An Artist in Making: A Critical Analysis of Alice Walker's First Novel *The Third* Life of Grange Copeland

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Abstract

The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970) recounts three different experiences of racial and economic oppression in the life stories of Grange, Brownfield and Ruth. These characters begin their stories as oppressed in the sharecropping system and in the corresponding environment of domestic violence and self-hatred. Grange's heroic and benevolent character bears little relation to his earlier presentation as a silent, brutal farmer. Brownfield progresses from a child of poverty and degradation to almost a tyrant-monster figure, and Ruth becomes the great hope of a generation. A crucial phase of Ruth's development is her growing awareness of society as a dynamic process instead of a static hierarchy where everyone must fit into his or her place. By the end of the novel, Ruth has been deeply stirred by the "Movement," which she feels will transform her world.

Keywords: Abandonment, Entrapment, Legendary, Sociopathic.

Alice Walker's first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) recounts three different experiences of racial and economic oppression in the South. In detailing the stories of Grange, Brownfield and Ruth, Walker not only illustrates her own theories of the importance of maintaining the individual soul in the context of community, as documented in her non-fiction work, but also elucidates methods of surviving suffering. Walker presents three variations on the Job quest in the journeys of Brownfield, Grange and Ruth. These characters begin their stories as uniquely oppressed in the sharecropping system and in the corresponding environment of domestic violence and self-hatred of mid-twentieth century Georgia. Everyone is faced with making meaning of his suffering and thereby transcending that suffering and its vicious cycle of brutality. Just as Job meets his anguish with a tripartite reaction of fear and misery, rage and rebellion, serenity and compassion, so do these characters evolve. However, none is a complete Job figure. Brownfield stagnates in the rage juncture of the cycle; Grange stops short of developing a cosmic sense of compassion; and, we hope Ruth will learn true compassion working for the civil rights movement.

Grange's heroic and benevolent character bears little relation to his earlier presentation as a silent, brutal farmer. Brownfield progresses from a child of poverty and degradation to almost a tyrant-monster figure, and Ruth becomes the great hope of a generation. Each character is therefore in some ways larger than life, too legendary for true realism. They are figures of that oppressive manifestations of suffering, and symbols of the survival methods adopted by the subjugated. In this way, each of Walker's characters is qualified for a comparison with a mythic figure like Job. While Job rebels against God's mysterious punishment, he retains a hope that God will explain, return, and restore him in relationship. Grange never mentions his birth father, but often wonders about the nature of God—he claims not to believe, but he often reads the Bible, especially the Book of Exodus. He sometimes attends church, and wishes he could attain a kind of Christian compassion for his fellow men. Brownfield claims his resentment of and rage at Grange as fuel for his cowardly rationalization, acts of violence, and vengefulness. Ruth rejects Brownfield's attempted reclamation in favour of Grange's loving protection. Job humbly receives God's reclamation, but Grange, Brownfield, and Ruth do not accept their respective reclamations. Grange tries to offer Brownfield apologies and assistance, but by the time Grange returns home, Brownfield has become so completely degraded that he cannot bear to see his own reflection in his father's eyes. At the end of the text, Grange's last few moments appear to be a kind of prayer, but Walker's narrator quickly dispels that possibility. "But if it was a prayer, how strange it was; for it was all about himself and his deliverance to and from, and his belief in and out. Actually, it was a curse" (Walker 340).

In this way, neither of Walker's male characters can ultimately achieve the self-submission necessary to enter into reclamation by the father, although Ruth accepts Grange as her surrogate father. Theodore Mason has rightly observed that *The Third Life* is "a novel dominated by the idea of cycle and repetition" (299) Each character begins his journey utterly subjected by poverty and misery. Brownfield rebels from his misery when he realizes his own life has become a repetition of his father's, watching his eldest daughter work in the fields. Brownfield's rage becomes almost sociopathic as it feeds on itself; his diffuse rage propels him into ill-tempered bitterness. Grange's first life is his life of fear and misery; during his second life in New York, he learns hatred for whites and thus enters the rage section of the cycle. During his third life, he begins to learn, through teaching Ruth, about compassion, but never fully adopts it himself. Ruth is the character who succeeds the most in all three stages: she feels fear.

