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Alice Walker: An Interpretation of her Works

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ALICE WALKER

AN INTERPRETATION OF HER WORKS.

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The southern United States in the 60's civil rights movement found a young and innocent Alice Walker registering black voters. Always the idealist, she left her northern college to return south; she had said she felt isolated in Sarah Lawrence and was missing the vibrant and exciting movement stirring the black people of the South. Things like an awakening black populace do not happen but once in a lifetime, so she willingly spent many hot summer days doing the tedious, and seemingly unending work of a revolutionary. But, she realized the importance of this work. In her essay, "Duties of the Black Revolutionary Artist", Walker said,

> The real revolution is always concerned with the least glamorous stuff. With raising a reading level from second grade to third. With simplifying history and writing it down (or reciting it) for the old folks. With helping illiterates fill out food -stamp forms-for they must eat, revolution or not.
> (p.135, Gardens)

She knew that every single black voter was important. She knew that every story told by an old black man was important. She knew that every patch on a quilt was important. Alice Walker knew her people. She recognized the pulse of their life, and above all, she had a great pride in being numbered among them. She was a southern black woman and proud of it. She wanted to perpetuate this great pride and instill it into both the young and old of the South. Having lived in oppression for most of their lives, the elderly black community seemed unaware of the beauty in their daily existence. Everything that was included in their world had been degraded and shunned as being mere black trash. White society had always set the value standards, and

blacks had always failed miserably to meet these white values. Alice Walker thought that the young black children had to be saved from this cycle of black degradation. They had to be taught about the black culture, its traditions, its history, and its literature. If any true appreciation and continuation of black culture was to come about, the children had to be educated in it. Over a period of time the black culture had begun to be viewed as second rate, not worth spending time on, and definitely not worth recording. But then came Alice Walker. During the civil rights movement she was just another cog in the revolutionary wheel. Men like Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X were the leaders and reclaimers of the black world. They showed the world that black is beautiful, and more important, they showed America's blacks that black is beautiful. Alice Walker herself was very much influenced by King. She said in a 1972 address:

> "He gave us back our heritage. He gave us back our homeland; the bones and dust of our ancestors, who may now sleep within our caring and our hearing." (p.145 Gardens)

She was, like many other black Americans, heart broken when he was killed.

Today, in the 1980's, his message is being carried on, but this time through literature. Alice Walker can not continue his crusade through voter registration drives, marches on Washington, or moving "I have a dream" speeches, but she can do what she is best at-writing.

Her aims have not changed much since the 1960's but her method and emphasis have. Many of the political rights that were fought for in the sixties are now realities. So, politically, many of the black dreams have come true. But we still haven't seen a lot of black success. Why? I believe that the black community, though politically free, are not yet emotionally free. Alice Walker is carrying on King's crusade for black freedom, but she is dealing with emotional and psychological freedoms, and her weapon is her writing. Walker once said that the truest and most enduring impulse she has is simply to write, so she is armed with a strong, and for her a very comfortable, weapon. (p.9, Gardens.) Walker wants black Americans to reclaim their black heritage from white derision and possible extinction. They should wallow in all the rich black heritage that is theirs, rather than disclaim and hide from it. Finally, Walker wants black Americans to celebrate their blackness. For her this is the culmination of developing black freedom and black pride. Through her literature Walker expands on and propagates these themes.

Seeing the differences between blacks and whites has never been hard. In fact, it has been rather obvious that major distinctions existed, and many racist whites played on these differences to expound their anti-black feelings. But to acknowledge the fact that one is Black, without accompanying that feeling with regret and self-pity, is a thing quite new to many Black Americans. Once this acknowledgment, or self-realization, occurs, one is on the road to psychological freedom. For a black person, the first

step is to say, "Yes I am black. I am not white, or yellow or anything else. I am black and I have my own history and culture, of which I am proud."

In Ms. Walker's prize winning novel The Color Purple, the reader is placed in a rural southern black world. Many poor southern blacks live in conditions similar to Celie's, and live out their lives the same way as Mr., Celie, and the children do. Celie's life is spent on a small and poorly run farm. There is no running water, not even a well. Celie is forced to fetch water from a spring. For many white readers the setting of this novel is totally alien, but the black readers are saying, "Hey, I remember a little place like that". This is the initial stage of acknowledging blackness; for them, it is a sense of knowing and belonging. For once as readers, they can identify with the characters of a novel.

As the daughter of a Georgian sharecropper, Walker experienced the South. She experienced being a Negro, she experienced the poverty, the summer's heat, the dust on the road. She is rich in knowledge of the South. In her essay, "The Black Woman Writer And The Southern Experience", Walker says:

> There is a great deal of positive material I can draw from my "underprivileged" background. But they [her white critics] have never lived, as I have, at the end of a long road in a house that was faced by the edge of the world on one side and nobody for miles on the other. They have never experienced the magnificent quiet of a summer day when the heat is intense and one is so very thirsty, as one moves across the dusty cotton fields, that one learns forever that water is the essence of all life. (p.21, Gardens)

Walker writes from personal experience. She too, like many of her southern brothers and sisters, has had a hard childhood. But she tries to show the beauty in it all. One must accept the good with the bad. Rather than bemoan the fate of the southern black, Walker delights in the folklore, the way of life, and the experience. She is open to the experience-she acknowledges it and accepts it. But one of Walker's most positive attributes is that she sees all that is inherent in that which she acknowledges and reclaims: she does not just blindly accept it all, she criticizes it, challenges it, and calls for improvement. Despite talking at length about the simple pleasures, Walker does admit that it was not all fun, "Nor do I intend to romanticize the southern black country life. I can recall that I hated it, generally." (p.21, Gardens)

In The Color Purple, we find Celie looking through all of her hardships and seeing life's simple joys. Coerced and brow beaten, she still retains her inner calm and will to live. When going to visit her father, rather than worry about the potential anguish, she admires the scenery. This is a way to take care of oneself, and the reader sees that Celie is beginning to do just that: live with joy, not fear.

> Then all along the road there's Easter lilies and jonquils and daffodils and all kinds of little early wildflowers. Then us notice all the birds singing they little cans off, all up and down the hedge, that itself is putting out little yellow flowers smell like Virginia creeper." (p.164, Color Purple)

One of the joys of Ms. Walker's writings is that they are so very well balanced. She does not simply brush the pain and hardships

of the southern black life under the carpet. This would be foolish and would totally discredit her work. The critic, Martha J. McGowan, saw this quality in Walker's Meridian:

> For her [Walker], the humanity bred into her people by oppression, the capacity for ecstasy at the untouched core of their long resistance, and their ability to create beauty from their long resistance, and their ability to create beauty from their pain are as precious as the hope of a shared brotherhood as the future is to Camus' rebel. (p.74)

This acknowledgement of the black experience as a whole, with both good and bad included, is an excellent attribute of Walker's art. In her collection of poetry "Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems", Ms. Walker shares with us a rare moment of sadness in "For my sister Molly, who in the fifties." This poem relates the tale of one who accepted the in vogue view of black America, but failed to acknowledge her true blackness. By "in vogue" I mean the current trend of socially acceptable blackness. For example, the much exploited African connection with which Wangeroo is identifying. Ignoring the place from whence she came, and looking down upon her family and childhood with contempt, Molly decides not to return:

Who found another world
Another life with gentlefolk
Far less trusting
And moved and moved and changed
Her name
And sounded precise
When she spoke And frowned away
our sloppishness.

... For my sister Molly who in the fifties left us.
(p.16\17 Revolutionary Petunias)

Molly is a symbol of the fake pride that Walker so much abhors. False loves and incorrect reclamations are not what Walker calls for. She stresses this again in her short story "Everyday Use", where Walker is highly critical of Dee (Wangeroo) and her false appreciation of her mother's quilts. She wants genuine love of one's heritage and not just the projection of a fake image. Walker questions whether adopting the black African clothing and norms is just as fake as adopting white norms. Here is a sign of Walker's true powers as a critic, as she spares no one from her cynicism, not even her own people. Walker tried to illustrate the unhappiness and lack of stability that rejecting one's black heritage brings. The rural life that Molly leaves in the poem "For my sister Molly who in the fifties left us" (p.16\17, Revolutionary Petunias) ,lacks the big-city excitement that she had recently become accustomed to. She now "frowned on wasp bites", corrected their English and had no time for the mundane existence in the country. But one sees that she is not happy. Has she acknowledged her blackness if she rejected her family and accepted the slick, fashionable version of black America?

