The Third Life of Grange Copeland Short Guide

The Third Life of Grange Copeland by Alice Walker

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Contents

Characters

Grange Copeland, the main character in the novel, connects the three generations of Copelands as he moves through three phases of his own life: his years as an abusive father and husband; his period of crime and violence in the North; and his parenting of Ruth. In his first life, Grange, then a distant, alcoholic father, withholds love from his son Brownfield and indirectly causes the death of his wife Margaret, a submissive wife who dreams of a better life for her family in the North. Grange's alcoholism, infidelity, violence, and desertion drive her to suicide.

Brownfield never forgives his father for failing to love him and for destroying his mother. He also resents that his mother neglected him to please his father. Throughout his life, Brownfield seeks revenge on his father and control over a woman to relieve his sense of powerlessness.

After Margaret's death and Grange's desertion, Brownfield is seduced by both Josie and her daughter Lorene. Walker refutes the stereotype of the black loose woman in a multidimensional portrait of Josie, a successful business woman with a voracious sexual appetite and a generous heart. She owns a popular juke-joint, the Dew Drop Inn, where she and Lorene compete for men. Dressing in "a red silk kimono with blue and purple dragons on the sleeves," Josie prefigures Shug Avery in The Color Purple (1982; see separate entry), who displays a similar vitality and sensuality. Like Shug, Josie -was prevented from marrying the man she loved because his family deemed her not "respectable" enough. Josie, unlike Shug, was raped at sixteen and endured abuse from countless men.

Mem is the most complex, fully developed female character in the novel. Described as refined, beautiful, and "cherry brown," Mem, in her strength and determination, contrasts with the delicate mulatto beauties of nineteenth-century African-American novels. Indeed, it is her "inner sovereignty" that elicits Brownfield's murderous jealousy, which eventually causes him to destroy her. With her refined style of talking and walking, at first Mem intrigues Brownfield but soon exacerbates his low self-esteem. Her tragic flaw is her love for Brownfield, which leads her to trust him. He ensures that her health is undermined by two abortive pregnancies and then, on Christmas eve, he lies in wait and shoots her.

Two daughters of Mem and Brownfield, Daphne and Ornette, never recover from the loss of their mother and their father's abuse. Though Daphne has fond memories of her father before he became an alcoholic, she struggles to maintain her love for him and cultivates numbness to cope with his brutality: she keeps "her mind a perfect though burning blank."

This strategy will be used by Walker again in The Color Purple, when the young Celie makes herself like wood to withstand Pa's abuse. In contrast to Daphne, the middle sister, Ornette, displays a rebellious spirit, which, since it threatens Brownfield's patriarchal dominance, makes her his least favorite daughter. After Brownfield serves

his prison sentence, he learns that Daphne is in a Northern mental institution and Ornette has become a prostitute, both casualties of two generations of dysfunctional families.

Brownfield and Mem's youngest daughter Ruth is the first Copeland to break out of the pattern of poverty, despair and abuse. Her name associates her with the old Testament Ruth, underlining her enormous capacity for loyalty and love, which are evident in her relationship with Grange. Educated, outspoken, and independent-minded, Ruth is the first Copeland who aspires to become a leader working to eradicate the social injustice that African-Americans endure.

And she is the first female character with the courage, confidence, and financial resources to realize the family's dream of moving north.

The novel has few white characters, nearly all of whom are portrayed negatively. Most are greedy white plantation owners who perpetuate a sharecropping system in which African-American men labor at such low wages that they cannot support their families without going deeply into debt. The novel includes one good white person: the husband of Mem's boss, who treats blacks as human beings. He pays Mem a generous wage, lends her books for the children, and avoids casting condescending gazes at blacks.

Social Concerns

Set in Georgia between 1920 and 1960, Alice Walker's first novel The Third Life of Grange Copeland describes the economic oppression African-Americans suffered under the share-cropping system and its tragic effects on black families and the black community. Walker asks to what degree blacks themselves have been accomplishes in their victimization by the white power structure, which destroys their dignity and dreams. She also explores the intersection of racism and sexism in the oppression of AfricanAmerican families, depicting black men who vent their anger and frustration, not on the whites who exploit them, but on their wives and children. The two main male characters, Grange and Brownfield Copeland, both try to prove their manliness through methods endorsed by white patriarchy: through assertions of power over women in the form of sexual conquests and wife abuse.

