

**Actions that Speak Louder than Words:
Survival, Identity, and the Play of Perspective
In Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland***

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Spring 2006

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The critical conversation concerning Alice Walker's female characters from her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (hereafter *Grange*), consists of a number of critics who claim the female characters, with the exception of Ruth, are victims while others do not discuss them at all. Critical focus is not given to the actions these women perform that challenge the dominant patriarchal ideology and racist society. The conversation also lacks a rebuttal to the negative characterization of these women as victims. By attempting to reclaim their identity, family, and a sense of community through socially rebellious behavior, the female characters prove they are not victims. The book's play of perspectives and the overall narrative structure support this interpretation. As the third-person, limited omniscient narrator shifts the focus away from the male characters, the women command power a victim could not.

Elliot Butler-Evans argues that the narrator and the shifts in focus keep Walker's argument about the culture of poverty and racism at the forefront of the novel as well as changing the character focus. By shifting perspective to the female characters, Walker mirrors the acts they perform to reclaim identity and power. Butler-Evans discusses that the perspective shifts do more than just give power to the female characters; these shifts challenge a "male-centered discourse." "What one encounters in Walker's early works in particular is an inscription of that (male-centered) discourse, but one that is persistently challenged by a feminine counter discourse" (107). While supporting the idea that the females who create the feminine discourse are challenging a male discourse, he refers to them as "Brownfield's victims"; this negates the power he gives these women by recognizing the feminist discourse (110). Whether or not one believes the female characters are victims, the narrative shifts, by emphasizing the power and strength of these women, create women who attempt to reclaim some if not all of their stifled identities.

The critical conversation touches on different subjects from different theoretical stances. Socio-historical discussions and feminist readings are the most common type of criticism surrounding Walker, but there is also a great deal of attention paid to her common motifs and themes and how those fit into the larger tradition of African American and female African American authorship. The feminist critical conversation focuses on the different types of females in Walker's work, the societal roles they break or are supposed to fulfill, the women's issues treated in Walker's work, and reactionary critiques to the criticism of male critics, specifically regarding *The Color Purple*. The discussion of theme centers on four major subjects: the role of silence and speech in *Grange*, the narrative journey motif, the role of folklore and oral tradition, and the role of family and community. Three of these major themes, silence and speech, the narrative journey and family and community are dealt with in the lives of Margaret, Josie, and Mem, but the majority of the thematic discussion does not mention their involvement in these important themes. A majority of critics, including some who could be considered feminist, assume three female characters, Margaret, Josie, and Mem, are victims. Reviews directly following the publication of the novel in 1970 focus on different themes than those highlighted by the larger thematic discussion that continues in the 1980s and 1990s. But the views on the female characters from these early reviews coincide with the treatment they have received more recently. One female reviewer, Josephine Hendin, believes that *Grange* is about the "depletion of love" and that the female characters are "victims of both whites and their own husbands" (5). While a male reviewer, Robert Coles, a few months later, in 1971, states that the novel is about "the directions a suffering people can take" (7). Neither mentions the importance or behavior of these female characters.

Other critics find different reasons for dismissing these female characters as victims. Critic Ruth D. Weston, for example, does not refer to the women as victims but as "casualties" (154). She discusses the female characters as women who represent the universal issue of sexism. But, by stating that in *Grange*, Walker explores the "black man's search for self-worth" and that "the casualties of that search are the wives of Grange and Brownfield Copeland" (154), she allows the men to dominate the text and she relegates the women to the nameless role of victim. Peter Erickson highlights one of the many reasons that critics have not turned their focus to Margaret, Josie, or Mem. Erickson claims that "the point of view is evenly distributed among Brownfield, Ruth, and Grange" (12). This reader does not find any even distribution of point of view in the text; if anything Brownfield's point of view diminishes severely when Josie enters the novel, leaving his point of view drastically uneven in comparison to Ruth and Grange. But this claim does not account for the point of view given to Josie and Mem several times in the text. Other critics claim that Grange, Brownfield, and Ruth are the main characters. Gerri Bates sums up how the majority of critics view these three characters: Mem is "a victim of gender-role socialization," her husband, and white society; both Mem and Margaret are "defeated women"; and Josie is just a "minor character" who serves as an example of what a father's rejection can do (65). These surface-level explorations of characterization lead critics to dismiss them as less important than any of the others. The feminist discussion often allows these critical claims to go unchallenged.