Another issue raised by Walker is that of nationality. Because claiming America means acknowledging the white traditions and racist views, should a black acknowledge his country, his race, or both? The critic C. Lynn Munro, has this to say of the dilemma:

> This double-consciousness, this 'sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others' ... produces two warring factions: to be American and a black person. The struggle between these

> two unreconciled strivings threatens to plunge the Black American, in particular the Black artist, into a sort of half-way house.
> (p.192, Journal of Afro-American Issues)

Walker struggles with this issue, unsure if being black is enough, or if one should acknowledge a world outside of the black world. Should a black person bond with a white because of common nationality, even if one has long oppressed the other? Accepting the help of white workers in registering black voters in the Civil Rights movement is an issue she deals with in Meridian. In this novel Walker chooses to be a black American, not losing touch with either entity. Meridian's acceptance of Lynne's help with voter registration shows this link with white Americans, but in a black context. Walker acknowledges that being a black American does pose its problems-one of which is interracial rape.

Walker explores the issue of interracial rape at length. We find it in her novel Meridian and also in her story "Advancing Luna And Ida B. Wells". The issue confronts her both as a black person and as a woman-the two pillars of her being. White rape of black slaves is well documented during the ante-bellum period, but is rarely referred to today. After the civil war, and to a lesser extent today, it is the cry of the white world that the savage black buck is raping their women. The amount of truth in this statement remains to be seen, but it is the principle of the accusation that plagues Walker. As a woman she should defend the victim, regardless of color, but as a black, she should defend her brother against the power of the white woman. So which side does she acknowledge? In "Advancing Luna and Ida B. Wells",

Walker tells of her anger and resentment toward her white friend, who had been raped by a black man. She felt betrayed that this white woman had put to shame one of her own, a black brother. But she also felt disgust that a man had raped a woman. The two things that she acknowledged and identified herself with, were in opposition. Here Walker finally favors her race over her sex, saying a white person's power over blacks, be that person man or women is still enormous. She chooses to side with her black brother, finding it impossible to reconcile herself to the power that white women have over all black men:

> That her power over my life was exactly the power her word on rape had over the lives of Black men, over all Black men, whether they were guilty or not, and therefore over my whole people.
> (p.97, <u>You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down</u>.)

No one can say that Ms. Walker does not explore every possible consequence resulting from acknowledging blackness. She wants her people to acknowledge that they are black, but she also wants to point out the myriad complications and implications resulting from that fact. Walker picks up this complex issue again in <u>Meridian</u>, where we find that she sides with the woman in that instance. In this story Meridian and Lynne maintain their friendship despite the trials of interracial rape. Walker does not appear to have resolved this issue fully for herself, and so one cannot take a lesson from her. But what she does do is to present the issue, and show both sides of it in fair light. Since the short story "Advancing Luna and Ida B. Wells" is the more recent of the two, one could conjecture that this is Walker's current

stance (i.e. claim one's race over one's sex), but I do not believe that Walker has finished with this topic yet. I think that her readers will hear more from Walker on this controversial issue.

The stereotype of the American family is white, nuclear, and patriarchal. But anyone can see through Walker's treatment of the family in The Color Purple, that she prefers other alternatives. Walker points to the long existing black alternative. She wants black families to acknowledge that they can be different. They need not be white, nuclear and patriarchal. Walker seeks to reassure the black world that their choice of family structure is a viable one, and they need not strive towards the white norm. Harpo and Sophia are perfectly happy with Sophia at the head. But because the pervasive white society tells Harpo it should be otherwise, he tries to assume power. Harpo's attempts to eat more and more so he can beat her up, prove to be in vain. Ultimately they acknowledge the fact that things were fine as they were, and they return to that arrangement. Walker had reversed the traditional roles, as a challenge to the norm, and had shown that one can have a successful relationship with alternative arrangements. Miss Celie's final happiness comes when she is living in an extended family of friends, lovers and relatives. Walker's message here is clear: acknowledge that a black family, with its loose and somewhat haphazard arrangements, may often be as sustaining and supportive as the white family.

Alice Walker has taken her readers through the first step of the journey; acknowledgement and self acceptance of one's blackness. Accepting the similarities and the differences, and being content with these is a major step forward to psychological freedom for the black person.

The next step toward black freedom is to reclaim all that is black. Once one has acknowledged all that is of inherent importance to the black world, the next step is to take it back. Many black people, especially during the Civil Rights movement, became so embittered and frustrated with their lot, that they just turned their back on everything southern. There were too many bad memories of the southern black experience. Too much oppression, too much racism, just too much. Many fled to the cities in the North where they hoped life would be better. The life there shone like green grass in the distance-surely a black would have a better life up North. Unfortunately, most of the emigrant blacks lived in the inner-city ghettos which were most likely worse then the run-down sharecropper's farm in the South. What Walker illuminates is the fact that despite all the bad attributes of the South, there are many good attributes also. She is afraid that too many blacks have thrown the good out with the bad. But ever the optimist, Walker claims that it is never too late to reclaim one's heritage. She praises the black southerners, the black lifestyle, the black dialect, the black family. She recommends, indeed urges, black Americans to take back what is theirs. They should not desert the South, and leave that lush countryside

to others. They should not abandon all that history and culture that has been passed down from generation to generation. What sort of people would turn their back on their own heritage? What sort of people would they become if they fled from their traditions and lifestyle? Walker tries to raise the black consciousness about the importance of reclaiming and appreciating what is theirs.

Of all the components of black America, Walker is probably strongest about reclaiming the southern black American experience. The South, for her, holds some mystical appeal. It calls her back over and over. In the South are her roots, her heritage, her history, and she is not going to forget that. In the short story, "A Sudden Trip Home in the Spring," Sarah Davis returns home to the South from her northern white college to bury her father. Never having got along well with her father, she at first rebels against the whole situation, rejecting all her childhood memories. Slowly, through the congenial understanding of her grandfather and brother, she is brought around to accepting her roots, and with it her own personal liberation. Her artistic creativity returns as she re-establishes her links with the South, and she begins a sculpture of her grandfather. The critic Mary Helen Washington says of the story that black women are,

> engaged in the search for meaning in their roots and traditions. As they struggle to reclaim their past and re-examine their relationship to the black community... (p.454, Contemporary Literary Criticism)

Walker herself needs this important link with the South for her own creativity, as she draws from the richness of her upbringing to help her create her art. Reclaiming one's roots leads to happiness and personal fulfillment.

We find this same theme running through Meridian, where she is always drawn back to the South, to her people, to the hot, dry, dusty days of Georgia. Meridian finds peace in the bosom of the South. While living in a northern black ghetto with Lynne, Walker makes it obvious that they both yearn for the South. Watching television in a diminutive New York apartment, Meridian and Lynne draw together in their yearning for the South:

> There was a scene on the television of a long, shady riverbank and people-mothers and fathers, children, grandparents-almost elegantly fishing, and here the face, close up, of a beautiful young black man with eyes as deceptively bright as dying stars... it (his eyes) sought to understand, to encompass everything, and the struggle to live honorably and understand everything at the same time...had given it a weary serenity that was so entrenched and stable it could be mistaken for stupidity. It made them homesick. (p.173\4, Meridian)

And they both return to the South, maybe not to ideal and perfected lives, but at least to a place they can call home. In the South they both receive the warm sensation of belonging.

Walker describes the aching pull of the South excellently in the closing lines of her poem "View From Rosehill Cemetery: Vicksburg." She is speaking of her childhood memories, and of those who live close to the land in the South:

> Here we are not quick to disavow
> the pull of field and wood
> and stream;
> we are not quick to turn upon our dream.
> (p.25, Revolutionary Petunias)

The joy in Walker's call for reclamation of the South is that she does not paint an unreal picture. When Meridian heads south she still finds the bigotry and racism that was always there. But here, as she works to improve the society, she can say that it is her own society that she is working for. Walker does not turn a blind eye to the backwood country people of the South. They too should be reclaimed. Walker helps her reader along by adding a comic, but not jeering, touch to it all. She makes fun of her own experiences. She seems to enjoy remembering and reclaiming her own southern childhood. "Baptism" is at once a poem of reclamation, memory, and amusement-and all in good cheer:

> They dunked me in the creek;
> a tiny brooklet.
> Muddy, gooey with rotting leaves,
> a greenish mold floating;
> definable.
> for love it was. For love of God
> at seven. All in white
> With God's mud ruining my snowy
> socks and his bullfrog spoors
> gluing up my face. (p.23, Revolutionary Petunias)

This tongue-in-cheek appreciation of the South is what makes it all worthwhile. Reclaim the good experiences, and enjoy the oddities.

