



Contribution of Alice Walker in American Literature

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Abstract

Over the span of her career, Walker has published seventeen novels and short story collections, twelve non-fiction works, and collections of essays and poetry. Alice Walker worked as a social worker, teacher, lecturer, and took part in Mississippi's 1960s Civil Rights Movement. She also participated in the 1963 March on Washington. In 2003, Walker was arrested outside the White House with 26 others during the March 8th International Women's Day. Born to sharecropper parents, Alice Walker grew up to become a highly acclaimed novelist, essayist and poet.

Key words: American, poet, social, novel, worker.

Walker was the eighth child of African American sharecroppers. While growing up she was accidentally blinded in one eye, and her mother gave her a typewriter, allowing her to write instead of doing chores. She received a scholarship to attend Spelman College, where she studied for two years before transferring to Sarah Lawrence College. After graduating in 1965, Walker moved to Mississippi and became involved in the civil rights movement. She also began teaching and publishing short stories and essays. She married in 1967, but the couple divorced in 1976. Walker's first book of poetry, *once*, appeared in 1968, and her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), a narrative that spans 60 years and three generations, followed two years later. A second volume of poetry, *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, and her first collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Woman* both appeared in 1973. The latter bears witness to sexist violence and abuse in the African American community. After moving to New York, Walker completed *Meridian* (1976), a novel describing the

coming of age of several civil rights workers in the 1960s.

Walker later moved to California, where she wrote her most popular novel, *The Color Purple* (1982). An epistolary novel, it depicts the growing up and self-realization of an African American woman between 1909 and 1947 in a town in Georgia. The book won a Pulitzer Prize and was adapted into a film by Steven Spielberg in 1985. A musical version produced by Oprah Winfrey and Quincy Jones premiered in 2004. Walker's later fiction includes *The Temple of My Familiar*, an ambitious examination of racial and sexual tensions (1989); *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), a narrative centered on female genital mutilation; *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998), the story of a family of anthropologists posing as missionaries in order to gain access to a Mexican tribe; and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2005), about an older woman's quest for identity. Reviewers complained that these novels employed New Age abstractions and poorly conceived characters, though Walker continued to draw praise for championing racial and gender

equality in her work. She also released the volume of short stories *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart* (2000) and several other volumes of poetry, including *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth* (2003), *A Poem Traveled Down My Arm* (2003), *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing* (2010), and *Taking the Arrow Out of the Heart* (2018). *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems* (1991) collects poetry from 1965 to 1990.

Walker's essays were compiled in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), *Sent by Earth: A Message from the Grandmother Spirit After the Bombing of the World Trade Center and Pentagon* (2001), *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* (2006), and *The Cushion in the Road: Meditation and Wandering as the Whole World Awakens to Being in Harm's Way* (2013). Walker also wrote juvenile fiction and critical essays on such female writers as Flannery O'Connor and Zora Neale Hurston. She cofounded a short-lived press in 1984.

In the unconventional memoir *The Chicken Chronicles* (2011), Walker discussed caring for a flock of chickens while also musing on her life. The documentary *Alice Walker: Beauty in Truth* was released in 2013. Walker introduced the themes of gender and racial inequality that she would continue to explore throughout her career with her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. The novel, which follows the Copelands, a family of sharecroppers, from the 1920s to the 1950s, is structured in short sections, and themes and motifs are repeated similarly to the cycle of poverty, abuse, and racism that they describe. Upon publication, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* was criticized for its portrayal of African American men, but Walker defended her views and continued to focus on the plight of women.

Walker's next novel, *Meridian*, is set in the time period following *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, as the civil rights movement is gaining momentum. Like her previous book, *Meridian* also follows a Southern black family. Rather than focus on the family patriarchs, however, Walker examines the effects of racism on black mothers.

Walker's best-known novel is *The Color Purple*. Told in an epistolary form, the novel's first section is composed of letters written by the central character, Celie, to God; letters from Celie's sister, Nettie, make up the second section; and the third section is a correspondence between Celie and Nettie, during the period where Nettie has gone to Africa.

After the success of *The Color Purple*, Walker continued to explore the struggles of African Americans, especially women, in her stories, novels, and poetry. Her novels *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) feature characters from *The Color Purple*. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is set in a fictional African country where female genital mutilation is practiced. Walker touched briefly on the subject in *The Color Purple*, but, with *Joy*, brings it to the fore, along with the minor character Tashi from *Purple*.

The concept of God and spirit that figured prominently in *The Color Purple* was reexamined in Walker's 2004 novel, *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. Less concerned with the image of an omnipotent deity, however, the novel explores the spiritual aspects of Mother Earth and the healing power of nature.

Walker's talent was recognized early on by the poet Muriel Rukeyser, who was instrumental in the publication of her first short story, "To Hell with Dying." The genesis of her interest in the future of the black woman is brought into sharp focus with her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Walker commented in the journal *Southern Cultures*, "If you think of the early stories, it's true that the women end badly, but it's because they belong to the generation of my mother and grandmother. They exist in an historical place that is removed from my generation of women. It's not until *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* that I got my generation of people. It starts so far back because I wanted to have a really good understanding of the historical progression." The novel went largely unnoticed, however, until the publication of *The Color Purple*, which skyrocketed Walker into the literary spotlight.

Most reviewers heaped praise upon *The Color Purple*, hailed as an authentic account of the rural Southern black culture of the 1930s. Many critics praise Walker's ability to temper the harshness of the lives her characters have to endure with a poignant illumination of universal themes of womanhood. Ed Piacentino observed, "One of the most endearing scenes in contemporary southern literature is the homecoming at the end of ... *The Color Purple*, showcasing the reunion of Celie with her family--her two children, Adam and Olivia, and her sister, Nettie, who have returned to America from Africa." Some critics took issue with the depictions of black men in the novel, suggesting that Walker's portrayals show them to be abusive and evil, ultimately and inevitably abandoning their families. As Tracy L. Bealer noted, "Walker argues throughout *The Color Purple* that sexual dissatisfaction in women is the logical consequence of the kind of masculinist misogyny that expresses itself through physical abuse and dominative sex."

Walker has been noted for her ability to present politically and emotionally charged issues in relatable ways, by emphasizing the humanity in her characters through various narrative techniques such as writing in dialects, using letters for narration, and employing oral storytelling traditions. She was praised by critics for exposing the practice of female genital mutilation in her book and film *Warrior Marks*, and her work has maintained a deep concern with racial, gender, and political issues. The evolution of her body of work shows an increasing concern with the spiritual, and she has been praised for interweaving all of these themes into readable, relatable texts that convey resonating messages.

Alice Walker has been defined as one of the key international writers' of the 20th century. The award-winning novel served as the inspiration for Steven Spielberg's 1985 film and was adapted for the stage, opening at New York City's Broadway Theatre in 2005, and capturing a Tony Award for best leading actress in a musical in 2006. An internationally celebrated author, poet and activist, Walker's books include seven novels, four collections of short stories, four children's books, and volumes of essays and poetry. Walker has written many additional best sellers; among

them, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), which detailed the devastating effects of female genital mutilation and led to the 1993 documentary *Warrior Marks*, a collaboration with the British-Indian filmmaker Pratibha Parmar, with Walker as executive producer. Walker's work has been translated into more than two-dozen languages, and her books have sold more than fifteen million copies.

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