Brownfield and Grange have been often dismissed as merely abusive. But rather than attributing their violence to a moral flaw, it is appropriate to view it in light of the Job story. Kate Cochran writes,

> In beating their wives, Brown- field and Grange redirect the aggression they feel as a result of their own subjugation. Therefore, domestic violence, creating brokenness in their homes, is the only way they can sustain the brokenness of their lives in the sharecropping system. (84)

Job becomes sarcastic and insulting as a result of his continued misery and his comforters' misunderstanding. So do Grange and Brownfield react to suffering. But more than a brutal emotional outlet, both Brownfield and Grange adopt God's role in the Job story: they mete out undeserved punishments to their wives without offering an explanation. Campbell writes,

> Such punishments are not only patently absurd, they are also doubly sadistic; by hurting Margaret and Mem, Grange and Brownfield also abuse themselves. Nevertheless, in both men's sharecropping households, the rules and punishments are determined solely by the whim of the father. (24)

Just as each week in the sharecropping homes follows a cycle of depression and violence, so too does the lineage of the characters continue a pattern. Abandonment by the father is an integral part of the cycle. While nothing is said about Grange's father, his absence foreshadows Grange's abandonment of Brownfield and Brownfield's abandonment of his own children. Certainly, the three characters are fundamentally scarred by this sense of abandonment by the father, but the abandonment also teaches them to abandon in turn. Walker details Brownfield's feelings after Grange leaves, but Grange seems totally without a father, even God. Ruth chooses to banish her own father, adopting a new one in Grange. With Job, the sense of abandonment is expressed when Job is at his lowest point. He feels sure that God hates him to have punished him so. He fears that he is utterly alone, without understanding friends, without supportive community, without loving children, but most of all without a beneficent God. For Grange, Brownfield, Ruth, and Job, abandonment by the father/God represents the ultimate desolation. But this desolation is both somewhat tempered and made more untenable as the father might return.

The novel presents a complex view of the open journey. Central to the

novel is a tension between the characters' strong desire for a stable life centering around a "home" and their equally potent inclinations toward radical change, the "new life" brought about by experience. These two powerful drives are merged in Brownfield's recurrent daydream, in which he imagines himself as owning both a beautiful mansion and an elegant car as:

> As he stroked his shoes carelessly with a rag, Brownfield sank into his favourite daydream. He saw himself grown-up, twenty-one or so, arriving at home at sunset in the snow. In this daydream there was always snow. He had seen snow only once, when he was seven and there had been a small flurry at Christmas, and it had made a cold, sharp impression on him. In his daydream snow fell to the earth like chicken feathers dumped out of a tick, and gave the feeling of walking through a quiet wall of weightlessness and suspended raindrops, clear and cold on the eyelids and the nose. (Walker 17)

South is a place of terrible entrapment which destroys family life and enslaves blacks to an endless cycle of physical and spiritual poverty. Grange's role as a sharecropper turns him into a stone and imposes complete accession on his wife Margaret. Their son Brownfield, whose entire life is a frightening extension of Southern values and who comes to develop a perverse love of the South while in prison, lives in a condition of nearly paralysis. Sharecropping threatens him with the "shadow of eternal bondage" and his marriage becomes "another link in the chain that holds him to the land" (Walker 50). Although he shows some signs as a young man of freeing himself by attempting to move out of the South, "his dreams to go North . . . died early" (Walker 53) and he is content to accept his place in Southern society—he fitted himself to the slot in which he found himself. Robert Butler writes:

> This extreme passivity gradually erodes his spirit until he becomes a pathological figure intent on destroying his wife and children when they display any signs of rejecting the static roles which Southern society imposes on them. He always interprets their drive for movement and freedom as an indictment of his own depleted life. (Butler 71)

Given such a numb, paralyzing world, several characters attempt to save themselves. Josie's daughter Lorene lights out to the North and is never heard from again. Grange, whose imagination has been fired by his brother-in-law

Silas's exploits in New York, leaves the sharecropping work that has "stupefied" him and simply takes off: "He had not even comprehended what he was running to. He was simply moving on to where people said it was better" (Walker 140). However, like Silas, who ends up a drug addict killed in a liquor store robbery, Grange eventually discovers that North is a real hoax. Although he goes there to pursue his dream of "living free," he is reduced to a condition of "solitary confinement." Ironically, his experiences in New York are a depressing repetition of his existence in the South as all the aspects of life are controlled by whites: "He found that wherever he went, whites were in control; they ruled New York as they did Georgia; Harlem as they did Poontang Street" (Walker 140).