Reclamation of the black art is another of Walker's vital themes. The suppression of the black experience leads to much of the finer works of southern black art being lost in the passage of time. If not for the persistence of Walker, the genius of Zora Neale Hurston would never have come to light. Walker saw the joy apparent in Hurston's works, all of which are set in the

heart of the southern black experience. At the turn of the century, Hurston had already fully reclaimed the South. Because she grew up in an all-black town, she did not look at the world through white eyes, and as a result her characters are immersed into the depths of the black world. Through Hurston's works, particularly her recording of southern folk black tales, or "big old lies" as she called them, the black community were able to reclaim the folklore that is so important for the richness and artistic depth of any culture. Walker follows in Hurston's footsteps by reclaiming her for contemporary southern blacks. Walker tells us that when she discovered Hurston's "Of Mules and Men" she immediately shared her joy with her family:

> Very regular people from the south, rapidly forgetting their southern cultural inheritance in the suburbs and ghettos of Boston and New York, they sat around reading the book themselves, listening to me read the book, listening to each other read the book, and a kind of paradise was regained. For what Zora's book did was this: it gave them back all the stories they had forgotten or of which they had grown ashamed (told to us years ago by our parents and grandparents-not one of whom could not tell a story to make you weep, or laugh) and showed how marvelous, and indeed, priceless, they are.
> (p.84\5, Gardens)

Walker's discovery of Hurston sees to be almost as important to her as her discovery of Martin Luther King Jr., only with Hurston it was a private and very personal discovery. Walker had believed in the quality of her education in the seemingly liberal Sarah Lawrence College. She had read widely of varied women poets and writers. Yet it was only later, with her accidental discovery of Hurston, and subsequent black women writers, that

she realized how racially unbalanced her education had been. Walker had finally found "the perfect book" where a vivacious and audacious woman was celebrating the black world with an infectious joy. Walker says of her first reading of Hurston:

> This was my first indication of the quality I feel is most characteristic of Zora's work: racial health; a sense of black people as complete, complex undiminished human beings. (p.85, Gardens)

Hurston, in herself, was a celebration. And today she should be claimed into the black literary tradition and celebrated. Walker has brought Hurston back from the brink of extinction, and now presents her people with a challenge of regaining and retaining a sense of pride in there own culture.

> We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children and if necessary, bone by bone. (p.92, Gardens)

Walker's search for Hurston's grave was a personal act of reclamation and celebration. It was symbolic of a journey toward full acceptance of a black heroine. The words Walker uses to describe her discovery of Hurston's grave, in an unmarked, overgrown and snake infested graveyard, still fills me with emotion. Walker's joy seems so real; her pilgrimage is over.

> 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 emotion one feels. ...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. (p.116, Gardens)

Not only does Ms. Walker reclaim the heros and heroines of the black world, she also reclaims all the little folk heros and folk tales of the countryside. Some of the tales, such as "Strong Horse Tea", are sad and somewhat depressing. But these should also be reclaimed. I am glad that Walker does this, because too much cheer would seem unreasonable. This tale is of a poor, unmarried and ugly woman who tries to cure her ailing child. Waiting for the "white doctor," (the "real doctor") proves unsuccessful, so her friend Sarah suggests some strong horse tea. Strong horse tea is an old southern euphemism for horse urine. Walker paints a pathetic picture of this poor, sorry and ignorant woman, desperate to save her child. The only hope is an old southern cure, of questionable value:

> Ankle deep in the slippery mud of the pasture and freezing in her shabby wet coat, she ran home to give the still warm horse tea to her baby Snooks. (p.98, In Love And Trouble)

Although this pathetic image can only evoke sorrowful emotions, it is none the less important as part of the southern black experience. Walker is accepting this woman as she is, without the need to try to educate or socialize her into the accepted norms of society. One must accept her as she is; she has lived her life this way, and most likely will not change now.

Walker herself celebrates the folk tales that she learned from her mother, and from other black women in the South. In Walker's short story "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" we are treated to a delightful story of old witchcraft. Hannah Kemhuff was refused food at a food line during the depression, despite the

obvious need of her children, by a cruel white woman named Miss Sadler. Hannah's children later died of starvation and she kept this memory with her until she was near her death bed. This is when Hannah seeks revenge. Tantie Rosie is a woman rich in knowledge of the old ways, old potions and old wisdom. She promises Hannah that her recurring dream of Miss Sadler's cruel eyes will be removed forever:

> "Don't worry about it, my sister," said Tante Rosie with gentleness. "By the grace of the Man-God, have use of many powers. Powers given me buy the Great One herself. If you can no longer bear the eyes of the enemy that you see in your dreams the Man-God, who speaks to me for the Great Mother of Us All, will see that those eyes are eaten away. If the hands of your enemy have struck you they can be made useless.
> (p.68, In Love And Trouble)

The same holds true for Celie, the heroine of The Color Purple. Beneath all the apparent ugly ignorance, there is an honest heart that yearns to love and be free. Walker stresses this fact when Celie finally stands up for herself in front of Mr. and exclaims that she too is a person of worth:

> I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here.
> (p.187, Color Purple)

Celie knows her worth, and with her reclamation of all that is hers, and all that had always been hers, she finally becomes a woman. She arrives as an individual once she claims her rights. It took Celie a long time to realize her own worth, but once she acknowledged the fact, with Shug's aid, she goes about regaining her self-worth with zeal; Celie heads off to Memphis to set up a life on her own.

Walker's use of the black dialect as a medium in some of her novels is particularly apparent in The Color Purple. Substandard, uneducated, ungrammatical are but a few of the derogatory terms applied to the language of the poor southern black. It most definitely is not the Queen's English, but it took someone like Walker to see that it is not a second-rate language either. As spoken by the man on the street, her readers would probably have difficulty in understanding this dialect. But Walker modifies it, highlights the good attributes, illuminates the art, and arrives at a highly literary and colorful rendition of the original. I believe that Walker uses the dialect primarily for her black readers. The need to reassure the black community that they should not strive towards a white ideal, and that their own black culture is filled with beauty, is her goal. In Walker's essay "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience", she talks of this. Many expect writers and poets to come out of scholarly and well educated stock. Walker shows that this need not be neccessarily so. She herself is well-educated, but her heroine, Zora Neale Hurston, certainly was not. Walker says:

> One wants to write poetry that is understood by one's people, not by the Queen of England. Of course, should she be able to profit by it too, so much the better, but since that is not likely, catering to her tastes would be a waste of time. (p.18, Gardens)

Here we find Walker being witty, cynical and practical all at once.

Although Walker does use this dialect widely throughout The Color Purple, I do not believe that she wants every black American

to suddenly adopt this dialect. All she is intending to do is to accept those who presently use it, and appreciate their language. Walker reverts to standard English in her other works, as she realizes that this is the standard medium of her country.

But Walker can still see the tenacious joy of her people in their colorful and vibrant dialect. The personable nature reflects what she always said about the poor black southerners and "their ability to create beauty from their pain."(p.18, Gardens) Walker's unique artistic talent and flair with the language brings it to life. She transforms it into poetry, highlighting all the magical idioms and intonations. Her taut and exacting command of the dialect, plus her personal will to show this dialect with all its beauty and vitality intact, has resulted in a novel with such flair and originality that it won both a Pulitzer prize and an American book award. Walker instills so many vivid images into the language that one can immediately create an exacting image of Celie and her life:

> When a woman marry she spose to keep a decent house and a clean family. Why, wasn't nothing to come here in the winter time and all these children have colds, they have flue, they have direar, they have newmonya, they have worms, they have the chill and fever. They hungry. They hair ain't comb. They too nasty to touch.
> (p.27, Color Purple)

Not all southern blacks speak like Celie. But Walker is trying to expose this part of their culture to them. This may not be the norm. This may not even be correct. But it is black, and it belongs to them. It a part of their heritage as black people, and they should appreciate it.

While one can not truly categorize or generalize an entire population, certain stereotypes do exist. With the Black community many of these date back to the days of slavery when the black man was considered of low intelligence and good only for his brawn, and the black woman was considered for her childbearing abilities plus her usefulness in the fields. The male buck was considered mindless, for the most part, and this stereotype ran right up through Klu Klux Klan days. The female of the species was never heard, and good for only one thing. Low intelligence, filth, squalor all were considered part of the black world. But today Walker tries to dispel these degrading and largely false stereotypes. The Color Purple is an entire novel about these poorly educated, squalid people, so typical of the stereotype. As such one would expect them to be ignorant and worthless, and certainly not worthy material for a novel. Celie can barely read and write, typical of her stereotype, yet Walker claims her strong personality and good nature as a focal point of the novel. This bursts the stereotype wide open as Walker sees beyond it. Mr. is an overbearing, domineering buck, typical of the black male stereotype, yet Walker claims his final act of humanity and reconciliation as his saving grace in the novel. This again challenges the stereotype. Walker sees these easily stereotyped faults, but shows that there are good attributes in her characters also. They each have to go through a period of learning and transformation, before emerging with their positive attributes out-shining their stereotyped negative attributes. This process is all-important before

one can reclaim them. By the time Celie and Mr. are nearing old age, and the end of the novel, the reader views them very differently from their original impression. Celie had been perceived as a ignorant and down trodden woman, and Mr. was an insensitive brute. One of the closing scenes of The Color Purple finds them sitting on Celie's front porch talking and sewing together. They are sensitive, emotional and caring human beings. They have escaped the stereotype, and Walker celebrates this.

