

THE QUILT THREADS TOGETHER SISTERHOOD, EMPOWERMENT AND NATURE IN ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE* AND "EVERYDAY USE"

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The art of quilting involves sewing together scraps of cloth to join fragments into both a work of art and a functional household necessity. Domestic textile design has largely been the domain of women in the United States across racial boundaries. In the African American community, women have been involved with quilting since they were brought to America as slaves. The artistry of quilting for the women who participate is a means of creative self-expression through improvisation and the irregularity of the African American quilt designs that are unique to that community. The self-expression involved in quilting creates a trinity of strength for women including: sisterhood, empowerment and a bond with nature. When women participate in the tradition of quilting this trinity of strength provides a positive channel for them to mend together the pieces of their lives and to move from fragmentation to fusion. The melding of the unique and fragmented parts of their lives provides the women strength to deal with adversities, such as sexism, isolation, abuse, ignorance or poverty. Quilting is not an end-point where women achieve elusive wholeness, but a way to meld together parts of their lives and achieve power from the joining of all the components that make them unique. Just as a quilt can always be adjusted and altered over time, so can the individual be altered and adjusted through new experiences and new ideology. The recursive power of the trinity improves the quality of life for the women involved in the artistry. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and "Everyday Use" explore the power of the quilt for a variety of African American women and offer vantage points on the trinity of strength that the quilt can provide for women who choose to participate in the tradition.

The main character and narrator of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is Celie, one of the most fragmented and oppressed women in

literature. Celie's life is full of disjointed scraps of experiences she cannot reconcile. The man Celie believes to be her father repeatedly rapes her. She gives birth to two children she believes are born in incest. Her father – who is later revealed to be her stepfather – steals the babies from Celie, and she is left unaware of their fate. Celie wrote, "He [her stepfather] took it [her first baby]. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can" (Walker, 1982, p. 12).

Her stepfather also alienates Celie from her dying mother because her mother believes Celie is responsible for the "affair" between herself and her stepfather. The loss of a connection with a mentor in the female world is a huge contributor to Celie's inability to gain power from the parts of her life. Celie said of her mother, "She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me. I'm big. I can't move fast enough" (Walker, 1982, p.12). Celie's mother has completely dismissed Celie from her life; and in her death, she fills her daughter with venom and loathsome thoughts. Her stepfather's ploy to isolate her in order to further her victimization is successful.

Celie longs to get an education. In her limited experience, she sees education as a form of empowerment. For Celie, it is the only form of power she sees as obtainable in her life. Her stepfather continues his oppression of her by withholding the opportunity of education. Celie noted,

"The first time I got big Pa took me out of school. He never care that I love it. Nettie stood there at the gate holding tight to my hand. I was all dress for the first day. You too dumb to keep going to school, Pa say. Nettie the clever one in this bunch" (Walker, 1982, p. 19).

In the first overture of a woman attempting to reach out to Celie in the novel, her teacher arrives at her home to try to convince her father to let her come to school. Celie reported,

"Next thing I know Miss Beasley at our house trying to talk to Pa. She say long as she been a teacher she never know nobody want to learn bad as Nettie and me. But when Pa call me out and she see how tight my dress is, she stop talking and go" (Walker, 1982, p. 20).

Miss Beasley attempts to reach out to Celie in a bond of sisterhood, but without the power of the quilt that comes later in the novel,

her attempts are unsuccessful. Celie will continue to be a victim to the patriarchy of oppression until she finds her own form of empowerment.

Her stepfather also drives a wedge between Celie and her sister Nettie. He wants Celie out of the house so that he can pursue Nettie, and he accomplishes this by essentially selling Celie off as a wife. Mr. _____ comes to the house in hopes of securing Nettie as his wife. His first wife was murdered, and he is incapable of caring for his children alone. Both men find Nettie more attractive than Celie, but their father refuses to give up Nettie and offers Celie in her stead. In an exchange devoid of love or concern for Celie's welfare, her Pa told Mr. _____,

“She [Celie] ugly. He say. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it... Fact is, he say, I got to git rid of her” (Walker, 1982, p. 18).