Walker invites us to ask how an African-American family can overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles created by a racist economic system that destroys the self-esteem of men who become enmeshed in debt as they struggle to provide a meager home and sustenance for their families. Black men in Walker's novel are denied the dream of upward mobility through hard work, which inspired waves of European migration to the U.S. From Harlem to Georgia, Walker's men find the American social system closed to blacks.

The eponymous protagonist Grange Copeland's life spans three generations, each scarred by parental abuse and neglect. Children are chains around the necks of the male Copelands, reminding them of the constraints of their poverty and their powerlessness to escape squalid living conditions. Finding themselves trapped in hopeless circumstances, these black tenant farmers project their selfloathing onto wives and children, whom they brutally abuse as they, presumably, had been abused by their fathers. Walker suggests that the cycle of abuse can be broken only when men become responsible husbands and fathers. But this answer represents a flawed solution, at best, in a society structured to prevent blacks from acquiring money in legitimate ways. In Walker's novel, white men take no responsibility for their part in creating and profiting from the plight of the black families.

Walker's novel opens in the Copeland backyard where we observe, from the perspective of the ten-year old boy Brownfield, Uncle Silas's Buick withdraw down the bumpy, dusty mule track, which the highway department neglects to scrape. The shiny Buick, with its plush interior, symbolizes to Brownfield the North, in particular the glamorous life his aunt, uncle, and cousins enjoy in Philadelphia, a city with tall buildings and elevators that soar "up, up, up from one floor to the next." Walker juxtaposes the lifestyles of the city and country cousins, stressing the drab, flat, and stagnant Georgia landscape surrounding and enslaving the share cropping Copelands, in contrast to the color, heights, and movement that animate the cousins' urban world. These cousins impress upon Brownfield the inferiority of his life and shock him with accounts of his family's conflicts: his father Grange's debts to his white boss, Mr. Shipley; his mother Margaret's dream of leaving Grange and moving north to

Philadelphia, so that Brownfield could attend school and enjoy a comfortable lifestyle; the strain that Grange's alcoholic binges place on the family's finances; and Grange's attempts to break out of debt by pressuring his wife to prostitute herself to Shipley.

Later in the novel, Walker exposes the myth that the North is the "Promised Land" when Uncle Silas turns out to be a drug addict and is shot while robbing a bank. Although Brownfield eventually realizes the hollowness of his cousins' boasts, the image of a better life in the North still haunts him. His dreams of opportunities in the North typify the faith that motivated Southern blacks in the first part of the twentieth century to migrate to Northern cities, hoping to escape economic and racial oppression in the rural South. All his life Brownfield Copeland tries to escape the emasculation he, as a young boy, saw his father suffer in the South when humiliated by the white boss Shipley. Instead Brownfield replicates his father's behavior by relating to his wife and children with the same brutal dominance that his boss exerts over him.

Within five years after the cousins' visit, Brownfield's family disintegrates.

Inescapable poverty and racism lead to chronic alcoholism and abuse. The omniscient narrator describes how the Copelands's lives are warped by the rhythms of Grange's alcoholic binges. Verbally and physically abusive when drunk, Grange, in his rages, sends his wife and son hiding in the woods out of the range of his shotgun. He repeatedly withdraws from his son because Brownfield reminds him of his own failures. The love between Grange and Margaret dies, and Grange takes a mistress to affirm his manhood— Josie, the owner of the Dew Drop Inn, a thriving juke joint for blacks in Baker County. Margaret sleeps with Shipley's men, and Grange deserts his family, moves in with Josie, and then flees to the North. A month later Brownfield discovers his mother and her new baby, named "Star," poisoned in the clearing, his mother on her knees, perhaps attempting to atone for giving birth to the child of a white father. In this scene and others like it, we see the disastrous effects that the disintegration of a black family has on its children; Brownfield, feeling abandoned by both parents, never forgives either.

Anger and resentment, along with the lack of parental nurturing and guidance, prevent him from developing into a mature adult capable of sustaining love for his own wife and children.

