

The Temple of My Familiar Short Guide

The Temple of My Familiar by Alice Walker

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Characters

The Temple of My Familiar contains more characters than all of Walker's other novels combined, including several that reappear from *The Color Purple* (1982). Drawn from various continents, the number and diversity of these characters are appropriate to the theme of the connectedness of each and all. The concept of the unity of all people is further reinforced by having the central characters, who live continents apart physically and mentally, cross paths and develop intimate relationships during the course of the novel.

Lissie and Zede are the two characters who most clearly carry the novel's message of the need for a new vision.

Zede, like Lissie, has "dream memories" of her ancestors who trace their lineage from Latin America back to Africa. In her many incarnations, Lissie has been both animal and human, male and female, white and black. Although she has more often been exploited than the exploiter, she has been and done all. Both characters (especially Lissie), function primarily as symbols rather than realistic characters.

The other female characters, Fanny and Carlotta, struggle to achieve the self-realization Lissie and Zede have already won. They chafe within the narrow roles defined by the dominant culture. Fanny is unhappy with her subordinate role in both her marriage and a racist society. She has a hatred of oppressors that she fears she cannot control. To develop her sense of selfhood she travels to Africa to observe and learn from female relatives. Carlotta, a much different type of woman, faces essentially the same problem.

Abandoned by her husband, she becomes the submissive woman for Fanny's husband that Fanny refused to be.

She acts and dresses the part but ultimately, like Fanny, remains unsatisfied. Her search for identity also takes her through new age approaches such as massage and yoga. However, she only discovers her identity through community with other womanists, in particular, through her relationship with Fanny.

If female characters in Walker's novel have to learn to reject the marginalized roles assigned them, Walker's male characters have to learn to accept the side of themselves that they have marginalized — the feminine side. Two of the three male characters have a developed feminine side. Hal, Lissie's husband, is so sensitive to the birth of his wife's first child that he gives up sex to avoid causing such pain, yet he loves delivering his wife's babies (who are fathered by other men). He is effective as a symbol, but as a character he borders on the absurd. Arveyda, the other sensitive black male character, is a new age music star, but with a domestic side. He bakes whole-wheat bread and after reading some womanist tracts his wife brings home, he recognizes their author, Shug, as his spiritual mother. Suwelo is the male character most intent on learning to develop his feminine side. Through Lissie's tutelage, he learns to give up his love of



pornography, a fetish that symbolizes his desire to continue the oppression of women, and is brought to see women as equals.

By the novel's conclusion, Walker's main characters have all reached the same philosophical viewpoint: nothing is to be excluded from the circle of life except that which oppresses. In *The Color Purple*, Celie says that if God listened to black women, life would sure be different. *The Temple of My Familiar* illustrates the efforts of black womanists to transform the world by reviewing the past and countering divisive forces in the present.



Social Concerns

In *The Temple of My Familiar*, Walker tries something almost destined to fail.

She challenges the West's Eurocentric vision of the world — its myths of human origins, its concepts of history, its ideas on political relationships, its attitudes toward the environment, its views on male/female relationships.

The male-dominated white culture has written the script and cast the players for thousands of years. In *The Temple of My Familiar* Walker recasts the roles and rewrites the script. Formerly marginalized people (principally African American females) take center stage — a much broader one than just Europe and North America — and play the heroic roles. Walker undoubtedly chose this approach because she knows, as does every chronicler of a people, that a people's concept of themselves and their prospects for the future are influenced by the accepted stories of their past. Those whose pages of history are cast in a dim light or worse, no light at all, must often struggle with an imposed, unacceptable identity or none at all. So, by rescripting history, Walker hopes to better the prospects of people marginalized by the hegemony of the white male.

A central social concern of the novel is the importance of a new vision of human interaction that emphasizes inclusion rather than exclusion. An old saying goes: "There are two kinds of people in the world — the kind who divide the world into two kinds of people, and the kind who don't." Walker — who has been accused of seeing the world in terms of black and white, female and male, right and wrong — celebrates in *The Temple of My Familiar* the connectedness of all things. Certainly racism and sexism are concerns in the novel, but Walker has a larger concern here which has not been central to her fiction previously. Walker is still concerned with race and sexism; she still views the world from the perspective of a black womanist. But with her focus on cosmic consciousness, the label "black womanist" seems too narrow to define her new approach. Although some critics have expanded the label to "new age black womanist," Walker has supplied her own description: "My full title that I've given myself at this juncture is pagan agnostic ecstatic."