The feminist critical conversation is mainly limited to Ruth; this indicates that another subject was drawing the attention of feminist critics. A major part of the discussion is heated and has demanded a great deal of attention from feminist critics defending Walker's depiction of African American life. A part of the critical conversation is made up of primarily black males

who resent and reject Walker's representation of black males in her novels. The feminist conversation in this realm consists of critics explaining the sources of the male reaction and the misreading that has led to those reactions. Pia Thielmann and Erma Kelly are two feminist critics who react to the male critics. Thielmann states, in regard to *The Color Purple*, that in the critical world Walker "is charged with having written a novel that confirms a racist and sexist society's most debilitating and degrading stereotypes about African Americans" (69). Thielmann counters by arguing that Walker is criticized for not "glorifying" black men, when she should not because "her intent is to clarify the ways.. .men as well as women are wounded by racism and how they may ultimately be healed" (69). Richard Wesley is a critic Thielmann cites who agrees that Walker is showing the "failures" of both sexes (71). Erma Kelly argues that *The Color Purple*: depicts male brutality but chooses not to focus on the pain that men are trying to escape through their violence. In earlier fiction when Walker put males on the periphery they were not violent; when men were violent, she devoted some time to demonstrating the source of that violence (175). Kelly points out that this type of criticism was not applied to novels such as *Grange* or *Meridian* because of the attention paid to the pain of the men in those works. But this criticism has been applied to *Grange* in retrospect and has demanded the attention of feminist critics discussing this novel. Thielmann and Kelly are just two of many feminist critics who have become involved in this heated debate. The debate is ongoing and the prevalence of this part of the conversation could be leading critics to veer away from discussing other feminist elements of the text.

Feminist critics often do not focus on the challenges performed by *all* of the female characters. One critic, Mary Helen Washington, writes from a feminist stance, yet she relegates the women in *Grange* to a position of victim through her theory on African American females in

literature and history. When discussing the types of females in Walker's work, Washington looks at them as historical representations as well as a cycle of the emerging feminist (or womanist).

Washington provides a cyclical socio-historical view of black women, from victimized by society and their men to women with growing consciousness and control. She divides women into three historical groups or cycles: the first are "suspended women," who are victims of physical and psychic abuse (who make up the majority of Walker's female characters); the second are the women of the 1940s and 1950s who assimilate and are alienated from their roots and are therefore victims of psychic violence; the third cycle are women of the Movement who reconnect with their roots and creativity and live with a new awareness (Washington 40). Washington places Margaret, Josie, and Mem in her first cycle which creates a false generalization of their behavior in the novel. By categorizing them as "suspended women," Washington negates the powerful actions they perform in the text. Washington assumes that all the women in *Grange*, except for Ruth, belong in this category. The victim label dismisses the importance of the challenges these women make to sexist and racist ideologies.

Margaret, Josie, and Mem challenge their role but ultimately fail at surviving "whole," in the words of Grange Copeland. Perhaps this failure is why critics have mistakenly categorized them as victims. These women, however, employ survival strategies that challenge basic present-day ideologies. These strategies are often what could be called power mechanisms because the rise and fall of these women's lives is based on power struggles in which they battle to wield control. The novel describes the lives of these women as they struggle with society, their landlords, and their husbands. These women survive partially by taking on a role or behavior previously belonging to men. Unlike the others, Ruth has the opportunity for a life without male

domination and violence. Because the other women live a subjugated life, one without the opportunities granted to Ruth, they reclaim only a part of their identity.

Margaret, Brownfield's mother and Grange's wife, is the only one of the three women whose existence resembles Washington's theory of "suspended women." But Margaret also employs her own survival strategies to challenge dominant ideologies; her mistake is the strategy she chooses and its lack of power against the cycle of poverty. Margaret is the only female character who could be considered a victim. Her perspective is never given focus and Brownfield describes her as always submissive: "He thought his mother was like their dog in some ways. She didn't have a thing to say that did not in some way show submission to his father" (*Third Life* 5). Though Margaret is a submissive character, she resists through the only means she finds available. Margaret has to deal with oppression and poverty, but she also must deal with Grange's drunkenness, abuse, and infidelity. In an attempt to gain some power in her household, she tries to beat Grange at his own game and find acceptance. Margaret assumes the behavior of her oppressor in an attempt to overturn the power hierarchy. Brownfield's perception guides the reader through Margaret's sexual power struggle: "one day she was as he had always known her; kind, submissive, smelling faintly of milk; and the next day she was a wild woman looking for frivolous things, her heart's good times, in the transient embraces of strangers" (24).

Margaret is a victim of multiple forms of oppression, but her attempt at a power upheaval implies that if she had the sufficient means, she would fight and perhaps succeed at claiming her identity and rebuilding her family. In her article, "Novels For Everyday Use," Barbara Christian discusses the inability for poor black women to fit into the female roles given by society. This is not because they are victims unable to make progress, but because they are denied the resources necessary to fill such roles and as a result they are denied identity. The label of victim might be

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suitable for Margaret, but even as a victim her strength is what barely held the family together. When she falls apart, Grange abandons the family, she poisons herself and her illegitimate baby, and Brownfield is left to wander and try to make a life for himself. Margaret is barely mentioned again in the novel, and at her exit, Josie enters and changes Brownfield's life and disrupts the narrative focus.