In Part II, Brownfield heads North but ends up at the Dew Drop Inn, where he becomes the lover of the owner, Josie (his father's former mistress), and her daughter Lorene. Brownfield's dependence on Lorene and Josie epitomizes his inability to function as a self-reliant adult.

His potential to behave responsibly is evident, however, when he falls in love with Josie's niece Mem, an educated school teacher, who fascinates him with her beauty and her refined manners and speech. They marry and he, like his father, becomes a tenant farmer, eager to save enough to move his family North.

The potential for love within Brownfield appears in his early years of marriage, when he and Mem enjoy a "passionate and careless" love, which sours only after Brownfield realizes that he will never escape from the same economic system that entrapped his father. After three years, he feels "locked in debt up to his hatbrim," virtually a slave to the white plantation boss who he had believed was fair.

In Part III, when Brownfield feels powerless to "save his children from slavery" because "they did not even belong to him," he follows his father's example by becoming an alcoholic and brutalizing his wife Mem. Projecting his own self-hatred on her, Brownfield accuses Mem of infidelity (while confident of her faithfulness), beats her regularly, and forces her to give up school teaching for domestic service. He even humiliates her into speaking the dialect of "a hopeless nigger," intentionally debasing her to his level to relieve his sense of inferiority.

The economic enslavement that black men like Brownfield experience makes them failures in a society that measures men by their ability to provide comfortable lives for their wives and children.

Walker portrays such black men as repeating their own enslavement by oppressing wives who become their scapegoats.

Walker's omniscient narrator tells us that Brownfield revises the Pygmalion myth, recreating Mem into a woman he finds ugly in order to make it easier to abuse her. Like Grange, he attempts to relieve his own inadequacy as a father and husband by overpowering someone more vulnerable than himself. But the result is increased self-hatred, which enmeshes him more inextricably in an endless cycle of abuse. Unlike Grange, Brownfield never learns to take any responsibility for his own life. Instead he relinquishes control to his white bosses: "He jumped when the crackers said jump, and left his welfare up to them." He regresses to an infantile dependency on his mistress Josie for money and sex, which causes him further humiliation when he learns that her attentions are intended only to provoke Grange's jealousy.

Part IV opens with the birth of Ruth, the third daughter of Brownfield and Mem. By now Brownfield is so incapable of acting like a responsible parent, that he cannot rouse himself from a drunken stupor to fetch a midwife. For Grange the child Ruth will function as a redeemer, which is foreshadowed in Grange's description of her birth in language echoing Christ's nativity: Grange calls it "somethin' of a miraculous event."

During this period, Grange takes an active role in providing for Brownfield's family, bearing "a load of eatables and wearables" every time he visits. Such gestures enrage Brownfield, for he resents his father's attempts to compensate for past neglect of himself and his mother Margaret. The contrast between the father and son emphasizes options that Walker believes were available to black men in the South. The father, Grange, eager to expiate his past mistakes, proves that an individual can transcend the effects of poverty and racism and behave heroically. The son, Brownfield, obsessed with revenge against Grange, becomes so dehumanized that he embodies the racist stereotype of the violent black male. But Walker underplays Brownfield's disadvantages

in comparison to Grange who, unlike Brownfield, benefitted from a period in the North and other people's money.

The first and second generation of Copeland wives differ in their ability to resist domination by abusive husbands.

Margaret, the weaker and more submissive wife, eventually submits to her husband's wishes and sells herself to the white boss, falling into the stereotype of the black whore. A more complex and stronger character, Mem is an assertive black wife who holds the family together in the absence of a positive husband. Far from a one-dimensional black matriarch, however, Mem is weakened by an internal conflict between her love for Brownfield and her determination to create a comfortable home for her children. Though she signs a lease to rent such a house, afterward she succumbs to Brownfield's insistence that they move to another plantation shack instead. Still undaunted, Mem finds a job for herself and one for Brownfield in a nearby factory. Though pleased with his new job, Brownfield resents following Mem's script, which signifies, to him, the loss of his manhood.

In the power struggle between Brownfield and Mem, Walker dramatizes the gender politics that undermined AfricanAmerican marriages and families in the post-Civil War South.

In Part V Mem's assertion of control reaches a climax when she threatens Brownfield at gunpoint and reads him a list of ten rules to follow in her house.