Since Walker has always expressed a strong concern for the rights of the excluded and exploited, it is not surprising that she would extend that concern to animal rights and the protection of the environment. The "familiar" of the title, in fact, refers to animals, principally the lion, which have long suffered in their relationship with humanity. According to one of Walker's characters, Lissie, familiars were once treated by women as companions and equals, but that relationship threatened male egos and they were driven away. In other stories in the book, Walker describes with equal indignation the wanton destruction of South American rain forests, African complicity with Western powers who dump radioactive wastes in Africa, and the destruction of the ozone layer. In the face of these assaults on the defenseless, Walker contends that "it is fatal to see yourself as separate." For her, healthy change will come only when society learns to see itself from a holistic perspective and with the understanding that all are one.



Techniques

Walker's principal technique in *The Temple of My Familiar* is to revise the Western representation of reality, which depicts itself as separate from and superior to other cultures, by telling stories that stress connection and equality. In her own words, Walker has said: "What I'm doing is literally trying to reconnect us to our ancestors. All of us. I'm really trying to do that because I see that ancient past as the future, that the connection that was original is a connection; if we can affirm it in the present, it will make a different future." Fanny unearths stories of black contributions to American history that have been neglected or suppressed.

Lissie presents reinterpretations of ancient myths. Zede recounts horrors and heroism that would have been left in the jungle and out of recorded history. This deconstructive technique might well have been acquired from the feminist movement or from modern critical theory; however, Walker was most probably influenced by the Black Aesthetic of the 1960s. As critic Elliot Butler-Evan explains the goals of that movement: "The major thrust of Black Aesthetic narratives as oppositional or alternative texts was the production of alternative representations of black life, positing significant self-reconstruction and definition, and the deconstruction of the ideological assumptions under pinning Western constructions of reality."

As critic and novelist J. M. Coetzee points out about Walker's rewriting of history, however: ". . . history is not just storytelling. There are certain brute realities that cannot be willfully ignored. Africa has a past that neither the white male historian nor Ms. Walker can simply invent."

Walker employs the same deconstructive technique not only on broad cultural topics but also on the characters' personal relationships. In *The Temple of My Familiar* the traditional institution of marriage is a failure.

Exclusive pairs fail because one of the partners is always privileged. To achieve sexual egalitarianism, paired relationships must open into triangular ones. Triangles are, after all, a woman's sign of peace throughout the novel.

Hal and Lissie's relationship is troubled until it opens to include Rafe.

Fanny and Suwelo's relationship is exploitative until Arveyda enters in.

Arveyda and Carlotta's relationship is marred by jealousy until she is to accept her mother as having been Arveyda's lover. Paired relationships are broken and eventually characters are healed by the love triangle, which in traditional Western literature invariably spelled disaster. In Walker's novels, however, the destructive triangle is transformed into a symbol of cooperation and equality.



Themes

A central theme in the novel is the challenge marginalized people face everywhere in creating an identity.

Fanny, for example, faces two unacceptable roles — either as a victim of racism and sexism or as a possible perpetrator of retaliatory violence. She, like many characters in the novel, seeks a new role. The source of new ideas does not seem to be from traditional books. Witness Suwelo, the college history teacher, and Carlotta and Fanny, college literature teachers who are spiritually lost. The sources seem to come from other places, principally women's lives — specifically from women with past lives in the case of Lissie and Zede, or from dreams which hold archetypal memories as Franny's dreams do. These sources are better guides to achieving a viable identity.

Walker puts the importance of these sources of knowledge this way: "a people's dreams, imaginings, rituals, legends . . . are known to contain the accumulated collective reality of the people themselves." In *The Temple of My Familiar* the wisdom that comes from these founts directs the characters to seek their identities in the connectedness of all things rather than in opposition to anything.

In Walker's novels, a new identity cannot be achieved without support.

There are no lone heroes. Those who struggle up from oppression, those who are lost and find themselves, succeed within a community of support.

The first place to look for support is the family. Fanny travels back to Africa to consult her father. She seeks out her mother for advice and makes alliances with her sister. She also tries reading books by little-known women writers, joins consciousness-raising groups, and enters therapy. Carlotta reconciles with her mother, and in an act that demonstrates that she has stopped competing with women for the attentions of men, she befriends Fanny. It is Fanny who, through her massage sessions, puts Carlotta in touch with her body, which she became alienated from in her drive to attract men. Suwelo, who lost his parents in a car accident, finds his support from surrogate parents, Lissie and Hal, who help him undergo values realignment. Arveyda, who lost his mother early in life, falls in love with his wife's mother, who renews his passion. He also discovers a new "spiritual mother," as he calls her, in Snug.

The novel ends with the four central characters living communally.

It is no surprise that in a novel with a central theme about the necessity of recreating the world, that the importance of artistic vision would also be a theme. Artists, after all, create worlds.