Josie, Grange's longtime mistress and Brownfield's mistress/caretaker after he leaves his parent's home, does not deserve the victim label. Josie uses sexuality as a survival strategy and a way to obtain power. One of the problems with labeling Josie as a victim is that when she is introduced into the novel, she is already an independent woman with authority. Independence and authority are not characteristics of a victim. Josie is in control immediately when Brownfield enters the Dew Drop Inn, which she owns, in search of work and shelter. Josie has control over where Brownfield will go next and ultimately his survival as he journeys away from his tragic sharecropping childhood. Just as she controls Brownfield, she also controls the narrative. Josie is introduced through Brownfield's perspective in chapter six but in chapter seven the narrative focus shifts to Josie and her life. Until this point, everything is through Brownfield's perspective and the focus is his childhood and the journey. The shift of perspective to Josie takes on more significance because it interrupts the pattern of the narrative. Told through Josie's perspective, chapters seven and eight are about her past that has led up to her life as owner of the Dew Drop Inn. Chapter eight provides a clue as to why some critics, including Washington, would categorize Josie as a victim, as well as why her actions as proprietor can be considered a challenge to the dominant patriarchal ideology.

Josie's experience of becoming pregnant at a young age and being violently rejected by her father is the basis for some claims of her "minor" role as a victim. When one considers how

the theme of pregnancy is treated in Walker's work, if she is a victim of anything it is her own biology. Feminist critic, Susan Willis, and Walker herself, discuss female biology as a source of vulnerability and weakness for women, especially those in the triply oppressed position of poor black female. In an interview with John O'Brien, Walker connects her own experience with pregnancy and abortion to the depiction of pregnancy as a perpetuator of oppression in *Grange* and other works: "I felt at the mercy of everything, including my own body, which I had learned to accept as a kind of casing, over what I considered my real self (327). As a pregnant teen, Josie experiences ultimate rejection from her father when she attempts to be forgiven and let back in his home. The rejection is based on the vulnerability of her female biology and sexuality; in this experience she is a victim, but what she does with this experience refutes that label. Josie refuses to let her sexuality be a weakness and reclaims a part of her identity as a sexually powerful female. Josie uses sex as a means for survival and self-sufficiency:

'fat Josie'.. .did her job with a gusto that denied shame, and demanded her money with an authority that squelched all pity. And from these old men, her father's friends, Josie obtained the wherewithal to dress herself well, and to eat well, and to own the Dew Drop Inn. (*Third Life* 53)

Josie takes a realm of life traditionally controlled by men and uses it to gain independence from men. As Josie's actions challenge dominant ideology, the simultaneous shift of focus challenges the established narrative pattern and draws the attention of the reader to both challenges.

Josie's lifestyle and the experiences that led her to it also cause a large problem for those who claim she is a victim. Walker reiterates, in varied contexts, the importance of black female authors' and their black female characters' ability to claim the self and the lives that they are leading. The discovery of the self or the claiming of identity is a milestone in the journey out of

subjugation for Walker's female characters. In her essay, "Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in an Artist's Life" from *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker recounts the works of Kate Chopin, Zora Neale Hurston, Flannery O'Connor, and others and discusses their importance to her as an author especially in regards to the defiant, challenging behavior of their female characters. Walker comments extensively on Hurston's character, Janie Crawford, from Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: Janie "refuses to allow society to dictate behavior to her, [and] enjoys the love of a much younger, freedom-loving man" ("Saving" 6). Janie and other characters are a source of inspiration to Walker. A common thread for the characters in these authors; works and in Walker's is that through challenging their subjugated positions, these women discover, claim, and maintain a part of their identity that was previously stifled. Josie does this by taking her weakness, turning it around, and claiming the power inherent in sexuality. This helps her to discover the part of her identity that encapsulates self-sufficiency and toughness. Josie's identity is maintained through the recognition of these qualities by others: "she [Josie] had a reputation for toughness that earned her an abundance of respect from youngsters who hoped to grow up to be like her" (*Third Life* 57).

As previously mentioned, Barbara Christian highlights a common argument about the state of Walker's women in her fiction and the state of black southern women in history. Christian discusses the problem of the roles which black women are expected to fulfill but cannot because they lack the freedom to do so in white society. The inability or lack of desire to fulfill the role given to women by society is one of many women's issues identified in feminist readings of Walker's work. Josie resolves this issue by creating a space for herself in a traditionally male-dominated arena. Christian discusses the problem of fulfilling society's role, but she discusses it as a reason for the victimized state of these women in Walker's work. But

inability to fulfill the role created by society does not always create victims. Often it leads these women to create their own space and in turn discover, reclaim, and maintain their identity as individuals.