The aspect of Walker's black pride that first struck me was her almost idolatry love of Martin Luther King Jr.. To Walker, he appeared like a saviour on the fuzzy black and white television of her youth. He was to her everything a black man should be. He was without flaw:

> He was The One, The Hero, The One Fearless Person for Whom we had waited. I hadn't even realized before that we had been waiting for Martin Luther King Jr., but we had. And I knew it for sure when my mother added his name to the list of people she prayed for every night.
> (p.144, Gardens)

It seems almost unnatural to revere someone as much as this, but what Walker says is true-King did give black Americans back their heritage. This should be celebrated, since what King did was not exactly an everyday occurrence. Today this celebration is continuing through many different channels, one of which is Walker's writing.

Malcolm X, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Rebecca Jackson, Jean Toomer are but a few of the heros and heroines of Walker's black world. She seems to realize that a culture needs a literary tradition, mysterious folklore and noted heros and

heroines and above all, role models. What Walker calls for, now that the process of reclamation has occurred, is to realize just how good and how rich all of this is, and to celebrate it. Celebrate that there once was a great black man called Martin Luther King Jr.. Celebrate that there is a wealth of excellent black literature to be found in the works of Zora Neale Hurston. Celebrate the writings of Jean Toomer. Celebrate the quilts made by the southern black women. Celebrate the old traditions and remedies which enrich the black culture.

In her short stories, in her celebration of Hurston, in her encouragement of pride, we see the perpetuation and celebration of historical and literary traditions. Walker sees these folk tales as things of worth and beauty and makes use of them. The critic, Trudier Harris, saw this evident in Walker's works and says:

> A close look at the fiction, especially the shorter pieces, of Alice Walker reveals that she employs folklore for purposes of defining characters and illustrating relationships between them as well as for plot development. (p.117,BALF)

We see Walker putting the folklore that she has spoken so highly of to use in her fiction. Walker's appreciation of, and outright celebration of, quilt making is a joy to hear. It does seem as if this tedious and skillful craft never received the praise it should. Yet quilts are works of love, crafted from bits of seemingly useless fabrics, and sewn together with meticulous care. It represents the work and bonding between black women, and Walker feels that as a symbol of this, quilting deserves to be

celebrated. In her short story "Everyday use", Walker is very clear about her appreciation of this timeless craft. She celebrates the woman at home, who labors over the quilt, and she celebrates its artistic and its functional aspects. Dee, one of the main characters in this story, appears horrified that her sister might be so foolish as to actually use a quilt:

> "Maggie can't appreciate these quilts!" she said. "She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use."
> (p.53, In Love And Trouble)

The irony rings clear, as Walker has delineated what is celebration and what is ostentation. For Maggie, using these quilts on her bed would be a joyous celebration of the work, skill and time that went into their creation. Dee's wish, to hang them on her wall, would be a false celebration, a false show of pride. Walker is quick to condemn those who are proud only of what is fashionable to be proud of. Walker is quick to cut down any false appreciations or appearances. Wangero, also known as Dee, wants her mother's quilts desperately, but for all the wrong reasons. Engrossed in a chic, trendy blackness, Dee can not seem to see get through to the real, pure blackness of her mother and sister. She changes her name:

> "No, Mama," she says. "not Dee, Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo!"
> "What happened to 'Dee' ?" I wanted to know.
> "She's dead," Wangero said. "I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me."
> "You know as well as me you was named after your Aunt Dicie."
> (p.57, In Love And Trouble)

Rather than reclaim and celebrate what is hers, Dee is celebrating the chic aspect of blackness. This in itself, is not wrong, but

one should not reject one's true roots and traditions, in favor of these fashionable, and perhaps precarious roots. Walker dislikes this ostentatious show of blackness.

The emphasis on the quilt making, as an unglamorous, slow, female preoccupation, is discussed by Pierce and Baker in their critique of Walker's story. They claim that quilting is a community oriented skill, and much under-estimated craft. They also call for a new definition of art, and what should be included in the realms of art. They consider quilting a worthy candidate for inclusion:

> Art is juxtaposed with everyday use in Walker's short story and the fire Goddess Dee, who has achieved literacy only to "burn us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know" is revealed as a perpetuation of institutional theories of aesthetics. (p.78)

Walker gives everyone a new perspective on the accepted norms. She repeatedly pulls her readers up short in their attitudes and expectations. Dee, a.k.a. Wangero, is criticized. One's average view of a poor uneducated black woman is challenged-Celie is the heroine in The Color Purple. Through all of these fictitious literary characters Walker speaks to her readers and asks them to reappraise their perceptions and stereotyped views of blacks. Walker calls for only a truthful and honest celebration of the southern black experience; she abhors falseness.

Walker sees artistic freedom becoming unbound once one does reclaim and one does celebrate the South. I think the story "A sudden Trip Home In The Spring" may be partly autobiographical, because Walker herself, although not living in the South, does

take mental trips home to the South for inspiration, revelations, and healing. Sarah, the heroine in this story, finally overcomes her artistic block, and finally is able to sculpt her grandfather, but only after she had returned South for her father's funeral. Back in her northern college, Sarah says to herself:

> "I am a woman of the world. I have buried my father, and shall soon know how to make my grandpa up in stone." (p.137 You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down)

Walker said she wrote The Color Purple in northern California. This was the only place her characters would visit her because it reminded them of Georgia:

> Eventually we found a place in northern California we could afford and that my characters liked. And no wonder: it looked a lot like the town in Georgia most of them were from,...it also bore a slight resemblance to the African village in which one of them, Nettie, was a missionary. Seeing the sheep, the cattle, and the goats, smelling the apples and the hay, one of my characters, Celie, began, haltingly, to speak. (p.357, Gardens)

For Walker southerners need full appreciation of the South to ensure their heritage. There is a need to celebrate it, not ignore it.

In a majority of her literature we find an almost indescribable, but all-pervasive joy in living, despite the varying traumas her characters go through. Meridian Hill lives a life of constant peril and with little financial or emotional reward. Yet she still had great respect for her own life, and lives it with an inner strength that is most definitely commendable and worth celebrating. Walker says of her life:

> The respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably

not her own. (p.188, Meridian)

Martha J. McGowan, the critic, also felt this indefatigable joy in life in Walker's Meridian. She could sense the joy in life that the characters, although oppressed, still felt and still celebrated. Life was a precious thing that was not to be wasted, and from which much happiness could be derived:

> For her [Meridian Hill], the humanity bred into her people by oppression, the capacity for ecstasy at the untouched core of their long resistance, and their ability to create beauty from their pain are as precious as the hope of a shared brotherhood as the future is to Camus' rebel. (p.211, Critique)

I believe Walker has a dual aim in her literary career: one is to help raise the black consciousness and the other is to help raise the female consciousness. It is not as if Alice Walker is the only enlightened soul in the black female realm, nor that all blacks and women are oppressed, but Walker feels, and justifiably I believe, that a guiding and inspirational voice is never lost in these newly awakened peoples. The women's movement, and the black Civil Rights movement, are both relatively recent social developments, and although well established today in many fields, there is still much room for improvement. Alice Walker devotes herself to their self-expression and to their developing independence. She herself, is probably one of the best models.