All the major characters in the novel practice some creative art on the way to building a new vision of themselves and their relationships with others. Hal and Lissie, both painters, paint portraits of each other, an act which symbolizes their re-creation of each



other in their relationship. Arveyda sings his wife, Carlotta, "into understanding her mother." Carlotta, a costume designer, like her mother, takes up painting and eventually becomes a musician, a bell chimist, in order to play with her husband. Fanny takes up playwriting after her father, and with her sister writes a play of her father's life. With her husband, Suwelo, who has taken up carpentry, Fanny designs their house, a symbol of their finally reconstructed relationship. No less important is the fact that all the characters are storytellers — an art which Walker sees as the central art in re-creating the world.

In all of Walker's novels the protagonists undergo spiritual transformation from depression and ignorance to hope and understanding. Grange Copeland transforms from self-centered to caring; Meridian Hill, from sickness to physical and spiritual health; Celie, from poor and degraded to financially independent and respected; Tashi, from victim to martyr. The theme of spiritual transformation is central to *The Temple of My Familiar* as well. Each of the characters search for wholeness.

They are split by a world in conflict, by a world that is divided into sides — by race, by sex, by religion, by political system, and so on. The novel suggests that by the will to find identity, by community, and by artistic vision people can transform into whole human beings.



Key Questions

Inasmuch as *The Temple of My Familiar* can be classified, it resembles a novel of ideas and perhaps it is best approached in that way. A place to start might be with the controversy over a premise influenced by the Black Aesthetic Movement that the history of oppressed peoples can and should be rewritten imaginatively in order to deconstruct "the ideological assumptions underpinning Western constructions of reality." Was Walker successful anywhere in the novel with this technique?

A second thrust of the novel is in advancing ideas about where the world should be headed in areas such as the institution of marriage, directions for social change, attitudes toward racism, mankind's relationship toward animals, and so forth. Walker's ideas should stimulate an interesting discussion.

1. All the central characters seem to evolve to a higher consciousness. What social responsibilities, if any, are part of their new consciousness?
2. Does it seem to be true that Walker's homogenized view of the sexes and races through Lissie dilutes moral responsibility for sexism and racism?
3. What various roles do love triangles play in *The Temple of My Familiar*?
4. In Walker's novels the central female characters often make a big to-do over their discovery of masturbation. In what ways is masturbation used symbolically in this novel?
5. Does Fanny's experience show the way one can combat racism without becoming a racist?
6. Walker took much criticism for her depiction of black males in *The Color Purple*. How do the black male characters appear in this novel?
7. Suwelo obviously has much to learn about how to treat women. Does Arveyda share any of his oppressive tendencies?
8. Why does Lissie write to Suwelo in disappearing ink?
9. What relationship does Lissie's story of the familiar have to do with the stories involving the central characters in the novel? What do they need to set free?
10. Is modern African society as it is depicted in the novel any better or any worse than Western Society?
11. Can you identify where the source of all trouble comes from in *The Temple of My Familiar*?
12. What link does there seem to be between memory and imagination in the novel?

Literary Precedents

The Temple of My Familiar is a unique novel, with few literary precedents.

Much like Lissie's dream familiar, it is not recognizably bird, fish, or reptile.

Nevertheless, Walker would claim to owe a debt to Zora Neale Hurston to whom she has often referred as her literary foremother. Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is also concerned with the search for identity in an oppressive and exploitative world.

While both novels are concerned with the same struggle, however, the solutions are different. Hurston's character achieves her identity by adhering to her individual artistic vision, while Walker's characters achieve whole, healthy identities through participation in a community of people with a holistic vision of life.

The Temple of My Familiar has perhaps been most influenced by Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928). Walker quotes from the opening of Woolf's novel in an epigraph. Woolf's central character, Orlando, experiences life as a male and later as a female over a period of three centuries. Most importantly, Woolf uses this fantastic technique to expose cultural biases and illustrate the essential equality of the sexes. Walker quotes a passage in *Orlando* in which the young man is batting at the shrunken and suspended head of a Moor. It could be that Walker, while acknowledging her predecessor, is also calling attention to Woolf's selective view of equality.

Related Titles

Walker's last three novels share a number of characters. Shug, Celie, Nettie, Olivia, Adam, and Tashi from *The Color Purple* appear briefly in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Olivia, Adam, and Tashi are central characters in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). Fanny, who only appears in *The Temple of My Familiar* is the daughter of Olivia and the granddaughter of Celie. Walker has said that the novels are not intended to be seen as sequels, and indeed no character who has a major role in one book has anything but a minor one in the others. The characters reappear because as Walker said, she had a hard time leaving some of them or in the case of Tashi she did not have the space at the time to tell her story.



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