Yet, Josie does not succeed in maintaining her identity throughout the novel. As Walker has repeated in interviews and essays, her concern in her work is with "the survival whole of my people" (O'Brien 331). Josie's economic independence is only one element of her identity and her lack of wholeness is the source of her ultimate demise in terms of identity. Josie lacks love and happiness: "She could grin with her face or laugh out of it or leer through it, but she had forgotten the simple subtle mechanics of the smile" (*Third Life* 55). Josie only claims the self in economic terms, and she attempts to create wholeness solely through her economic independence. This ultimately fails leaving her behind with the other supposed victims of this novel.

Even though Josie has a level of independence and self-sufficiency, she is grouped with Mem and Margaret, as a victim. Josie forfeits the only part of her identity that keeps her independent. When Grange returns to Baker in his "third life," where Josie, Mem, and Brownfield are living, Josie sells the Dew Drop Inn, abandons the lifestyle that defined her, marries Grange, and finances his farm. Josie gives up her individual identity to be used by both Brownfield and Grange for the remainder of the novel. Grange feels badly and recognizes what he is doing but Brownfield is just continuing his pattern of abusive behavior towards women. Josie loses all parts of her identity and quickly the novel ceases shifting focus to her perspective. Josie's lack of prominent perspective is directly related to the loss of her sexual power and the self-sufficiency she drew from it. When Josie fails to challenge society any longer the narrative ceases to recognize her perspective.

The later parts of Josie's story could be the source of why critics, particularly feminists, have failed to recognize her as anything other than a victim. Josie is portrayed as a victim desperately trying to keep the male love she is denied. After she sells the Dew Drop to finance Grange's farm, the narrator articulates what has happened to her: "There was Josie, learning each day that once again she had been used by a man and discarded when his satisfaction was secured" (*Third Life* 205). Josie, when conspiring with Brownfield on how to take his daughter, Ruth, away from Grange is described as "a woman whose self-respect has ceased to be a matter of moment to anyone, including herself (281). These are the final moments of description for Josie's character, and this could lead a reader to dismiss the Josie first introduced in the novel. Although she does not survive with her whole identity intact, Josie survives in spite of her oppression, challenges society, and claims power when it was not offered to her in the first place. But while Josie takes control of a male dominated arena, Mem assumes male behavior to survive.

Mem, Josie's niece and Brownfield's wife, is just as undeserving of the label of victim as Josie is. Mem employs male power mechanisms in order to gain control and better the life of herself and her family. Mem is already challenging dominant ideologies when introduced, her challenge is education. This same thing will help her daughter Ruth to survive, identity intact. Mem is highly educated; she is introduced into the novel through Brownfield's perspective as she returns from school in Atlanta. Mem is immediately set apart from the "suspended women" in the world of *Grange* by her education, her speech, and even her walk. Brownfield, even in his adoration, notes (with some negativity) the differences in Mem: "I can't stand for women to go away for two weeks and come back talking proper!' Part of what he meant was 'walking proper,' for Mem certainly had a proper walk" (*Third Life* 58). This moment in the novel not only sets up

Brownfield's future feelings about Mem's knowledge, but it also points out that Mem's education and her 'proper' ways are threatening because they challenge the mold into which poor black women are expected to fit according to patriarchal and racist ideologies. But the ways in which Mem challenges the mold are not directly associated with education; her challenges emerge in a time of intense struggle and she assumes male behavior in order to achieve her goals.

Mem is clearly not a victim when she is first introduced. Because the critical conversation focuses so much on Ruth and how she emerges whole, there is a lack of recognition that Mem is the first character to present education as a way out of a cycle of poverty and abuse. Mem's education serves as a source of Brownfield's brutal attacks on her later in their marriage. After Brownfield and Mem marry, they are tragically drawn into the pattern of the sharecropping life that destroyed Grange and Brownfield's family, Brownfield begins to resent Mem's knowledge: "He [Brownfield] did not begrudge her the greater heart, but he could not forgive her the greater knowledge. It put her closer, in power, to *them*, than he could ever be" (*Third Life* 73). Because he is threatened by the power she could wield over him in combination with the debilitating power whites had over him as a black sharecropper, Brownfield systematically breaks her down, beginning with her 'proper' speech first. Speech indicates the rise and fall of Mem's power and identity in her life with Brownfield. Brownfield not only destroys her educated way of speaking but he degrades her so severely that she becomes silent in an attempt to protect herself and her children. Both of these losses in speech are at first of her choosing:

For a woman like Mem, who had so barely escaped the 'culture of poverty,' a slip back into that culture was the easiest thing in the world. First to please her husband, and then because she honestly could not recall her nouns and verbs, her plurals and singulars, Mem began speaking once more in her old dialect. (75)

Her silence is a choice out of both generosity and survival instincts. Mem's silence towards Brownfield is an attempt to curb the physical abuse that was destined to occur but her silence also indicates a loss of her identity.