The primary one is that he must behave like a man rather than the way white men expect him to; he must treat her and his children with respect. Mem's argument represents Walker's belief that one way African-Americans can avoid complicity in their oppression is to accept responsibility for their actions. Brownfield refuses to accede to this argument, maintaining that his behavior is determined by white racists. He and Mem express incompatible conceptions of manhood, hers based on responsibility and his on dominance over his wife and children. Walker explores the merging of racism and sexism in the struggle between Mem and Brownfield, demonstrating how traditional American notions of masculinity contribute to the alienation that divides black men and women and that prevents them from working together against a common oppressor.

Mem's triumph—the family moves to her new home in Part VI—is short-lived, for Brownfield uses her vulnerability, to "bring her back to lowness." First, he wins her trust; then he ensures that she suffers through two pregnancies, which destroy her health and prevent her from working. Finally, Brownfield succeeds in moving the family to a house that represents the antithesis of Mem's dream: "Mr. J. L. 'splace" a windowless, floorless, three room shack half full of wet hay. And Brownfield returns to tenant farming, though it saps his health. Brownfield represents the black man who colludes in his enslavement by a white boss and tries to feel empowered by similarly enslaving his wife.

Walker repeatedly reminds us of the complexity of racial and gender problems by using a shifting perspective. In Chapter Twenty-Nine, the narration turns to the children's perspective, emphasizing the pain inflicted on them by a father who uses them as scapegoats for his own self-hatred. Ruth, the youngest daughter, emboldened by her father's brutality, tells him, "'You nothing but a sonnabit.'" In return, he inflicts on her "the first really hard blows Brownfield ever gave her." A new baby is born, an Albino boy destined not to live beyond his sickly infancy because Brownfield murders him. In Chapter Thirty-One, on Christmas Eve, Ruth's innocence ends when she sees Mem walk, inexplicably, into Brownfield's gun; and she realizes that her mother was, after all, Santa Claus. The chapter functions as a transition to the third generation of Copelands and launches the bildungsroman of Ruth, the character who most successfully transcends the effects of poverty and racism.

Ruth's two older sisters are taken North by Mem's father when Brownfield goes to prison; and Ruth, by her own choice, lives with Grange and Josie. Having persuaded Josie to sell the juke joint to buy a cotton farm, Grange works to create a stable life for Ruth, growing vegetables, saving money, and sparing her from field work. Walker's belief in the capacity of humans to transcend the devastating effects of racism and poverty appears in Grange's transformation from a feckless husband and father to a devoted grandfather. Gradually he and Ruth "become inseparable," with his wife Josie the odd person out.

Josie is a problematic character, who was abused by her father and exploited by Grange. The narrator explains the distance between Josie and Grange as a product of the hatred of whites that he felt during his "second life" in the North, since he believes Josie, an ignorant woman, is incapable of comprehending such feelings. The narrator gives no hint that this belief is a rationalization on Grange's part and calls Josie, Grange's "fat whorish wife who was raped at sixteen and never avenged." Though later Grange acknowledges that she is a better person than himself, in general Walker glosses over his callousness and condescending attitude toward Josie, even implying that her promiscuity warrants disdain. Grange's moral obtuseness regarding Josie may reflect Walker's intention to create a realistic protagonist with serious flaws, despite his transformation into a devoted father figure.

Grange's success in raising Ruth to be a self-confident young woman results partly from his instilling in her knowledge of and pride in her African-American cultural heritage, teaching her African songs, folklore, and dances. Although he impresses upon her the atrocities of slavery and the hostility between the races, Ruth resists Grange's separatist racial politics. In portraying Ruth as open-minded about whites, Walker expresses an optimism about the direction race relations were taking during the sixties.

In Chapter Thirty-Seven the focus shifts, however, to hostilities between blacks and whites prior to the Civil Rights Movement, through an extensive flashback of Grange's sojourn in the North.

