremost she must be secure in the knowledge that to be so, she must first be whole herself. Alice Walker's womanist «loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk.

Loves herself.
Regardless.»²²

Notes

1. Alice Walker, «Women on Women», *The American Scholar* (Fall, 1972), p. 620.
2. «Reflections: On Black Feminist Therapy», *Conditions Five*, eds. Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith (1979), p. 115.
3. Johnson, p. 115.
4. «A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication», *Language and Social Reality*, ed., John J. Gumperz (Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 199.
5. This is the title of Toni Cade Bambara's forthcoming book —*From Can't to Can: Journeys of African Women Across Continents and Through Centuries*.
6. (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970). References hereafter will be included in the text.
7. (London: The Feminist Press, 1982). This novel was originally published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., in 1976. References hereafter will refer to the 1982 edition cited here.
8. *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press Limited, 1982), p. 82.
9. Pratt, p. 169.
10. These are the terms Alice Walker uses to describe her personal historical view of women. They indicate a movement from women totally victimized by society and men to

- growing, developing women with a certain degree of control over their own lives. See Mary Helen Washington, «Teaching *Black Eyed Susans: An Approach to the Study of Black Women Writers*», in *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 11, n.º 1 (Spring 1977), Pp. 20-24.
11. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973). References hereafter will be included in the text.
 12. Sadly, this type of madness is more common than people would like to admit and sometimes is even manifested as dramatically as Myrna in this story. Though there was much cruel laughter over the case of Mari Carmen Ruiz, the «Maestra de Itrabo» who tried to burn down her classroom and did in fact mutilate herself, the sense of isolation and conflict she apparently felt over her unwanted motherhood (it is significant, I think, that she burned her *breasts* with cigarettes) was not understood either by her husband or society at large. Though it is unscientific to make such superficial analysis on the basis of journalists' reports, these reports do in fact make a statement on the actual state of womanhood as seen by the patriarchy. As reported, the main preoccupation of this woman's husband was that people not believe that it was «un caso de cuernos», a belief he himself admits to having entertained. The ambivalence of Ms. Ruiz toward her own needs is also clear. She mentions the weight of the responsibility of caring for three young children by herself and the fact that her husband is away from home for extended periods of time, but is quick to say «it's not his fault». Though «successfully» completing treatment in a sanatorium, one wonders if this woman has not been returned to the same pressures that caused her madness in the first place. Juan Madrid, «Maestra de Itrabo: 'Perdon a Todos'», *Cambio 16*, n.º 668 (September 17-24, 1984), pp. 88-90.
 13. *Black-Eyed Susans* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975).
 14. (London: The Women's Press, 1981). This book of short stories was originally published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., in 1971. All references hereafter refer to the London 1981 edition.
 15. «Address upon the installation of Sara Simmons Chapman as Dean of H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College», in *Under the Oaks*, vol. 8, n.º 1 (Winter 1984), p. 20.
 16. (London: The Feminist Press, 1983). The novel, for which Alice Walker was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, was originally published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in 1982. All references in the text refer to the London 1983 edition.
 17. «Women on Women», p. 601.
 18. «Corretta King: Revisited», in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (London: The Women's Press, Ltd., 1984), p. 152.
 19. «Picks and Pans», *People Weekly*, vol. 18, n.º 8 (November 1, 1982), p. 14.
 20. See, for example, Andrea Ford, «Pain, Postmarked by Poetry», *Detroit Free Press* (August 8, 1982), p. 5B.
 21. «Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self», in *Gardens*, p. 393.
 22. This is the third definition of «womanist» that Walker sets out as a Preface to *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, p. xii.