Acknowledging that one is a woman should not a difficult task. But acknowledgement of all that is encompassed by womanhood is another issue altogether. The womb is an organ unique to women. Many women see this as a curse and as a chain which ties

them down. Walker wants to change this perception of a woman's body. She wants women to acknowledge that giving birth is not an easy task, but it is a wonderful experience, and unique to women. Speaking of the birth of her own daughter in her short story "One Child Of One's Own", Walker says:

> What is true about giving birth is...that it is miraculous. It might even be the one genuine miracle in life. The miracle of nonbeing, death, certainly pales, I would think, beside it. So to speak. ...Men have every right to be envious of the womb. I'm envious of it myself, and I have one. (p.367, Gardens)

Walker speaks of the pains involved in being a woman too. In dispute with her mother over the pain involved with childbirth, and the many myths, or "Women's Folly" as Walker calls them, the conversation goes as follows:

> "The other reason I will never have another child out of this body is because having a child hurts, even more than a toothache... and it changes the body."
> Well,there are several responses from the general supply of Women's Folly my mother could have chosen to answer this. She choose them all.
> "That little pain," she scoffed (although, caught in a moment of weakness, she has let slip that during my very own birth the pain was so severe she could not speak.)"That pain is over before you know it." That is response number one. Number two is, "The thing about that kind of pain is that it does a funny thing to a woman (Uh-oh, I thought, this is going to be the Women's Folly companion to the women-sure-are-funny-creatures stuff.)...." (p.365, Gardens)

Walker's amusing look at this issue helps one to acknowledge the female body, with all the joys and pains intact. As is typical of Walker, she deals with the issue from both sides, and shows women both the good and the bad. A woman's body and powers of regeneration are positive attributes, but one must be able to accept the responsibilities and limitations with this also. A

full awareness of this brings with it a power to women. Walker calls for this power to be reclaimed.

Women have a different perspective on life than men. They have different life experiences, different hopes and different expectations, yet usually we all experience the same life. Walker is not truly rebelling against the current male dominated world, rather she is trying to develop an awareness of the woman's world that also exists. She wants people of both sexes to acknowledge that there is a difference, and that this doesn't make either any less valuable. Walker, in my opinion, is trying to show that women do not have to accept or live by the male perception of the world. Women should develop their own views and outlooks and accept these as valid and worthwhile guidelines for their lives. Walker urges women to get to know themselves first, and then get to know men.

In The Color Purple we see an extraordinary amount of the world through a woman's eyes, and not a man's. Celie is treated by Mr. as if she was a cook, a babysitter, a maid, a sexual object, in fact she is seen as just about everything other than as a woman and a human. It almost seems as if being a woman negates being a human. Celie's wedding day is the very epitome of Mr.'s non-acceptance of Celie as a woman and a person. She has to clean the house, cut the children's hair, make the dinner, and then go to bed with him.

> So after I bandage my head best I can and cook dinner-they have a spring, not a well, and a wood stove look like a truck-I start trying to untangle hair. They only six and eight and they cry. They scream. They cuse me of murder. By

> ten o'clock I'm done.They cry theirselves to sleep. But I don't cry. I lay there thinking of Nettie while he on top of me, wondering if she safe. (p.11, Color Purple)

It takes Shug Avery to show Celie that she is a woman of worth. Celie and Shug, during their developing friendship clean, cook, sew, and do all sorts of "menial women's tasks" together. Walker wants us to acknowledge that these things are not inherently bad, or lowly. These tasks have long been socially relegated to women. Women do have a genetic affinity to housework, nor do men have a genetic abhorrence towards it. But since we do live in a male dominated society, and housework was perceived as below the male standards, it was seen as trivial and of no real importance. Walker challenges this, and shows through her writing that these domestic skills are of valuable worth. Celie finally gains her independence when she acknowledges and uses her sewing skills as a functional, profitable and worthwhile skill. Mr. is finally content when he is making shirts to match the pants that Celie is making.

Acknowledging that women are human, ridiculous though this may seem, is an issue in many of Walker's works. Walker tries to highlight the fact that many people, men in particular, perceive women only as sex objects or house managers. Women need to become aware of their many potential talents, and their present oppression, in order for them to reach the heights to which they are capable. Acknowledgement of oppression is a vital part of this process.

Nikki Giovanni, an excellent poet and admirer of Walker, said of Walker's crusade to make women aware of their own oppression:

"I welcome the love Alice so painfully shares."

The pain she refers to is that which is bound to come with the upheaval that taking a new look at oneself and one's surroundings brings. But the need for this is strong. The need to acknowledge women's present situation is urgent.

Stereotypical female roles are very prevalent in the world today. Women are often seen as Mother, Lover, Giver, and so forth; all of which are giving roles. Women support men in many instances, in the family being the most noted example. We see how Mr. declines in cleanliness, hygiene and health once Celie leaves him to care for himself. Actually being a mother, wife, lover, what have you, is not bad in itself. In fact women function very well in a loving, nurturing environment. The point Walker tries to get across is that this need not be the only environment in which a woman can operate. Women should be given a choice. Men are not the only ones who need love and nurturing. Women need it too, and very often they have to settle for with all give and no take. Walker calls on women to acknowledge that they too have needs, and these should be met. Meridian is one of Walker's finer works, and in it Walker lives up to her reputation of tackling controversial subjects head on. As Lynn Munro said in the Spring Black American Literary Forum of 1977:

> As her published works have repeatedly shown, Alice Walker has never shrunk from controversy. (p.74)

Meridian Hill is a woman who broke away from her stereotype. She chose the life of a revolutionary over the norm-the standard housewife and mother role-and confused all the men around her because she was independent and different. Truman feels a deep, and almost maternal love towards Meridian. One of the reasons that nothing concrete comes of their relationship is because of her atypical lifestyle, and the difficulty he has with coming to terms with it. This is where Walker shows some of the trials involved with not being a part of society's stereotype. But one must not omit to acknowledge the final conclusion of this story, where Meridian has atoned for the guilt she had been feeling about her alternate lifestyle. Meridian ends on a positive note, showing that Walker knows that the path is an not easy one, but it is one that should be traveled.

Walker shows both the positive and the negative sides to living outside the stereotype. Meridian's mother lived her life blindly servile and loyal to her stereotypical role. It was evident that she hated it, but she seemed to be too lost and unaware of alternatives to do anything about it:

> Her mother's life was a sacrifice. A blind, enduring, stumbling-though with dignity (as much was possible under the circumstances)-through life. She did not seem to understand much beyond what happened in her own family, in the neighborhood, and in her church. She did not take extreme positions on anything, unless unreasonably provoked over a long period. Then she spluttered out her rage in barely coherent complaints against-but what had her mother complained about? (p.77, Meridian)

Meridian feels alienated from her own mother because she can not

live her life locked within this stereotype. She had experienced marriage and childbirth, but had felt the need to follow a different road. This choice of an alternative should be readily available, and not the cause of guilt. But we find Meridian acknowledging the fact that in her day, her choice will invariably bring rejection and guilt. When she goes away to college, she enjoys her alternative lifestyle: "She had felt blessed that first year at Saxon." (p.93, Meridian) She was becoming involved in various civil rights activities, and enjoying her freedom, limited though it was. But she also feels cut off from the mainstream of women, her sisters, her support. Martha J. McGowan wrote a very insightful review of Meridian in which she says:

> She [Meridian] feels cut off from an ancestral line of black women, who represent to her a life-fostering force of black spirituality. The thought of killing for a revolution has brought Meridian inevitability to reflect upon her own identity and purpose as a woman who has rejected black motherhood. (p.193, Critique.)

Walker shows women locked in their stereotypes, shows alternatives, but also warns of the potential trials and tribulations associated with breaking this new ground. Walker doesn't blame men directly for the psychological stresses and strains imposed upon these women who have acknowledged the present status and have chosen an alternative, rather she sees the whole of society as the culprit. Women should acknowledge that men can oppress, but it is women who need to free themselves or they will have only themselves to blame. Walker is not the first to notice this, in fact she gives a lot of credit to Jean Toomer, the nineteenth century poet. He wandered the South and saw clearly the trap that women

were in. In Walker's monumental essay, "In Search Of Our Mother's Gardens" she talks with reverence of Toomer:

> In the still heat of the post-Reconstruction South, this is how they [women] seemed to Jean Toomer: exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey, toiling away their lives in an era, a century, that did not acknowledge them, except as "the mule of the world."
> ...They forced their minds to desert their bodies and their striving spirits sought to rise, like frail whirlwinds from the hard red clay. And when those frail whirlwinds fell, in scattered particles, upon the ground,no one mourned. (p.232)

Acknowledging that women have needs as human beings is another realization that Walker tries to bring to light. Escape from the all-giving, and nurturing stereotype is often necessary to bring this forcefully to light. If women do not have an outlet for their energy, which is fulfilling for their individual needs, they will become stifled and become bitter in their frustration. In Walker's short story "Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?" we find a scenario where a woman's creative urges are being killed by the power of her stereotype and her husband.