Celie is poised to be no more than a work mule and a mammy for Mr. _____.

The role of the mammy as played out by Celie is one of the major oppressions she must overcome, and eventually does as she is indoctrinated into the trinity of strength through quilting. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) in *Black Feminist Thought* noted:

The first controlling image applied to U.S. Black women is that of the mammy – the faithful, obedient domestic servant. Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behavior (p. 72).

The men in Celie's life are using the oldest form of exploitation of Black women available to them to suppress Celie – the role of the mammy. This role is so engrained in Celie's mind that she does not see how she is being exploited or even identify her need to rise above the exploitation. Once she is enlightened through the triad of power that she gains from quilting, she becomes strong enough to eventually shed this controlling image and form a new self image of her own making.

Delores S. Williams (1993) noted, “Alice Walker wants us to recognize that the inordinate demands men make upon the nurturing

capacities of black mothers are destructive for women... Walker's work suggests that the exertion of male power to make sure women meet these demands constitutes sexism in the black community" (p. 53). It is this sexism that represents one of the many oppressions that women face which can be overcome through the communion of quilting that empowers women to rise above their condition enforced by the many oppressors in their lives.

Mr. _____ does not love or respect Celie causing even more rifts in her sense of self. Celie knows the men discussed her "sell" to Mr. _____ as a work mule and mammy called a "wife" as they would discuss the purchase of seeds for next spring's crops. The men in her life are oppressors who only see her as a means to achieve their ends and not as a person with her own uniqueness. This cruel treatment further shatters her image of herself, and her life becomes pieces of experiences that she must endure.

Poverty also plays a role in Celie's oppression. She lives on the very edge of survival and the men in her life use her as a work force to supply their table with food and to take care of their offspring at no cost. Ultimately, one of the keys to Celie's empowerment is her ability to generate an income for herself, but it requires the trinity of strength through quilting for her to have the ability to break away from the oppressions of her life and envision a new economic system for her.

Celie's awakening to a new life comes at the heels of conflict. Mr. _____'s son, Harpo, is married to a powerful woman, Sofia. Sofia is the polar opposite of Celie. Where Celie is meek and quiet, Sofia is forceful and outspoken. She has a realistic viewpoint of the world, and is not afraid to counter the oppressive patriarchy to achieve her own goals. Harpo, who is accustomed to his father's treatment of women and their subservient mannerisms toward his father, comes to Celie seeking advice on how to make Sofia into a quiet work mule like Celie. Harpo told Celie, "I tell her [Sofia] one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always backtalk" (Walker, 1982, p. 42). Unfortunately, Celie offered him the worst possible advice, "Beat her" (Walker, 1982, p. 43). The end result of Celie's advice is not stellar. She said, "Next time us see Harpo his face a mess of bruises. His lip cut. One of his eyes shut like a fist. He walk stiff and say his teef ache" (Walker, 1982, p. 43). Sofia is capable of fighting back, and Harpo has been at the receiving end of her wrath. Celie, at this

point, cannot imagine a woman standing up for herself verbally or physically. Sofia holds a power that Celie does not possess and does not understand how to tap to utilize it to her own advantage. In order for Celie to progress, she must learn Sofia's secret. This can only happen through a sisterhood and an exchange of ideas. However, Celie has raised Sofia's ire toward her through her advice to Harpo, and the two women are at odds with one another.

Sofia confronts Celie. She is enraged and arrives at Celie's home carrying a sack. Celie reported, "She open up her sack. Here your curtains, she say. Here your thread. Here a dollar for letting me use 'em" (Walker, 1982, p. 45). Celie has made these curtains for Sofia and Harpo. In this exchange, the curtains, hand-sewn by Celie, are an extension of her self. The worst thing Sofia can think to do to Celie is to return this part of her that Celie offered to Sofia. This is the first instance in the novel where sewing and the product of labor become an extension of self. It paves the way for quilting, which comes later, to be a form of self-expression that the women can share.