Alice Walker's love-hate relationship is best expressed through Mem. Her suffering is carried to the high degree. She had an opportunity to observe Brownfield actions with Josie and Lorence. She knew that he was ignorant, no-good and strangely fascinated by her college learning and sophistication. He was illiterate so she taught him how to write his name. Parker Smith writes,

> The worse he treated her, the more she was compelled to save him. Therefore, when she agreed to marry him, she took on as part of her vow the whole history of Black emasculation. He blamed Mem for his failures and inability to produce a crop at the end of a farming season. (482)

He beat her. He did not fear her as he did the white men whose power choked him and refused him his manhood and who gave him dried potatoes and sickly hogs at the end of the year. Brownfield had to strike at something. His mission, then, was to pull her down beneath him so that his foot could rest easy on her neck.

Mem's weakness is representative of a steady stream of suffering throughout Walker's fiction. She carries the burden of guilt as a heavy load on her back. It appeared that Mem could not be victimized. After all she had an identity. She was a schoolteacher. So, a series of questions became paramount. Why did she accept the violent acts against her body and the violent expressions that chiselled away at her soul? What kind of lethargy was it that allowed her to take beatings, time and again? In her own weak mind did she somehow feel that Brownfield was needed to affirm or reaffirm her woman-ness.

Mary Helen Washington states that the author is an apologist for Black women. And she uses "apologist" in the sense that Walker speaks or writes in

defence of a cause or a position. The cause is the liberation of Black womanhood but as an apologist she demonstrates this position basically in the sense of acknowledging. Walker confessed to Mary Helen that she knew the women she writes about and while growing up in Georgia, she smelled the brunt of their pain. She remembers them when she was thirteen.

The Third Life of Grange Copeland is saved from nihilistic despair by the fact that it is centered in two other interrelated problems. The first is Grange's return to Georgia where he begins his "third" life after growing embittered about his "second" life in Harlem. This journey produces a dramatic change in his character as he becomes a loving surrogate father for Ruth after she has lost her parents when Brownfield murders Mem and is subsequently sent to prison. Unlike Brownfield, who tries to weaken his children, Grange strengthens Ruth by providing her with an emotionally secure "home" on the farm which he and Josie buy with the money they get from the sale of the Dew Drop Inn. Ruth therefore avoids the problem which has made it difficult for Brownfield to move in his lack of an adequate foundation in life, "He was expected to raise himself up on air, which was all that was left over after his work for others.... He was never able to do more than exist on air; he was never able to build on it. . ." (Walker 54).

Ruth can move steadily toward a liberating new life because she has been brought up on much more than "air." Grange's nurturing has provided her with the emotional and spiritual base she needs to develop a resilient self. She is now capable of undertaking the open passage so often celebrated in classic American and Afro-American literature. Walker does not establish the farm as a romantic setting which suggests her love of Southern "place." Surely Grange never evinces any love for Georgia in particular or the South in general—he hates it as much as any place. He returns to Baker County because he is interested in creating a "home" by transforming a limiting place into liberating "space." When he fences off his property from the surrounding, he can make it a "sanctuary" a "refuge" distinct from Southern society where he can be free and independent—a "reborn man." His turning back to a pastoral world of his own creation is then a quest for the same sort of life-giving space that the Puritans sought in a New World "sanctuary."

Ruth must leave this pastoral world to realize her own identity. Space, unlike place, cannot be inherited but must be created by a human soul. Although Ruth as a young girl is nurtured by the home with which Grange provides her,

she must, like most American heroic figures, finally break away from home in order to undertake her own autonomous life. She feels that her options in the world she was given are limited: Not only will the white world reduce her to a maid or a school teacher, but the black community, which is sharply critical of her life with Grange, restricts her to the status of a pariah. When she asks Grange, "What am I going to do when I get grown?" he tells her that she can stay on their farm "till kingdom come" (Walker 172). But she immediately rejects such a static conception of her future, telling him, "I am not going to be a hermit" (Walker 172). The same fences which give him a sense of security eventually induce claustrophobia in her. She needs unlimited space if she is to fulfil the deepest promptings of her growing self.