Here, the turning point in Grange's life occurs in an incident in Central Park when he unintentionally causes a white woman's death. Fascinated by the woman's pregnant

condition, Grange closely watches as she meets her lover on a park bench near a pond. The lover, a white soldier, who is obviously the father of her child, offers the woman a ring and money, but apparently not marriage. After being abandoned by him, the woman drops the $700 he had given her. Grange picks it up and offers her half, only to be insulted by her twice: first, when she demands—'"Give me that money, nigger,"'— and second when she lets go of his hand, preferring to drown than be saved by a black man. The woman's death allows Grange to transfer his hatred from himself to whites: "He felt alive and liberated for the first time in his life.

He wanted to see a thousand tomorrows!" For weeks afterward he proclaims a gospel of hatred, randomly assaulting whites in the vicinity of Harlem.

The Central Park incident and its aftermath can be interpreted as an allegory, dramatizing the hostilities between black men and white women. Grange represents the black man attracted to a blond white woman, the dominant culture's icon of beauty. She, oblivious to the poverty that drives him to crime, regards the black man as a loathsome beast, an image which Grange's shaggy appearance reinforces. Although Grange later regards the episode as "simple murder," Walker portrays it as far more complex, showing how the white woman's racial prejudice elicits behavior in Grange consistent with her negative stereotype of black men.

The park incident ultimately frees Grange from his fear of whites so that, after he tires of fighting them in Harlem, he can focus on building his third life.

Returning to Baker County, he marries Josie for her money and buys the farm where he raises Ruth. The love that Ruth inspires in Grange informs his "third life," during which he tries to redeem himself through paternal devotion for her.

Walker's use of shifting perspectives —shifting back and forth among Brownfield, Grange, and Ruth—creates the impression that racial and class inequality in American culture has complex causes and effects, which are not reducible to simple solutions. In Part X, Walker shifts the focus to Ruth's perspective. We see her first encounter with the racist stereotyping endemic to American institutions when she discovers a caricature of an African-American in her history text book, beneath which a white student had written "Note: A nigger." The picture exposes Ruth to the pseudo-scientific, degrading images of African-Americans that proliferated from the Civil War into the twentieth century.

The dysfunctionality of the AfricanAmerican community appears in its intolerance of the relationship between Grange and Ruth. Ruth's classmates gossip about Brownfield's murder of Mem and his incarceration. Later, when Brownfield is released from prison, and Josie moves in with him, the classmates ostracize Ruth and taunt her for having an "indecent" relationship with Grange.

The only girl friendly to Ruth is the beautiful Rossel Pascal, and even she calls Ruth "Grange's wife." Rossel functions as a foil to Ruth, for Rossel's answer to the question of how to avoid life in a dysfunctional family is to marry a father figure—Walt Terrell, "the richest black man in the county," a World War II hero who is as old as Ruth's father.

Ruth's ambitions to attend college and move North suggest that she will avoid a fate like Rossel's, who a year after graduation, has grown into the role of the Southern lady, with a childlike devotion to and dependence on her husband. Nevertheless, compared to the lives of the abused women in the novel, Rossel's life as a traditional wife, married to a responsible black man, is an understandable choice in a world that gives poor southern black women few options. In Ruth, however, Walker creates the first independentminded woman in the novel, a character who symbolizes the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s in her desire to be educated and her potential to become a leader working for racial equality and social justice. Indeed, when Grange advises Ruth to wait for the right person to lead blacks toward freedom, she replies that she herself should fill that role.

Though he educates Ruth about George Washington Carver, Grange, surprisingly, makes no mention of the accomplishments of W. E. DuBois or Marcus Garvey, though both were prominent during the period that Grange was in Harlem.

In various ways, Walker presents Grange as a flawed role model for Ruth.

He admits to her that his hatred for whites spills over into a callousness toward other blacks. Further, the money he has saved for her was acquired from bootlegging and beating black men in poker games. Therefore, he urges Ruth to become a better person than he is by fighting whites without betraying her race, without becoming "a black cracker" herself. He hopes that she will avoid his mistakes, yet learn from him how to overcome the white power structure.

Grange provides her with money for college plus practical strategies to deal with "whites who owned and ran the town." Above all, he prepares Ruth for a future without him, a future in which she will not just survive but know "joy, laughter, contentment in being a woman," a future in which she will achieve wholeness. Ruth's security is possible, however, only because Grange exploited Josie and various black men. Walker implies that an unfair social structure breeds corruption among the victims who try to overcome it.