At this point, Sofia shares wisdom with Celie that is so fresh and innovative to Celie that she cannot immediately comprehend the implications. Sofia said:

All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house...I loves Harpo...God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me. Now if you want a dead son-in-law you just keep on advising him like you doing (Walker, 1982, p. 46).

Sofia holds a power that Celie cannot fathom. She is willing to fight for herself and not meekly follow her oppressors. She demands equality and love from her husband. Celie needs this knowledge and skill in her own life, but the women must find a vehicle to deliver this wisdom. As the women continue to talk, Sofia moves from rage to pity toward Celie. She realizes that Celie is powerless, and subconsciously Sofia searches for a way to share power with Celie. She is the one who offered up the idea, "Let's make quilt pieces out of these messed up curtains" (Walker, 1982, p. 47). With this offer, the trinity of strength is opened to Celie. In this instance, Celie's journey to mend together the pieces of her

life begins with the bonding of the sisterhood. As they quilt together, the women become friends and Celie begins to understand Sofia's strength and to adopt parts of Sofia's ideology as her own. This is an important first step in Celie's transformation into a stronger individual.

Sofia and Celie mend their relationship through collaboration on a quilt. Elsley (2010) noted: "In the novel's first reference to quilting, Celie and Sofia move through confrontation to reconciliation with each other. Their joint quilting marks the beginning of Celie's journey to selfhood." Celie has been isolated from the only two women of importance in her life, her mother and her sister. Finally, through Sofia's generosity in offering her the sisterhood of quilting, Celie gains a woman friend and enters into the triad of power that quilting can offer. The quilt brings Sofia and Celie together in a joint project that creates strong bonds between the two women. When Sofia leaves Harpo and goes to live with her sister, Celie presents her with their quilt to take along, "At the last minute I decide to give Sofia the quilt" (Walker, 1982, p. 69). Celie cannot escape with her friend, she must follow her own life course and find a way to work through the other parts of the trinity of power begun with their joint quilting project, but she can send a part of herself, the quilt, with Sofia.

The sisterhood of quilting precedes the work of Alice Walker by centuries. Sofia and Celie enter into an old tradition of celebration when they begin collaboration on the quilt. Leon (2006) noted, "Antebellum African-American quilt manufacture was often linked with festivities" (p. 25). Sallie Paul of South Carolina remembered quilting as a party in her interview with the WPA, "Colored people would have quiltings to one of dey own house, up in de quarter, heap of de nights en dey would frolic and plan en dance dere till late up in de night (as quoted in Leon, 2006, p. 25). Harry Johnson remembered the festivities associated with a quilting:

'Dey would give a big supper an' give a quiltin' an' quilt out a quilt in one night. De cullud folks an' white folks, both, give 'em. But if de cullud folks give a quiltin' dey had to get permission from de white folks in slavery times. Dey always had a big supper. De quilt had to be done, first, den dey had a big supper an' dance' (as quoted in Leon, 2006, p. 25).

The communal aspect of quilting is an aspect of African textile work. “Melville Herskovits has identified similar Afro-Haitian arrangements. Comparing the communal work systems of Haitians and Africans, he points out that in both cases there is a ‘tradition of giving no pecuniary reward for work done, but of making the feast which comes at the end of the day’s labor adequate return’” (Leon, 2006, p. 26). The quilt was the only thing produced at such a gathering that belonged solely to the slaves. This community of work created good will among the group and was a mechanism to bond with other individuals through the enjoyment of creatively working together for a common goal. Alice Walker selected the quilt as a strong metaphor in *The Color Purple* and “Everyday Use” to show sisterhood. The rich history of bonding through quilting provides logic behind the choice she made to include it as an integral part of her work.

Her first quilting experience and the entrance into the sisterhood pave the way for Celie to forge other friendships with women. The friendship that ultimately liberates Celie is her relationship with Shug Avery, her husband’s lover. Celie is enamored with Shug. Everything about her is mysterious and wonderful. Like Sofia, Shug is everything that Celie is not. Shug can stand up to Mr. _____, she earns her own money with her singing career, and she is willing to do as she pleases instead of what the conservative southern society surrounding her dictates. Celie both idolizes her and is in love with her. Now that Celie has learned the power of the sisterhood through her quilting connection with Sofia, she has the tools to develop a connection with Shug. Shug is a talented singer who is accustomed to improvising her music to fit her mood and purpose. Celie is beginning to master her artistry with the needle, and is connected to Shug through their respective arts.