The last quarter of the novel dramatizes her plans for leaving home so that she can "rise up" on her own. Her dreams of freedom take the form of going north, and she clearly tells Grange, "I want to get away from here someday.... I think maybe I'll go North, like you did" (Walker 193). Later, she thinks of going to Africa, and by the end of the novel she is deeply stirred by the prospect of becoming part of the civil rights "movement." The exact direction she will pursue is never made clear. "Like most American heroes, she has a lucid notion of the places she must leave but keeps an indeterminate vision of the space to which she will move. And like the Jews in Exodus, she must leave an all-too-real 'Egypt' in order to experience a mythic "promised land" (Campbell 95).

Grange delights in telling her the story of Exodus because he wants to strengthen her imagination for flight, so that she can avoid the "numbness" which has blighted so much of his own life. Although Walker is vague about the end-point of Ruth's life in order to stress its open, indeterminate quality, she points out that it will be different from the failures meted out to other characters. Unlike her sisters Daphne and Ornette, who drift north, one to end up in a 'crazy house' and the other in a whorehouse, Ruth's movements will be directed by the sense of mission which Grange has given her to perform some great and Herculean task. Her active mind may be 'always in flight,' but it is endowed with purpose because it is always moving towards something, the creation of a Protean self. Unlike Brownfield, whose life becomes a circle of failure because he is content to relive his father's 'first' life.

A crucial phase of Ruth's development is her growing awareness of society as a dynamic process instead of a static hierarchy where everyone must fit into

his or her 'place.' Observing the nightly news, she becomes fascinated by "pictures of students marching" as they work for a more open and fluid society (Walker 201). Even in the Georgia backwater in which she has been raised there is dramatic evidence of meaningful change—voter registration, campaigns, interracial marriage, and the beginnings of integration. By the end of the novel, Ruth has been deeply stirred by the "Movement," which she feels will transform her world.

Although people like Brownfield and Judge Harry are hopeless cases because their rigid minds have been frozen by the feudal society in which they live, many people and social institutions are beginning to "thaw." Dynamic forces are at work; dissolving the stereotypes which have crippled people in the past, creating new possibilities for persons like Ruth. Although Walker, whose life was profoundly transformed by her participation in the Civil Rights Movement, does not provide us with a naïvely romantic view of personal and political growth. She believes that vast changes will occur if people have the courage and imagination to move toward these changes. The novel's sombre ending, which depicts the violence triggered by a failure of justice in a white-controlled system, reminds us that Ruth and her contemporaries are a long way from the fluid, open society which they seek. Walker stresses that they are at last moving in the right direction, and this is no small cause for hope. Like the author's own mother, to whom she dedicates the novel, Ruth can triumph where others have failed because she "made a way out of no way" (Walker 3).

The Third Life of Grange Copeland is centered in Walker's double vision, her penetrating awareness of the racist society that surrounds black life in the South and her desire to escape from that world. But she is tough-minded enough to realize that the Southern society she leaves is anything but healthy and would only trap her and poison the black life around her. In a world of severely limited options, therefore, she correctly chooses movement over stasis and open space instead of restrictive place. She knows it is her only way of making a "way" out of "no way." Committing herself to the ever-changing real world with all its difficulties, she discovers rich possibilities for growth. They will never completely satisfy her but make available to her the same liberation experienced by other heroic figures in American and Afro-American literature.

In *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Walker describes her vivid sense of participation in a dynamic tradition which associates human liberation and

growth with open movement. She argues that black literature is different from modern American literature, which is static in nature, because white American writers tended to end their books and their characters' lives as if there were no better existence for which to struggle. Whereas "the gloom of defeat is thick" in American literature (Walker, In Search 5). Generally, Black writers enable the hero to achieve some kind of larger freedom, partly because our literary tradition is based on the slave narratives, where escape for the body and freedom for the soul went together.

Walker's ambivalence toward the South is vividly dramatized. At times she warmly celebrates the Southern community and is intrigued by the thought of what continuity of place could mean to the consciousness of the emerging writer. But she also feels hemmed in by memories of her past which continue to plague her. Her seven years in Mississippi, which epitomizes the South for her, reduce her to a state which she describes as suicidal, and she leaves, resolving never to set foot in Mississippi again. Zora Neale Hurston, the Black writer Walker most admires, returned to the South late in life only to die of malnutrition and to be buried in an unmarked grave. Although the romantic side of Walker's temperament longs for a pastoral Southern world, a "garden" cultivated by people like her mother, her realistic impulses warn her that she will have to create her own "garden" in the space she creates for herself in her own life's journey.

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