> Every time he tells me how peculiar I am for wanting to write stories he brings up having a baby or going shopping, as if these things are the same. Just something to occupy my time.
> "If you have time on your hands," he said today,"why don't you go shopping in that new shop in town."
> I went. I bought six kinds of face cream, two eyebrow pencils, five nightgowns and a longhaired wig. Two contour sticks and a pot of gloss for my lips.
> And all the while I was grieving over my last story. Outlined which is as far as I take stories now-but dead in embryo.
> My hand stilled by cowardice, my heart the heart of a slave. (p.15, In Love And Trouble)

Again and again we find Walker urging women to reassess their lives and open themselves to the opportunities now available. In

The Color Purple Celie was never identified as an individual, outside of her relationship with another, until she finally saw her situation and her alternatives, plus had the courage to choose. Her final escape from her stereotypical existence comes with an unorthodox lesbian affair and the unorthodox leaving of her husband. She finally acknowledges the fact that her independence comes with her breaking out of the stereotype of a timid, domiciled wife. Walker doesn't ignore the joy some women find in being a mother and a provider, but she offers choices. She herself says she finds pleasure living a quiet, domestic life. Talking of her father she writes:

> He would have grown
> to admire
> the woman I've become:
> cooking, writing, chopping wood,
> staring into the fire. (p.33, Horses)

Walker's aim, in my opinion, is the alleviation of psychological oppression. Walker tries to reach this goal through the heroines she talks of in her work. We find Celie finally making that move to independence. We see Walker's great love of Zora Neale Hurston; and Walker herself seeks to create this bond between herself and her sisters. At times her race is paramount, and at times her sex is. But when she speaks to women, I believe that she speaks to all women, even though she has reserved that special bond with other black women. Grace Paley describes this in her critique of Walker's works in the Esquire magazine.

> Though she must speak primarily to women of color because of their longing to hear from her-from one another, they're so intense and loving-she does speak to me too. Probably that is because her work, which begins in anger and pain,

> accumulates energy and ends so often with human possibility. (p.85)

Here we find that women acknowledging one another creates a special strength and energy that Walker calls on us to tap. Acknowledging this fact has lead different women down different paths. The power of a bond between two women is another aspect of womanhood that Walker seeks to highlight and acknowledge. In Meridian the bond between the two women, Meridian, a black woman, and Lynne, a white woman, undergoes many devastating blows, yet it survives. They overcome racial issues, culture differences, and the issue of a man's divided love. The time spent sharing an apartment in New York together, recovering from the death of Lynne's daughter Camara, and a traumatic time with the civil rights movement, was a time when two tired women cared for one another. They were open enough to admit hates and prejudices, tired enough to bitch, but strong enough to care. Excerpts from the chapter Walker titled "Two Women" include:

> "I want to tell you something," said Meridian. "I tried very hard not to hate you. And I think I always succeeded.."
> "Thanks, Meridian, for everything. I honestly don't know what I would have done without you."
> Meridian had hugged her, and she had hugged Meridian, and they had parted. (p.175)

The fact that these two women retained their friendship, over and above their race, is a point that I feel Walker wants her reader to pay heed to. The two women are united as much by their love of Truman, as by their dislike of Freddie Pye. They seem united in their attitude towards these men.

Another path chosen by some women is that of lesbianism. Walker is very open and accepting of this. Her treatment of the love between Shug Avery and Celie in The Color Purple has opened up a lot of debate. Walker, in my opinion, was just trying to acknowledge the fact that two women can love one another and care for each other, and it need not be any great sin. The relationship consisted of a healing and tender love, and Walker challenges anyone to condemn this. The love scene between Shug and Celie is a very tender and loving one, especially when the reader see it set against the treatment Celie had received from Mr. For a woman who had previously acted like a board while Mr. was "doing his business", Celie's sexual awakening with Shug can only be greeted with cheer. I think that Walker shows that she is happy that Celie received love, be it from a woman or a man.

> My mama die, I tell Shug. My sister Nettie run away. Mr. come git me to take care of his rotten children. He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me, I say.
> She say, I love you Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth. (p.109)

This scene would normally have been received with much distain and disgust, but because of Walker's skillful approach to this scene, with the emphasis on the love and care women can share with each other and not on the actual act of sex, her readers can appreciate it for what it is. Walker's skill in guiding her readers through this controversial scene should be commended.

In The Color Purple Walker shows that the struggle of women is universal, and the bonds between them in this struggle should

also be universal. Nettie tells of the African Olinka women, where the society cares for its women and can not see their lack of independence as a problem. Nettie writes:

> There is a way that the men speak to the women that reminds me too much of Pa.They listen just long enough to give instructions.They don't even look at women when women are speaking. (p.149)

Back in the U.S. the reader sees Celie struggling with the new awareness that Shug is imparting to her. We see that women will not achieve instant freedom from oppression once they have acknowledged that they are oppressed. But Walker does give hope, and shows delight when a woman is heading in the right direction.

> Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock.
> But this hard work, let me tell you. He been there so long, he don't want to budge. He threaten lightening, floods and earthquakes. Us fight. I hardly pray at all. Every time I conjure up a rock, I throw it. (p.179)

The final acknowledgement that Walker tries to bring to our attention is probably the worst crime that can be committed against a woman: sexual abuse. For too many women who are raped or incestuously abused, the feeling of guilt is all that follows. Rather than be angry and fight for justice against this criminal act, many women hide away in shame, and feel the guilt their attacker should be feeling. Celie is ashamed of having been pregnant, and this is perpetuated by her father's cruel and uncaring attitude. When giving her over to Mr. in marriage, he is totally cruel and inhumane:

> But I can let you have Celie. She the oldest anyway. She ought to marry first. She ain't fresh tho', but I spect you know that. She spoiled. Twice. (p.17)

One asks oneself, who did the "spoiling" anyway? Walker here shows her readers the paradox in the prevalent male value system. Celie's father, rather than feel guilt as an incestuous father, condemns Celie for having lost her virginity. The irony is too strong to miss what Walker is trying to tell us here.

The issue is raised again in Meridian, when Freddie Pye's rape of Lynne is kept like some seething underground secret. Throughout this novel Walker deals with this dilemma and her readers can travel with her as she works through it. This is one of the joys in Walker's art; that one can feel at one with her as she tries to solve and come to an acceptable resolution of the controversial issues which she tackles. She exposes her inner self and is not afraid to show emotion. She is a writer with whom the reader can identify, because she does more than merely show the result of an debate, she brings the reader along with her as she works towards that answer.

Lynne is acutely aware of the broader implications of her rape because of the racial difference. The fact that she keeps the rape a secret illustrates her fidelity to the black race. But her final revelation to Meridian illustrates her fidelity to her sex. (As I have previously alluded to, I do not believe that Walker is finished with this issue yet.) What I feel Walker is doing during all of these sex-related crimes is exposing the fact that they do occur, probably more often than we think, and women

should acknowledge this fact. Celie's repeated rape by both father and husband, Lynne's rape, the story of Ida B. Wells, are all examples of Walker exposing these horrific crimes. Women should bond together against these grotesque crimes, and with the strength from their kinship, protect their number.

If Walker has achieved all she set out to do, the reader will be very much aware of the many diverse implications of womanhood. Her female readers will acknowledge their standing in the world today, with all the pros and cons included. Once one has acknowledged womanhood, and developed an awareness of it, the next step will be to reclaim all that is inherent in womanhood. Walker calls on her readers to reclaim everything, ranging all the way from the poor and illiterate Celie, to the loud and talented Zora Neale Hurston. Reclaiming womanhood, like her call to reclaim blackness, is a means to overcome oppression and develop pride. Celebration is an inherent part of this, as it also results in pride and joy. Reclamation means setting up of one's own standards, being critiqued by one's own, writing for one's own, and stating that this alternative is worthwhile and of value.

Motherhood, and a daughter's bond with her mother, are very important themes for Walker's reclamation. Womanhood had always been defined by motherhood: it was a woman's sacred duty to have children, it was her purpose in life. As such it was seen by many radical feminists as a bond from which they should break. Women's biology was perceived as some sort of strange joke. Walker takes

a different view. She believes that a woman should experience this amazing miracle, unique as it is to women. Motherhood is a thing women should be celebrating, and not bemoaning. None the less, in the usual Walker way, she does look at all sides and states that she had fears about her decision to have a child. In her short story "One Child Of One's Own", she elaborates on this:

> For me there has been conflict, struggle, occasional defeat -not only in affirming the life of my own child (children) at all costs, but also in seeing in that affirmation a fond acceptance and confirmation of myself in a world that would deny me the untrampled blossoming of my own existence.... In my opinion, having a child is easily the equivalent of having balls. In truth, it is more equivalent: ballsdom is surpassed. (P.363, Gardens)

She is reclaiming motherhood, but she appreciates the worries and concerns involved with choosing this path. She is aware of the energy women put into their children, and the great emotional ties which are involved. She tells tales of powerless mothers watching their children starve, and never, not even at the death bed, being able to get this pain and anger out of their hearts. The story that I am referring to here is "The Revenge Of Hannah Kemhuff". Although both Hannah and her children were starving to death, Hannah speaks nothing of her own sufferings, but rather feels intense grief because she cannot feed her children:

> "They was sweet children and not much trouble, although they was about to go out of their minds with hunger."
> Now a deep sadness crept into her face, which until she reached this point had been still and impassive.
> "First one and then the other of them took sick and died."
> (p.66, In Love And Trouble)

Walker sees that close emotional bonds are important to women. Women identify themselves through their bonding much more so than

do men. Walker does not see this as negative. On the contrary, she sees this as vital to one's emotional well being. She teases some unknown lover about his watery affection, saying that she wants the hot emotional love of lovers:

> I'm really very fond of you,
> he said.
>
> I don't like fond.
> It sounds like something
> you would tell a dog.
>
> Give me love,
> or nothing.
>
> Throw your fond in a pond,
> I said. ... (p.45 Horses)

Walker's bond with her mother exemplifies the importance of close bonding between women. Walker brought her mother with her on one of the true pilgrimages of recent times: the search for Zora Neale Hurston's unmarked grave. For Walker this was highly symbolic of reclaiming a strong woman, and giving her the respect that she deserves. It is interesting to note that she went with her mother on this expedition. Maybe Walker was reclaiming more that just Hurston's grave, she was reclaiming her own relationship with her mother and securing that bond through mutual experience and commitment to a cause. Together they trash through an overgrown, probably snake-infested, field in search of Zora's grave. Walker calls her mother by her first name, Rosalee.

> "Well," I say, "this is the center, or approximately anyhow. It's the only sunken spot we've found. Doesn't this look like a grave to you?"
> "For the sake of not going no farther through these bushes," Rosalee growls,"yes, it do."
> "Wait a minute," I say,"I have to look around some more to

> be sure this is the only spot that resembles a grave. But you don't have to come."
> Rosalee smiles-a grin, really-beautiful and tough.
> "Naw," she says, "I feels sorry for you. If one of these snakes got ahold of you out here by yourself I'd feel real bad." She laughs. "I done come this far, I'll go on with you."
> "Thank you, Rosalee," I say. "Zora thanks you too."
> "Just as long as she don't try to tell me in person," she says, and together we walk down the field."
>
> (p.105\106, Gardens)

Rosalee Walker is a big, strong woman, who has lead a hard working life. Obviously, she appreciated the importance of education, although she herself was not educated, and she worked hard to put her children through school. Walker's poem "Women" is a beautiful tribute to her mother, in which Walker reclaims her in all of her strength.

> They were women then
> My mama's generation
> Husky of voice-Stout of
> Step
> With fists as well as
> Hands
> How they battered down
> Doors
> And ironed
> Starched white
> Shirts
> How they led
> Armies
> Headragged Generals
> Across mined
> Fields
> Booby-trapped
> Ditches
> To discover books
> Desks
> A place for us
> How they knew what we
> Must know
> Without knowing a page
> Of it
> Themselves. (p.5, Revolutionary Petunias)

Reclaiming and celebrating these bonds between two women is an important theme for Walker. To quote a fourth century B.C. philosopher, Euripides, "Woman is women's natural ally", and this I believe is Walker's point of view also. She shows this through much of her work, and the result is invariably renewed freedom and independence for the women involved. Walker said in an interview with Claudia Tate:

> "By and large black women writers support themselves, they support each other and support a sense of community much more so than any other group I've ever come in contact with, except for the civil rights era when people tend to be collective. That was true of them, and it is true of us. And I like that." (p.184, Black Women Writers At Work.)

Walker's bold appreciation of this bonding, "And I like that.", shows great pride in women. She is reclaiming what Euripides had said years ago, and states that woman is indeed women's best friend.

This theme, women uniting with other women for strength, is very strong throughout The Color Purple. Celie finds her guidance and inspiration through her bonding with another woman. The same can be said of Squeak, and her relationship with both Celie and Shug. Squeak was always the quite, diminutive one, living in the shadow of Sofia or Harpo. At the dinner table when Celie announced that she was leaving for Memphis with Shug and Grady, there is a great comradery between the women. They joke and laugh at the male expectations, which previously had been held in high esteem.

> Shug say, Albert. Try to think like you got some sense. Why any woman give a shit what people think is a mystery to me.

> Well, says Grady, trying to bring light. A woman can't get a man if peoples talk.
> Shug look at me and we giggle. Then us laugh sure nuff. Then Squeak start to laugh. Then Sofia. Then us laugh and laugh. Shug say, Ain't they something? Us say um hum, and slap the table, wipe the water from our eyes. (p.182)

The women here have reclaimed the importance of their friendship. Their laughter is a celebration of the joys of bonding with women. The reader can see how strong the women are when they bond together, and support one another. This is, I believe, the lesson Walker is trying to teach. She repeats the lesson, as an intensive course, with Shug's relationship with Celie. This is most definitely a loving and learning relationship. Celie may have never achieved the freedom that she did, unless she had received the love and direction from Shug. Shug knows that she is free to travel, and still be welcomed back to Celie's home. Together they grow and learn. Together, as two women, as lovers, but more importantly, as friends, their bond is highly symbolic to the women of the world, to Walker's readers.

Another major section of the world that Walker would have her readers reclaim, is that of the many lost and neglected female heroines. There are so many unrecognized female artists, that Walker almost makes this her personal crusade. Walker wants women to see the very many excellent role models and heroines that exist. Her personal quest for Zora Neale Hurston is one such example of an unsung heroine. Walker sought to reclaim her, fearing that she may be lost forever.

> I did then what fear rarely fails to force me to do: I fought back. I began to fight for Zora and her work; for what I knew was good and must not be lost to us.

(p.87, Gardens)

This strong call for reclamation in the field of women's literature runs across racial lines, as Walker calls for all women's works to be reclaimed. Flannery O' Connor was a white, upper class woman. Walker says that she was the only southern writer who did not seem preoccupied with race. Walker's appreciation of O'Connor is neatly summed up in her essay "Beyond The Peacock".

> She was for me the first great modern writer from the south (p.52, Gardens)

It is good to see that Walker's call for reclamation of female literary genius runs across racial lines; the bond between women should be united, and will never succeed unless it is. Women should unite in their celebration, their support of one another's works, and give help with one another's struggles. In Walker's interview, quoted in In Search Of Our Mother's Gardens, Walker commends the white women authors that she enjoys, mainly because of their universal humanity, and not their race. All women, regardless of race and creed, should reclaim their literary sisters, again regardless of race and creed. Walker points out the universal themes of womanhood, and how women are unique from men in their literary interests:

> The women writers that I admire-Kate Chopin, the Brontes, Simone de Beauvoir, and Doris Lessing-are well aware of their own oppression and search incessantly for a kind of salvation. Their characters can always envision a solution, an evolution to higher consciousness on the part of society, even when society itself can not. Even when society is in the process of killing them for their vision. Generally, too, they are more tolerant of mystery than is Ahab, who wishes to dominate, rather than be on equal terms with, the whale. (p.251\252, Gardens)

She has made women aware that they have both good and bad attributes, and these are now being judged by female standards and any faults will hopefully be improved with female help and understanding. Walker's opening page in her short story collection <u>You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down</u> (the title itself is a cry of celebration), is a quote from the German writer Hermann Hesse. It reads as follows:

> It is harder to kill something
> that is spiritually alive
> than it is to bring the dead
> back to life.

Walker, in my opinion, has done a great deal to keep this spirit alive. In the opening page of another of her collections of short stories and essays <u>In Search Of Our Mother's Gardens</u>, she also reaffirms this celebration and pride in womanhood. Walker derives a special definition for the term Feminism to suit her color, but she makes it applicable to all women. The following is a brief summary of her definitions:

> [womanist means] a woman who loves other women, sexually, and\or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counter- balance to laughter), and woman's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and\or nonsexually. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health....
> Loves herself. Regardless.

The pride in this celebration is as obvious as it is contagious. Walker is spelling out, and quite deliberately at that, what she feels about her feminism, or womanism as she calls it. It is strong. It is direct. It is just, and not at all vindictive.