Many critics, speaking from varied theoretical stances point out the importance of the theme of speech and silence in *Grange*, Harold Hellenbrand devotes an article, "Speech after Silence: Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*" to exploring the role of silence and speech. He explores the move from silence to speech in the characters and looks at how that movement is parallel to the personal transformation of the title character and the possibility of a larger social change.

Walker wants us to sense that silence symbolizes those moments in her characters' biological and emotional lives - especially, though not exclusively, her women's - when they are most vulnerable to physical penetration and psychological manipulation.

(Hellenbrand 117)

Hellenbrand explains silence as powerlessness and vulnerability and the acquisition of voice as the gaining of strength, independence, and identity. Mem makes this move from silence to speech and reclaims her identity and power in her marriage. In response to Brownfield's announcement that he would be moving the family to yet, another sharecropping cabin, Mem reclaims her voice for the first time: "I ain't" Mem said. "I ain't and these children ain't." She stiffened her thin tough neck for his blow" (*Third Life* 108). Many critics agree that words and language represent the power in the text to uplift the soul and build community. Mem moves from silence (weakness and vulnerability) to speech (strength and agency).

Mem's movement from silence to speech is much more complex than just the movement; her movement to speech comes about with a realization about power and responsibility in her

marriage and about herself as an individual with strength. From very early on in the marriage Mem was in a constant struggle to obtain a movement of progress for the family. Before things were at their worst Mem was saving "every cent she was allowed to keep from her wages as a domestic because she wanted, someday, to buy a house" (*Third Life* 76). Buying a house and leaving the sharecropping life is a significant upward movement; the fact that Mem constantly wants to move on reveals that she is never a passive victim. The silence is an indication of her ill conceived survival strategy for her family. It is not until she is fed up that she realizes her silence is not helping, and she decides to take control.

A moment of significance in her realization is at the beginning of chapter nineteen, where Brownfield is angered by her attempts to find a house and at the same time doubtful and patronizing of her efforts. In this confrontation, Brownfield shoves Mem into her flower box and it is destroyed: "He shoved her and she knocked over her flower boxes..." (*ThirdLife* 101). This is of great significance when viewed with an awareness of what these flowers mean in the context of Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" from the collection of the same title. In this essay, Walker explains that part of what stifled the identity and power of the women from the time period and social strata Mem represents, was that their art and creativity was denied. The garden, the quilt, and the song help these women reclaim their art and their identities. Mem is a character who Walker associates with her own mother because Mem attempts to retain identity and pride in herself in "whatever shabby house [she was] forced to live in" ("In Search" 241). As he destroys the only element of Mem's identity that she has left, her flowers, Brownfield serves as the catalyst for Mem's movement to speech and action. The pride Mem takes in her flowers is comparable to the pride she takes in herself as a black woman; this pride contrasts the common characteristics of someone who fits the label of victim. Brownfield

was embarrassed because of his skin color, because he associates it with weakness: "...as his own colored skin annoyed him he meant for hers to humble her. He did not make her ashamed of being black though, no matter what he said" (*Third Life* 77). This pride in who she is that Brownfield lacks shows that Mem does not allow herself to be a victim of society and its racist ideology. Even in this small section, Mem's thoughts refute the claim that she is merely a "suspended woman." Walker enhances this moment by shifting focus momentarily to Mem's consciousness which will only happen when she makes that move from silence to speech and reclaims power for her family.

A noticeable shift of focus to Mem occurs in chapter twenty-one; the focus is centered on Mem and her daughters and how they perceive Brownfield, their own perceptions on upward movement, and Mem's ability to achieve it. Mem and the girls are discussing the modern conveniences they will obtain when Mem moves them out of this sharecropping cabin and into a house of their own in the city. When Brownfield enters the scene, he announces he will be moving them to another and even more destitute sharecropping home. This is the moment when Mem finds her voice and her self. When Brownfield demands complacency from his wife, Mem exercises her voice. "I already told you,' she said, 'you ain't dragging me and these children through no more pigpens. We have put up with mud long enough'" (*Third Life* 109). Mem's voice emerges as her perspective gains focus. Mem's acquired voice is significant to the challenge she undertakes, but her actions are even more significant because these actions usually belong to men in a patriarchal society. While Josie refutes the victim label by controlling an arena only suitable for men, Mem actually assumes the role and power mechanisms of men in order to gain power and independence.