When Shug makes an overture of interest in Celie’s art of quilting, Celie is thrilled. Shug pulls up a chair next to Celie, “She pick up a random piece of cloth out the basket. Hold it up to the light. Frown. How you sew this damn thing? she say. I hand her the square I’m working on, start another one. She sew long crooked stiches, remind me of that little crooked tune she sing” (Walker, 1982, p. 60). Celie makes the connection between the improvisation of Shug’s “crooked tune” and the crooked stiches she makes on the quilt square. The square is a pathway for the two women to share their arts with one another. Shug’s strong personality must display superiority over Celie, since Celie possesses a skill Shug does not.

She shows her power over Celie in her mock frustration, "How you sew this damn thing?" (Walker, 1982, p. 60). Yet, despite her words, she still wants to enter into the sisterhood with Celie enough to attempt to work on the square even though she is not proficient with sewing.

Celie knows from her experience with Sofia that the quilt will provide the bond of sisterhood with Shug and she continues, "That real good, for first try, I say. That just fine and dandy" (Walker, 1982, p. 60). Shug retorted, "Everything I do is fine and dandy to you, Miss Celie...But that's cause you ain't got good sense. She laugh. I duck my head" (Walker, 1982, p. 60). In the good-natured banter the women exchange, the first threads of a bond are woven that will tie the women's destinies together. Celie is able to see the beauty in Shug's irregularity of stitching that she connects to the beauty of her "crooked little tune."

Her understanding of irregularity and improvisation are important for her to make another step into the trinity of power, an understanding of nature. Since nature presents irregular beauty, for instance, no flower, tree or bird is identical, it is important for Celie to appreciate the beauty of irregularity before she can completely appreciate nature. Likewise, improvisation is a human tie to nature since nature is constantly creating and improvising upon itself as it grows and evolves. The improvisation of design also echoes the musical improvisation that occurred with jazz musicians during the Harlem Renaissance. The ability to improvise is at the heart of much of the art of the African American culture. Shug takes her musical ability to improvise and applies it to the quilt, thereby acknowledging that Celie's art is linked to her own. This initial link to Shug becomes a strong bond and leads Celie into a lesbian relationship with Shug Avery. Their relationship propels Celie into the rest of the trinity of power. Through Shug she gains a bond with nature, empowerment, and a deeper understanding of the nuances of art through irregularity and improvisation.

The unique art of the African American quilt ties it to nature. African Americans brought a new aesthetic to quilting that "appears to have sprung into the American Quilt tradition without European precedent" (Leon, 2006, p. 15). One of the most unique characteristics of the African American quilt is the design irregularity of the textiles:

West and Central African textiles and African-American quilts are often peppered with design irregularities that until recently were

aesthetically incomprehensible to the majority of Westerners, who expected textile designs to consist of identically repeated imagery and abhorred the unsystematic variation that result from what they considered poor workmanship. Indeed, creative needlework was not expected or rewarded among early European-Americans; technical expertise was the order of the day (Leon, 2006, p. 45).

The art of the African American quilt shows great synergy with nature. The quilt grows organically and irregularly with mood and feeling instead of following a sterile geometric design.

Celie develops a bond with nature through quilting: another component of the trinity of strength. Replacing God with nature, Shug Avery is the avenue Walker uses to introduce a new theology to Celie. As the two women discuss their ideas on God, Shug shows Celie a new way of thinking about Him. Instead of God as some white guy, Shug sees God as nature. Shug tells Celie:

“My first step from the old white man [God] was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. . . I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it” (Walker, 1982, p. 178).