With the advent of Civil Rights Movement in Baker County, Walker suggests that the white power structure in the South will be changed. She contrasts the attitudes of the older and younger generation of blacks in the responses of Grange and Ruth. Though kind to the young workers, Grange considers their cause hopeless. In contrast, Ruth is intrigued by the marchers and the alliances among blacks and whites. She also experiences a sexual awakening when she meets an attractive young worker named Quincey, who, she learns, is already married. This encounter points out another weakness in Grange's parenting of Ruth—his desire to keep her secluded at the farm, where her chances of a romantic relationship are slim. Walker hints at the difficulty an isolated young black woman like Ruth would have finding a suitable mate in the South. But the tenderness between Quincey and his pregnant wife offers hope that Ruth's generation may produce loving, nurturing families.

In the final section of the novel, Part XI, Walker focuses on the corruption in the Southern judicial system. Brownfield takes Grange to court, presided over by Judge Harry, the epitome of white paternalism and one of those whites who "play God" and smile "in that way Southern white men smile when they control everything—birth, life and death." Harry clearly use his power for his own selfinterest. When Brownfield was in prison, Harry had Brownfield work as his personal gardener. No wonder, then, that when Ruth's custody case comes before Harry in court, he cavalierly grants Brownfield custody of Ruth.

Walker implicitly contrasts the selfserving actions of Judge Harry with the heroic self-sacrifice of Grange in the novel's climax where Grange shoots Brownfield rather than give him custody of Ruth. Once again Walker dramatizes the high price a black male pays to stop the cycle of abuse, which he himself contributed to, and the irreconcilable conflict between parents and children involved in that abuse. The novel ends with a description of Grange's final moments, marked by the deep ambivalence between love and hatred that characterized his third life: his mouth is open in an attempt to pray, probably for his beloved Ruth, but instead he utters a curse, presumably against white racists like Judge Harry. Grange's final words express his compassion for Ruth, left to find her way alone against grim odds: "'Oh, you poor thing, you poor thing," he murmured finally desolate . . . ."

Techniques

The sterility and stagnancy of the Copelands's lives are emphasized by pervasive images of flatness and drabness.

Flatness dominates Brownfield's world, beginning with his birth "in the vast cotton flats of Georgia" and continuing through his adulthood when he works in the cotton fields as his father had before him. The hopelessness of the sharecropper's life is underlined by brown and gray imagery. Brownfield was named after the "sort of brownish colored fields" that were the first things Grange saw after his son's birth. Grange thinks of the day on which Margaret killed herself and her newborn son as "that gray day of retribution in sorrow." Grayness also permeates Brownfield's life, from the gray dirt floor of his family's one room shack to the grayness on the palms of his hands. The last child of Brownfield and Mem has a gray appearance like a phantom: "small and still and gray" with "grayish redrimmed eyes."

Land images have both positive and negative associations in the novel. The names of the three main characters— Grange, Brownfield, and Ruth Copeland—stress their relationships with the land, which is primarily one of bondage to it. Only during the early period when Brownfield and Mem revel in their love, does Walker describe the land in positive terms: they made love "in the woods after the first leaves fell" and "at the shady ends of cotton rows." But after five years of "endless sunup to sundown work on fifty rich bottom acres of cotton land," with nothing but abject poverty to show for it, Brownfield suffers heartache and despair. The land becomes a weight to which he feels chained by his wife and children.

Mem is one of the few characters who is sustained by her attachment to the soil.

When Brownfield first meets her, he wonders at her enjoyment of leisurely walks in the woods. She delights in planting and tending flower gardens. Later, after Brownfield despairs of moving North, his efforts to shame Mem into despising her blackness fail because she regards skin color as part of the natural order: "She had a simple view of that part of life. Color was something the ground did to flowers, and that was an end to it."

This statement adumbrates the scene in The Color Purple when Shug Avery tells Celie about God's anger when people ignore the color purple in the fields.

Like her mother, Ruth draws support from the land. Grange's farm becomes her haven, but even before that, as a toddler, Ruth enjoyed the land around Mr. J. L's shack: she played in the straw field adjacent to the house, enjoying "the cool greenness of the ferns and water lilies that grew beside the crayfish-inhabited spring." In Mem's and Ruth's vital relationships with the land, Walker expresses the possibility that the soil can support individuals strong enough to withstand oppressive forces in their environment.