Once Mem finds her voice she realizes she has no other choice but to find ways to get the things done necessary for the upward movement of her family. Brownfield refuses to do these things because he has accepted the role of victim and poor black sharecropper for himself and his family. "He felt himself destined to become no more than an overseer, on the white man's plantation, of his own children" (*Third Life* 72). Brownfield has already destined his children to the same fate he believes to be his own. Therefore Mem is the only one who can change their situation. Mem's acquisition of power, self, and progress begin with her finding a house and signing the lease herself. For the remainder of the next two chapters, the center of consciousness resides with Mem. Just as Walker is undermining the power hierarchy by stripping Brownfield of the power of perspective, Mem is undermining the power hierarchy by performing predominantly male duties that exude power by finding a house and signing the lease. At the moment she tells Brownfield she has signed the lease, the reader receives an inner thought of Mem's that refutes the categorization of victim: "whose [Mem's] decision to let him be man of the house for nine years had cost her and him nine years of unrelenting misery" (113). A victim does not have the power to decide to let someone be in control of them. As a victim, one is controlled without consent by a more dominant being; Mem *decides* to let Brownfield be the man and then she chooses not to allow that any longer. The power to make and change such decisions belongs to a woman with agency, power, and self respect.

There are also significant changes in Mem's thought process and language when she regains her voice and power. With the narrative pattern shift, the reader is given insight into Mem's feelings. Without this shift these thoughts would not have the same significance. Brownfield continues to reject Mem's announcements that she and the children will not continue this sharecropping life. At this point, Mem realizes that Brownfield has no right to the physical

and psychic power he wields: "I don't have to stand here and let this-----spit in my face, she thought more or less calmly, and for the first time very seriously" (*Third Life* 115). With each successive thought of this nature, Mem's voice gets louder and more present; what is most significant when she speaks is her dialect. Brownfield successfully destroyed Mem's proper speech, but as she regains her power and identity, she regains the part of her self that separated her from others: "'You do what you want to, Brownfield.. .You do exactly what you want and go precisely where you please. But me and these children are going to live in that house I leased'" (115). In this section, Mem has recalled her nouns, verbs, plurals, and singulars; it as if through her speech, she reclaims the identity that Brownfield helped destroy. Mem then obtains a job that pays more than Brownfield's and makes it clear that she and the children are leaving with or without him. Again these actions do not belong to a woman who could be called a victim, and her actions recall those of other literary women, such as Hurston's Janie Crawford, Toni Morrison's Pilate or Sula and Walker's own Shug Avery or Meridian.

By becoming violent and therefore taking on the form of power Grange and Brownfield exercise, Mem challenges and changes the power hierarchy. Recalling Mary Helen Washington's theory on "suspended women," Mem could be considered such a woman until this point in the text where she has found her fist as well as her voice. After verbally standing up to Brownfield, Mem believes she has made headway. But when he returns drunk that same week and brutally beats her as she lies in bed, she employs the only behavior that Brownfield associates with power and that is violence. Brownfield awakes from a painful jab to the groin to find Mem "propped up against the wall on her side of the bed, holding a shotgun" (*Third Life* 123). During this violent confrontation, Mem again reminds Brownfield and the reader she is not some passive victim. She wrongly allowed Brownfield the power in the relationship out of pity: "'To think I let you drag

me round from one corncrib to another just cause I didn't want to hurt your feelings" (126). The confrontation ends with Mem laying out her rules for life in their new home, including respecting her and the children and stopping all abuse, to which Brownfield obliges. Mem has successfully overturned the power hierarchy that exists in her society and her household; she holds the power, decides the fate of her family, and sets the rules. The act of overturning a male-dominated power hierarchy should be of great interest to feminist critics, but there is a lack of discussion surrounding Mem's actions which leaves a void in the critical conversation. Barbara Christian points out that "Walker risks hell and brimstone when she stitches together the remnants of a black man's lost pride with the new cloth of the black woman's mounting strength" (61). The risk Walker takes should warrant a discussion, but Christian is one of very few who recognizes Mem's actions as risky and challenging to male-dominated society. Perhaps the outcome of Mem's challenge to Brownfield and the power hierarchy has led critics to wrongfully dismiss the power of her actions.

Mem's time of power and independence are short lived. This is due to the same reasons that Josie experienced rejection from her father, female biology. Brownfield strategically breaks Mem down through the weakness of her female biology. He tries to keep her pregnant, out of work, and weak until the life she built up and the home she obtained crumbles and he ushers the family back into the cycle of poverty. As Susan Willis states when discussing the issue of pregnancy in Walker's work, "conception articulates oppression," and for Mem it not only articulates oppression but multiplies its effects (82). Through this horrible slippage back down the ladder of progress that Mem fought so hard for her family to climb, Mem still has strength and fight left in her spirit. Mem is *not* a victim. Even in extreme weakness and destitution she is still determined: "Tm going to git well again, and git work again, and when I do I'm going to

leave you" (*Third Life* 142). The house and the life they had are a testament to Mem's power despite sexist and racist ideology. These moments in the life of Mem's character show that she is determined to challenge whatever cruel authority Brownfield and the sharecropping system claim, at every step refuting the victim label.