Shug has made the connection that God is nature and that there is an inner-connectedness among all living things that provides power to those willing to enter into communion with nature. During this conversation, Celie begins to see Shug’s point, “Now that my eyes opening, I feels like a fool. Next to any little scrub of a bush in my yard, Mr. ___’s evil sort of shrink” (Walker, 1982, p. 179). Celie understands that nature is more powerful than her oppressor. If a scrub of a bush can make the evil of Mr. ___ shrink, then the combined strength of all the forces of nature can empower Celie to overcome any obstacle in her life. Her understanding of nature gives Celie a new control in her life: one that would not have been available to her had she not made that first step with Sofia to enter into the sisterhood through quilting.

As the relationship with Celie and Shug unfolds, Shug becomes determined to deliver Celie from the oppression of Mr. _____. Once in a

safe and loving environment in Shug's home, Celie discovers her true talent, sewing, which was introduced when she and Sofia collaborated on the first quilt. She ultimately starts a business creating comfortable pants for women and men. Elsley (1992) noted the quilt metaphor shows:

A woman makes the world her own by taking apart the patriarchal ways of being to create a space for herself. That space allows her to accept her own fragmentation, embrace those fragments, and thus validate herself. Recognizing rather than denying her pieces is often a woman's way to become 'sole or whole' in a more femino-centric way. In effect, she makes a patchwork quilt of her life.

As Celie is empowered through quilting she learns important factors about artistry and self-expression. She succeeds in business because her pants are an improved improvisation of traditional pants, and the artistry of them attracts a following. Her understanding and appreciation of irregularity allow her to lose herself in a lesbian relationship, and to see that breaking the mold can be empowering as she reinvents the traditional pants worn by men and women.

As Celie becomes financially independent and savvy in the ways of the world, she becomes free from those who were able to oppress her. Thus, sewing introduced with quilt making becomes starting point for Celie's new way of life. Even with the breakdown of her relationship with Shug, she is able to move back to her family home and live a full life among family and friends. There are still gaps in the quilt of her life. She is not immediately able to gain the formal education she has always desired, nor does Shug choose to remain her lover, but her newfound strength becomes a pillar to those around her. She even enters into a comfortable relationship with her still-husband, Mr. _____, whom she is finally able to call Albert – a sign that she has finally entered into equal footing with him. Only her escape from oppression through the trinity of power she entered as a quilter could have allowed her to have this relationship with him as an equal instead of as a servant. Celie grows into a self-assured, self-sufficient woman over the course of the novel as the pieces of her life are melded together to form a new tapestry defining her sense of self.

Alice Walker in "Everyday Use" again presents a character that begins the story much like Celie, downtrodden and oppressed. Maggie's

oppression lies in her poverty, lack of education, disfigurement from burn scars obtained during a house fire, and lack of self-esteem. Her mother, the narrator of the story noted, "Sometimes Maggie reads to me. She stumbles along good-naturedly but can't see well. She knows she is not bright. Like good looks and money, quickness passed her by" (Walker, 2004, p. 2438). Maggie is a candidate to gain power from the strength of the trinity through quilting.

Maggie has had to live her life in the shadow of her older sister, Dee, who is everything that Maggie is not. Dee is beautiful, smart, light-skinned, stylish and ambitious. The story spans one afternoon when Dee returns to the family home after years of being away at college to visit her mother and sister. When their mother considers her girls she thinks:

Maggie will be nervous until after her sister goes: she will stand hopelessly in corners, homely and ashamed of the burn scars down her arms and legs, eying her sister with a mixture of envy and awe. She thinks her sister has held life always in the palm of one hand, that 'no' is a word the world never learned to say to her. (Walker, 2004, p. 2437)

Maggie has stood on the sidelines all her life in the shadow of the effervescent Dee. Her sister is a form of oppression to her because Maggie does not know how to stand her ground against the force of nature that is Dee. Again, Walker employs the trinity of power represented in quilting to bring Maggie from the shadows and to move her to a new position of security and confidence.

Maggie has long been a part of the cross-generational sisterhood of quilting in her family. Her mother reported, "It was Grandma Dee and Big Dee who taught her to quilt herself" (Walker, 2004, p. 2442). Maggie has achieved some aspects of the triad of power that comes from quilting. She has been indoctrinated into the family sisterhood and holds a skill that soundly ties her to the matriarchy of the family as well as the history.