Walker does a great deal in strengthening and celebrating the link between mother and daughter. This is a theme running through a lot of modern feminist writings, and we see it strongly here with Walker. In "Everyday Use" a short story about the reclamation of one's heritage, the daughter-mother bond manifests itself as the strong, unifying force in the story. One daughter, Dee, a.k.a. Wangeroo, has rejected her family's poor and rural lifestyle. The daughter who lives with her mother, Maggie, has a true and meaningful relationship with her mother. Maggie and her mother know that there is more to life than money and appearances. As Wangeroo tries to take Maggie's quilts, her mother says:

> When I looked at her [Wangeroo] like that something hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet. Just like when I'm in church and the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout. I did something I never had done before: hugged Maggie to me, then dragged her on into the room, snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangeroo's hands and dumped them into Maggie's lap. Maggie just sat there on the bed with her mouth open. ....
> Maggie smiled; a real smile, not scared. After we watched the car dust settle I asked Maggie to bring me a dip of snuff. And then the two of us sat there just enjoying, until it was time to go in the house and go to bed.
> (p.58\59, In Love And Trouble)

Here we find Walker showing the importance of a strong and true bond with one's mother. She shows both sides, with a loving daughter and a daughter who is unaware of the real importance in this bond. The ending shows, quite obviously, the option Walker prefers. Walker uses her own relationship with her mother as an example of how a mother and daughter should relate. They do not agree on everything, religion being one such difference, but they respect and love each other.

The accepted view of religion, as it commonly know today, is primarily a male institution. Walker points to alternatives, common to many women, and illuminates the many positive aspects of these personal and unconventional religions. Walker is proud of the female alternative, and exclaims this belief with a great sense of joy. At first she says she felt as if she was betraying what her own mother had thought her, and was teaching her child things which will not fit into the mainstream of society. But as a woman, and an individual, she had to question the restrains placed on her by society. She explains this in her poem "Mississippi Winter II".

> When you remember me, my child,
> be sure to recall that Mama was
> a sinner. Her soul was lost
> (according to her mama) the very
> first time she questioned God. (It
> weighed heavily on her, though she
> did not like to tell.)
> But she wanted to live and what is more
> be happy
> a concept not understood before the age
> of twenty-one.
> She was not happy
> with fences.
>
> (p.20, Horses Make A Landscape Look More Beautiful)

I think that Walker prefers the personal, private religion over the established, structured church. Walker's short story "The Welcome Table" shows us a bitter, anti-establishment view of Walker that is seldom seen in as strong and raw a light as this. A poor, elderly black lady is rudely ejected from the well-to-do, white, male church. She had gone in there to pray and find shelter from the bitter weather. The men of the congregation, urged on by

their wives, throw her out, and continue praying. Walker says, with much cynicism and sorrow :

> God, mother, country, earth, church. It involved all that, and well they knew it. (p.84, In Love And Trouble.)

Many women today choose a personal alternative, one of the reasons being that they do not have to deal with externally imposed rules and dogma from a male hierarchy. Shug Avery's believes are as true and as strong as any established church. Shug and Celie discuss religion, and Shug says:

> When I found out that God was white, and a man, I lost interest....God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it....
> It? I [Celie] ast.
> Yeah, It. God ain't a he or a she, but a It.
> But what do it look like? I ast.
> Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show...
> I believe God is everything, say Shug.
> (p.178)

Walker has instilled a great personality into the character of Shug, of which many women are proud. She represents the alternative in such a proud and strong manner, that one can not help but be proud of her, and want to champion her.

Literary celebration is obvious in Walker's writings. As I have previously alluded to, Walker was very much impressed by the amazing talents of such writers as Zora Neale Hurston "one of the most significant unread authors in America" (p.93,Gardens); Paule Marshall "Unequaled in intelligence, vision, craft by anyone in her generation, to put her contributions to our literature modestly" (p.84, Gardens); Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker "both poets of such obvious necessity it would be imposs-

ible to overlook them." (p.84,Gardens); Flannery O'Connor "Her book of essays "Mystery and Manners",... is the best of its kind that I [Walker] have ever read." (p.48, Gardens); Doris Lessing, Simone de Beauvoir, Nella Larson, Phillis Wheatley, the list rings on in praise. Walker is very much impressed with the wide array of excellent female authors, and exudes this in her celebration of them. Her praise does not stop with purely literary heroines, she also sings the praises of the very many great women singers. Walker is horrified when she thinks that female singers, like female writers, could have been restricted in their artistic outlets.

> Consider, if you can bear to imagine it, what might have been the result if singing, too, had been forbidden by law. Listen to the voices of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Roberta Flack, and Aretha Franklin, among others, and imagine those voices muzzled for life. (p.234, Gardens)

She celebrates that their great talents are free to flow.

Identifying with and celebrating these literary women leads Walker onto her next stage of celebration, and that is the celebration of all women, of all female bonds. Walker has shown her approval of and urging for the bonds between women so often throughout her writings, that one could not possibly have missed it. Walker loves to be identified with other women, and celebrates all that is involved with womanhood. Dr.Ancella Bickley, the vice president of West Virginia State College, said of Walker's celebration of women that it is like an eye that is passed between women. This eye is the selfhood and autonomy that comes with identification with other women. To Walker, this is a great gift

which should be celebrated, and passed on to even more women. The Color Purple is full of celebration of women bonding with women; it is the cause of Celie's freedom, of Squeek's new identity, of Nettie and Celie's undying love. It is one of the central themes of the novel, and is obviously a joyous celebration.

Celebration of women's crafts and women's skills is a natural continuation from this. When women bond together, it is often during a session of story telling or quilt making. Quilts, in fact, are very symbolic for Walker. For her they symbolize the unity of women, the creativity of women, the bonding of women. The quilt making skill was traditionally one that was passed from mother to daughter, and shared with one's peers. The craft is skilled and precise. The product is a thing of beauty, but in the typical female way, it is a thing of functional worth also. Quilts are made as gifts for men, by women. Baker and Pierce together wrote an entire review about the bonding involved with quilting in Walker's literature. They say:

> Quilting, sewing, stitching are bonding activities that begin with the godlike authority and daring of women, but that are given (as a gift toward community) to men. (p.142)

Quilts are made as gifts for daughters, by mothers. We see this in her short story "Everyday Use". Walker includes these skills in much of her literature, and can be considered as symbolic of her celebration of women bonding together. The quilts are being used as the emblem of this theme.

I believe that Walker's final theme for celebration is that of women's strength and their resiliency against all kinds of

adversity. The repeated image Walker uses here is the meek and diminutive woman, who accepted her unfair burden without question, but who finally comes to a realization and an independence for herself. This stereotypical woman is Celie in The Color Purple, she is Lynne in Meridian, she is Elethia in the short story "Elethia", she is Walker's mother in reality. Again and again we find Walker using variations on this theme to point out how strong women actually are. Women have amazing capacity for absorbing pain and suffering, while still being the nurturing mother. Take, for example, Celie's life in The Color Purple. Walker depicts this poor, unfortunate woman looking after an ungrateful husband and children, and getting nothing in return. She just accepts her lot for a long time, knowing only how to survive.

> Don't let them run over you, Nettie say. You got to know who got the upper hand.
> They got it, I say.
> But she keep on. You got to fight. you got to fight.
> But I don't know how to fight. All I know is how to stay alive. (p.25\26)

We can not help but cheer and join in the celebration when Celie finally takes for herself the life that she deserves. I think Walker kept Celie in her servile position for as long as she did, because this caused the reader to become more and more indignant about the oppression, but also more delighted with the onset of freedom. This is where Walker's skill as a writer is proved. Her manipulation of the readers' emotions is very skillfully worked, and the reader is almost unaware that any of this is happening. The skill of survival can be criticized as women's fear of confrontation, but one does have to take into consideration the

myriad forces of society, money and power. In the short story "Porn", Walker again points to a woman who actually felt closer to women, but who never spoke this out loud, for fear of reprisal.

> Like many thoughtful women of the seventies, she had decided women were far more interesting than men. But, again like most thoughtful women, she rarely admitted this out loud. (p.77, In Love And Trouble)

At the end of this story, again we have a woman coming away free and independent. It is as if women know intuitively the value of life and will not give up on it, even in the face of great adversity. Walker, who is a strong believer in a woman as a mother, may well feel that because women are so close to life as a generating force, that they see the true value in it. Women are not ones to give in, throw in the towel, and just quit. We see this attribute celebrated in Meridian, where she will not succumb to the pressure of her revolutionary peers, and die for the cause. As Meridian puts it, Jesus should have just left town before the crucifixion. Meridian herself held on to her precious life for all it was worth. As Walker says:

> The respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and to not give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. (p.189)

This proud protection of her life is a positive and strong force of celebration. One must have pride in something if one is to celebrate it, and that is what the reader sees here.

In summary, I feel as if Alice Walker has used her literature for far more than mere literary entertainment. I believe that she wrote with a very strong message for both blacks and women. To

both minorities, of which she herself is proud to belong, she calls for acknowledgment of their attributes, their worth and their limitations: she calls for reclamation of the many positive attributes that have, for too long, been derided as insignificant: and she calls for a loud, joyous celebration of all the many defining aspects of womanhood and blackness. I see this evident in most, if not all, of her works, and I also believe that she is very successful in attaining her goals.

THE END.

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