Another pervasive motif is the naturalistic imagery that portrays blacks as dehumanized by the racist social system.

Brownfield's slovenly eating habits cause his eldest daughter Ornette to think of him. as a "hog." At one point, after he verbally abuses Mem, she reflects that he behaves "just like an old dog." And Brownfield observes that Mem resembles "a skinny balding gorilla." He calls her an "ugly black hound," and she accuses him of treating her "like a no-count dog" for nine years.

Themes

Manhood is a pervasive theme. In the first scene between father and son after Brownfield's release from prison, Grange articulates a definition of manhood that stresses responsibility for one's actions.

Grange regrets that he had attempted to assert his manliness by using Josie and abandoning his wife. In his third life, Grange redefines manliness in terms of devotion to wife and children and a commitment to fulfilling one's family responsibilities in spite of racial oppression. He articulates the main theme of the novel: the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions. But the racist context of the novel exposes this solution as oversimplified. At key points Walker reminds us that white racists control institutions and prevent African-Ameri cans from enjoying power or privilege and that whites take no responsibility for their unjust behavior. Therefore, no matter how responsible African-Americans themselves are, their access to wealth will be restricted by the white power structure.

The novel also critiques the sexism inherent in the American ideology of masculinity. For example, in the Central Park episode, the white soldier projects an image of the heroic male—"tall and brave and honorable in his uniform"— but the image is undermined by the revelation that he has used and abandoned his lover.

Walker powerfully depicts the oppression of black women by abusive husbands in the sufferings of Margaret and Mem Copeland. Both struggle to keep their marriages and families intact, and both are used as scapegoats by husbands who project onto them their own selfhatred. Hope for strengthening black family structures is offered in Walker's portraits of increasingly strong female characters. Women in the novel become more independent and more complex with each successive generation. Whereas Margaret submitted passively to Grange's brutality, Mem fought Brownfield and asserted her right to fulfill her dreams. In Ruth Copeland, the youngest daughter of Brownfield and Mem, Walker creates a young woman equipped with the inner strength to break out of the cycle of abuse that killed her mother and grandmother. Through the relationship between Grange and Ruth, Walker suggests that paternal love and fostering, along with financial resources, can empower African-Americans. But in Grange's question about Judge Harry—"What about that Judge"—he condemns the entire racist social order, implying that it must be reformed before African-American men and women can live together with freedom, dignity, and love.

Love and its absence are dominant themes in the novel. The lack of parental love shapes Brownfield Copeland's entire life; his failure to feel nurtured in childhood creates a lifelong grudge against his parents, which he never outgrows and which emotionally cripples him as an adult. But Walker's novel also points to the redemptive power of love. In his early childhood, Brownfield loved his mother with a keen awareness that his very survival depended on her: on "her pliant strength and the floating fragrance of her body which was sweet and divine and delicate, yet full of the concretely comforting odors of

cooking and soap and milk." After she abandons him, Brownfield seeks surrogate mothers in his lovers, first Josie and then Mem.

In the beginning of Brownfield's marriage, he believes that Mem offers him a chance for salvation through her love.

Later, he regards his "wedding day as the pinnacle of his achievement in extricating himself from evil and the devil and aligning himself with love." Brownfield worships Mem and feels strengthened by "the warm life-giving circle of her breast." Because Brownfield never fully matures into an adult and a responsible husband, Mem's love proves inadequate to prevent his descent into alcoholism and abuse. Indeed, Walker raises questions about how love can exist in a racist society that refuses to view AfricanAmericans as complex human beings and that prefers to accept degrading stereotypes of them. Walker suggests that the social injustices pervasive in a racist society poison all forms of love in AfricanAmerican families.

After Brownfield stops loving Mem, his father Grange becomes devoted to her, as if to compensate for his son's defection. Further, through love and support of his granddaughters, Grange tries to make amends for his neglect and abuse of his own family. His goal—to raise Ruth to be strong enough to survive in a racist world—gives Grange's life purpose and meaning.