She also possesses the bond with nature that comes with quilting. Both Maggie and her mother are at home in the natural world, in some ways even more so than they are in the artificial man-made world inside their home. The story opens with a description of the yard of the family home. Maggie and her mother are anticipating the arrival of Dee. Her mother said:

I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy yesterday afternoon. A yard like this is more comfortable than most people know. It is not just a yard. It is like an extended living room. When the hard clay is swept clean as a floor and the fine sand around the edges is lined with tiny, irregular grooves, anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house. (Walker, 2004, p. 2437)

Both Maggie and her mother are at home in the world of nature. Their ease with the natural world is a part of the experience of quilting. The quilting process allows the women the opportunity to control what once controlled their lives as slaves, cotton. By weaving and sewing the cotton into a quilt using their own labor and artistry, the women are able to take back control in their lives, and form a partnership with nature to replace the adversarial relationship formed in slavery. Historically, cotton was the source of exploitation of African Americans:

Without cotton, American slavery in the age of industry might have died out, doomed like other archaic economic systems, such as serfdom and indentured servitude. After the United States began mechanizing cotton production, with the cotton gin to clean the bolls and with the industrial spinning and weaving machines to make the cloth, the Southern slave population doubled. (Brackman, 2006, p. 37)

Cotton dictated slavery in the South. The slave women sought empowerment and control over this controlling force. Conquering cotton by turning it into a practical thing of beauty allowed them to feel power in a powerless situation. They also gained power due to the fact that the quilts they made provided warmth and nurture to their families. The quilt became an extension of the woman's love for her family. Rosemary Brey in "Keepsakes" said, "No matter where I go, [my grandmother's quilt] goes too. On a winter night it's like wrapping home around me" (as quoted in Leon, 2006, p.15). Maggie and her mother are part of this cycle of empowerment because they have both made a positive connection to nature through quilting.

Maggie and her mother's association with the earth is also a reflection of their skills as quilters because the quilt materials are of the earth. Historically, slaves had to work to find materials to fashion their

quilts. The primary material used in quilting is cotton, a natural product gathered by the slaves through various methods and usually gleaned from waste. Without realizing it, slave women were some of the first to recycle goods by taking old and worn items or waste products and making them into something beautiful and necessary. Harrison Beckett, a former slave said, "In de ginnin' time [marster] 'lowed de wimmen to pick up de cotton what drop on de groun' and make into beds, an' quilts an' comforts" (as quoted in Leon, 2006, p. 17).

The process of gathering materials to make a quilt tied the African American woman to the earth. They either gathered scraps or grew their own crops of cotton or flax in order to fashion quilts. Some women even had access to wool. Lucinda Elder, a former slave, said,

"Marse John had lots of sheep, an' when dey go through a briar patch, de wool catches on de briars, an' in de Fall de women folks goes out an' picks de wool off de briars... I didn't know nothing' 'bout makin' quilts outen cotton 'till I comes to Texas." (as quoted in Leon, 2006, p. 17)

Even the dyes for the material were from the earth, and Black quilt-makers were aware of this connection. In Barbara Brackman's (2006), *Facts and Fabrications – Unraveling the History of Quilts and Slavery*, she referred to Sarah Graves who was about ten years old at the start of the Civil war. Graves said, "If we wanted it [the fabric] striped, we used two threads, we would color one by using herbs or barks" (p. 43). This process of gathering and dyeing the materials to make fabrics created a strong bond between the slave woman and her environment. The earth became a symbolic, invisible quilter in the process. The human skill and labor of quilting is an art that improvises and interprets the natural world into a product of self-expression both beautiful and functional. Maggie and her mother have both experienced the energy and bond that comes from this communion with nature, but as the story unfolds, it is apparent from Mama's descriptions of Maggie's timid actions that Maggie has yet to access the final piece of the trinity of power of quilting, empowerment.