The good life with a peaceful, progressive Copeland family is fleeting, but the fact that they get there is a testament to Mem's strength. Mem's struggle points to a very important element of Walker's work and Southern literature in general. Robert James Butler discusses the theme of overcoming oppression through the struggle of the open journey in his article "Making a Way Out of No Way: The Open Journey in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*." The journey motif is highly important to *Grange* because the journey is the physical aspect of the search for "human liberation" and it serves as "a way of maintaining a vital self in societies which are both racist and sexist" (Butler 67-68). Human liberation and the maintaining of identity are ultimately important to *Grange*, but the element of "making a way out of no way" is more important to the re-categorization of Mem and the other females as strong fighters rather than victims. Barbara Christian notes the struggle is not only a common motif but an element necessary to find one's identity: "the exploration... of the process of personal and social growth out of horror and waste is a motif that characterizes Walker's work" (50). Christian goes on to say that Walker sees the struggle as "prerequisite to real and lasting change" (102). Walker emphasizes the necessity of change and within that she "validates the necessity of struggling out of external constrictions to find meaning in one's own life" (Davis 37). Mem is doing exactly that; she is struggling to make her family's life better and find meaning in her life. Because Mem rises out of struggle, she embodies one of Walker's most important motifs and in doing so she makes herself a pivotal character in the novel and for the survival of the only hope, Ruth.

Butler also discusses the importance of the struggle to Southern literature and Walker specifically in his other article, "Alice Walker's Vision of the South in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*" Butler claims Walker's vision is a double one which includes the oppression and cruelty of the South and also the beauty and strength of community. Butler claims that Walker has this double vision of the South because she lived it; she recalls that community "gave blacks a way of coping with and sometimes transcending the hardships of such a racist society" (195). Mem lacks this communal strength because she does not have her family there to support her. Josie is the only person she has to rely on and Josie has ulterior motives when it comes to Brownfield. Though Butler understands the struggle and the necessity of struggle for the development of self, he, like other critics, only sees this in regards to Ruth. Butler claims Walker's characters represent this dual vision of the South; Brownfield represents the cruel South while Ruth represents those who overcome struggle through family and community. But Josie and Mem both overcome struggle in their own ways without family and community. The lack of community support is probably one of the reasons for their ultimate failure, but their attempts prove they are not mere victims of the cruel part of Walker's vision of the South. Walker's vision of the South helps to show why Margaret, Josie, and Mem ultimately fail: they are trying to do it all on their own without familial or community support while Ruth has the self-built isolated community of Grange's farm. Though Margaret, Josie, and Mem all work through the struggle they do not end the novel as Ruth does - a character full of hope for the future and the possibility of changing the pattern of previous generations.

Mem refutes the victim label and demands a space for herself as an important character because she is attempting to reclaim her identity which is of ultimate importance to Walker. Within the theme of family and community, Walker is trying to show how by uplifting or

rebuilding the family one is claiming and maintaining her identity. When Mem decides to uplift the lifestyle of her family, she is claiming her identity and her agency as a human being. According to Peter Erickson, Walker uses the family as an "imaginative structure" for her work and he identifies the relationship between Grange and Ruth as the regeneration of the family (5). Erickson ties this into a larger motif of finding and maintaining identity by emphasizing Walker's belief that maintaining family is maintaining the self. Erickson, Butler, and Christian are just a few of the many critics who feel the novel is divided by the degeneration and the regeneration of family with the regeneration beginning with Grange becoming Ruth's guardian. Perhaps this division has led critics to dismiss any females that were part of the degeneration. But Margaret and Mem repeatedly attempt to regenerate the family, which leaves more questions about the lack of focus on their actions. Though Erickson realizes the importance of family to identity, he does not discuss that what Mem does by overturning the power structure in her home is an attempt to regenerate the family. Though she does not succeed, Mem is attempting all of the things that ultimately save Ruth. But in the realm of criticism she does not get credit for this.

Thadious M. Davis takes Erickson's ideas about the regeneration of family a step further and uses the term "community" to enlarge Walker's vision of family. In *Grange*, the family is larger; it is all of the generations before and after Brownfield. Walker uses "sexual violence and physical abuse to portray breaches in black generations" (Davis 26). Again, Mem is attempting to do these things that ultimately save Ruth. When Mem lays down her rules for their new home, the absence of violence is a main priority. Mem uses all of the resources available to stop these breaches and rebuild family and community. Mem enacts all of the most important thematic elements, but is left out of the discussion because she ultimately fails in her self survival. Despite her failure, the foundation her actions provide for Ruth should be acknowledged.