Key Questions

The Color Purple sparked considerable controversy regarding Walker's portrait of black male characters, with several writers and critics accusing her of reinforcing negative male stereotypes. The abusive behavior of Celie's father Pa and her husband Albert were cited as examples of Walker's betrayal of African-American solidarity. Class discussions could focus on similar issues in The Third Life of Grange Cope/and, but a more fruitful discussion might result from an examination of the effects that traditional white gender roles have on relationships between men and women in the novel, along with the added pressures created by poverty and racism in the rural South before the Civil Rights Movement.

1. Why is Grange Copeland unable to touch his son in the early scene in which Grange hovers over Brownfield's bed before deserting the family? How do social forces contribute to the alienation of father and son in this novel?

2. Does Walker perpetuate stereotypes of African-American men and women, or are her characters complex portraits of human beings?

3. How do race, class, and gender affect family relationships, in particular, marriages and parent/child bonds?

4. How do you understand the relationship between Grange and Josie? How do you react to Grange's treatment of Josie and his own assessment of his behavior?

5. What does imagery of land, drabness, and animals add to the novel?

6. What does the novel suggest about the economic and judicial systems in the South during the first half of the twentieth century?

7. Compare and contrast Margaret and Mem Copeland, their roles as wives and mothers, their strengths and weaknesses in the context of a racist patriarchal society.

8. What does Grange's period in the North contribute to the themes of the novel?

9. How do you judge Grange's killing of his son Brownfield and Grange's actions afterward?

10. According to Walker, what are possible solutions to the sense of hopelessness and futility that African-Americans may experience in a racist society?

Literary Precedents

In refuting stereotypical portraits of black men and women, The Third Life falls into the literary tradition of AfricanAmerican novels that focus on racial oppression. Two prominent examples are Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937; see separate entry) and Ann Petry's The Street (1946; see separate entry). These novelists, like Alice Walker, created black female characters who are complex and dynamic in contrast to one-dimensional black women, such as the loyal mammy, the loose woman, and the tragic mulatta, who frequently appeared in literature written by both white and African-American authors before the 1940s.

Specific parts of The Third Life resemble earlier African-American novels. Grange's period in the North, beginning in 1926 and lasting nearly four years, has echoes of Ralph Ellison's opening chapter of InvisibleMan (1951; see separate entry), for Grange finds that "to the people he meet and passed daily he was not even in exis tence! . . . The North put him in solitary confinement where he had to manufacture his own hostile stares in order to see himself. For why were they pretending he was not there?" Like Ellison's Invisible Man, Grange finds the Northerners' denial of his very existence more devastating than the contempt his blackness elicited from Southerners. And the liberation Grange experiences after the death of the woman in Central Park is like the freedom Bigger Thomas feels after murdering Mary Dalton in Richard Wright's novel Native Son (1940; see separate entry).

Related Titles

Themes and social concerns in The Third Life anticipate those treated in Meridian (1976) and The Color Purple. Meridian Hill's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement takes up where The Third Life ends. Her realization that she would kill to save "the best that has been produced" is comparable to Grange's murder of Brownfield at the end of The Third Life.

The Color Purple examines abusive relationships between black fathers and daughters, and between husbands and wives, but in this later novel, Walker focuses not on the theme of manhood but on empowering relationships among black women.

Nevertheless, elements of The Color Purple have parallels in The Third Life.

Until Shug Avery tells Celie that her husband's name is "Albert," Celie refers to him as "Mr." In The Third Life of Grange Cope/and, Brownfield tells Mem that she should call him "Mister," to acknowledge his manhood and her lowly status as a "black and ugly" woman. Brownfield's realization that his white bosses swap him and his family as if they were "a string of workhorses" prefigures an early scene in The Color Purple in which Albert consents to marry Celie because Pa has thrown in a cow to sweeten the bargain. Like Celie when she walks out on Albert, Mem finally asserts herself to Brownfield, telling him, in words that will be echoed by Celie, "We might be poor and black, but we ain't dumb."

The same year in which The Third Life of Grange Cope/and was published, Toni Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye, appeared. Both novels present the crippling effects of racism and poverty on African-American families, but unlike Walker's novel, which ends with the liberation of Ruth from her father's abuse, The Bluest Eye concludes with Pecola Breedlove's madness, the product of her father's incestuous love, her mother's neglect, and her community's indifference.

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