Mem might not have won the fight for power and progress with Brownfield but she does fight, and she gives her girls, especially Ruth, a model to remember. The tragedy is that Brownfield, in his painful rage, murders Mem in front of the children. Christian claims that women like Margaret and Mem (she leaves out Josie) "are destroyed when they begin to gather strength and rebel" (62). Perhaps what she means is that women who have been abused and are trying to maintain their family while challenging their abusers are destroyed by their abusers. What is unfortunate about the lack of discussion concerning Mem's power, especially for feminist critics, is that it leaves her where the character Brownfield leaves her, as a weak victim. But all evidence points away from that label. Brownfield, while criticizing the deceased Mem condemns her as weak because of one of her strong and beautiful qualities: "without this strength, the strength to kill his ass, to make him wallow continually in his own puke, she was lost. Her weakness was forgiveness, a stupid belief that kindness can convert the enemy" (*Third Life* 212). Brownfield, at this point, is a character whose beliefs about humanity are always wrong. To place Mem in a box with Washington's "suspended women" is to condemn a character who contains multiple elements Walker finds essential for survival and wholeness.

Mem holds onto her creativity through flowers, she challenges the power hierarchy, and most importantly she believes in the possibility of change for Brownfield and implicitly for humanity. When critics leave the females in *Grange* to be labeled as victims they are, like Brownfield, mistaking their belief in change as weak. Walker has stated that a big part of what she is trying to do through her characters is emphasize that change is possible and one of the most important things that society must work towards. Christian discusses this belief in change as a way that women are defined in the text: "the way in which women are treated and the way in which they define themselves are related to the possibility of change" (101). Mem's belief in

change is what allows her to survive and keep challenging her family's status. Brownfield's overturning of Mem's power and literal murder of her and her identity are not grounds to dismiss her as a victim.

When Mem is murdered and Brownfield refuses to change, Ruth is the only hope left to break the Copeland's cycle of poverty and abuse. There are many reasons why Ruth's character has been given the most focus when it comes to discussing female characters in *Grange*. Most important is the prominence of her perspective in the second half of the novel. There is a consensus when it comes to structure that Mem's murder divides the novel. Directly following the murder, the reader follows Ruth's childhood and adolescence for the rest of the text. Ruth's perspective is integrated with Grange's as he becomes her guardian after Mem's death. This prominence of perspective leads readers and critics to focus on Ruth as the most important female character. But the fact that prominence of perspective sways the focus of readers and critics supports the argument that Mem and Josie are as important as Ruth and as undeserving of the victim label. Both Josie and Mem have several places in the text where their perspective is given focus, like Ruth's; therefore these two belong in a category with Ruth. Narrative perspective focus is important, but it is only one part of why Ruth commands critical focus. Many critics view the novel as being about three generations of Copelands: Grange, Brownfield, and Ruth. This is a bit simplistic when one recalls the prevalence of the other women's stories.

There is no question that Grange is a pivotal character in this text and he is able to see what was missing in these women's lives that kept them from surviving. Grange witnesses Margaret, Mem, and Josie fight without surviving successfully; he realizes that survival is one thing, such as Josie and the Dew Drop Inn, but something is missing: "Survival was not everything. *He* had survived. But to survive *whole* is what he wanted for Ruth" (*Third Life*

272). These elements enable Ruth to survive through the struggle but also to be happy, enjoy life, and enjoy being a woman. Ruth is the female character of focus in the critical conversation for all of these reasons, but her distinct opportunities and survival are not reason enough to categorize the rest of the female characters as victims without a discussion of their struggles.

Ruth is the only independent female with an intact identity at the novel's close, but that does not erase the many things that have been done by Margaret, Josie, and Mem throughout the text that liken them to Ruth. These female characters provide the first examples of elements a woman must obtain in order to survive. Margaret, Josie, and Mem have self-sufficiency, independence, speech (proper or not), and the courage to fight. Therefore, none of them should be so easily dismissed. Mem's strength and defiance at her place in life serve as a model for Ruth, but reviewers and critics often forget this when they begin to write about and discuss the novel. Keeping in mind what Alice Walker is trying to do with her art, it is unfortunate that the feminist critical discussion has left out the females who paved the way for Ruth, by fighting battles even though they may have lost the ultimate war with their oppressors. Margaret, Josie, and Mem may reach different levels of identity and autonomy in the text, but each of them attempts to reclaim identity and rebuild the family. Each of these women performs actions that challenge a racist and sexist society. None of them stand back and allow themselves to be victimized. By being silent on the challenges to dominant ideologies performed by these women, critics relegate these women to the silent position from which Walker releases them.

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