Quilts sewn by the elderly women of the family come into question as Dee turns to the actual mission of her trip, which was not to visit her family, but really to collect artifacts of her family's history to show off to her elitist friends in the city. Mama narrated:

After dinner Dee (Wangero) went to the trunk at the foot of my bed and started rifling through it. Maggie hung back in the kitchen over the dishpan. Out came Wangero with two quilts. Grandma Dee had pieced them and then Big Dee and me had hung them on the quilt frames on the front porch and quilted them. One was in the Lone Star pattern. The other was Walk Around the Mountain. In both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell's Paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece, about the size of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Grandpa Ezra's uniform that he wore in the Civil War. (Walker, 2004, p. 2441)

These quilts exemplify the cross-generational bonding of the sisterhood over their creation. They were pieced by Grandma Dee, who is now dead, and quilted by her daughters: Mama and Big Dee. The quilts also demonstrate artistry through the improvisation of the quilt designs, and the irregularity of the materials used. One of the quilts contains just one tiny irregular piece of the Union uniform worn by Grandpa Ezra during the Civil War. The quilts are tied to the environment through the materials used and the organic nature of the design. Even the names of the patterns employed, "Lone Star" and "Walk Around the Mountain," reference nature.

Dee, by her own choice, is an outsider to the sisterhood that created the quilts. Walker uses her to show the dichotomy of choices available to young African Americans. Dee is driven and ambitious. She has intentionally distanced herself from her family and their traditions in order to make gains in the world beyond her home. The community recognized her drive to succeed and raised money for her to attend school. Dee replaces the empowerment that comes from the trinity of strength through quilting, with the empowerment that comes from education and success in the city well beyond the confines of her small country community. While the community, through their willingness to help fund her education, as well as Mama and Maggie appreciate Dee's form of empowerment and success, Dee is unable to understand or accept that there are other ways to achieve concord with the world. As Dee ends her visit with her family, she "turned to Maggie, kissed her, and said, 'You ought to try to make something of yourself, too, Maggie. It's really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live you'd never know it'" (Walker, 2004, p. 2442).

Dee does not understand that Maggie has made something of herself. In the final moments of the story, Mama must make a choice between allowing Dee to walk away with the family heirlooms or taking them from Dee and giving them to Maggie who had been promised the quilts as part of her dowry when she married John Thomas. When Dee initially asks her mother for the quilts, her mother attempts to deflect her by offering some of the other quilts in the family collection. Dee refuses to be denied saying, "I don't want those. They are stitched around the borders by machine" (Walker, 2004, p. 2441). Dee wants the authentic part of the sisterhood and nature to become part of her inanimate collection of historical objects stored and displayed in her home in museum-like precision. Cowart (1996) said,

"The quilts that Wangero [Dee] covets link her generation to prior generations, and thus they represent the larger African American past. . . The visitor [Dee] rightly recognizes the quilts as part of a fragile heritage, but she fails to see the extent to which she herself has traduced that heritage."

Dee cannot appreciate the quilts the way that Mama and Maggie can because she has not immersed herself in the sisterhood that created them. The realization of this strikes Mama in a moment of utter empowerment that she in turn shares with Maggie. In this moment, both women fulfill the trinity of power that the quilt provides. Mama said:

When I looked at her [Dee] like that something hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet. Just like when I'm in church and the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout. I did something I never had done before: hugged Maggie to me, then dragged her on into the room, snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero's [Dee's] hands and dumped them into Maggie's lap. Maggie just sat there on my bed with her mouth open. 'Take one or two of the others,' I said to Dee. (Walker, 2004, p. 2442)

Mama's empowerment is like a religious moment for her. It is powerful enough for her to stand up to the daughter that the world never learned to say no to, and finally tell her no. Mama immediately shares her empowerment with Maggie who sits in stunned silence at finally being picked before Dee. Nancy Tuten (1993) noted, "Mama's new appreciation of Maggie is significant because it represents the establishment of a sisterhood between mother and daughter." In a single moment, the trinity

is fulfilled. Both women can partake all the power it has to offer. The presence of this tour de force, Dee, in their home provided the women the catalyst they needed to make the final step into the triad. Dee's own empowerment unknowingly spills over to her mother and sister. In that small way, Dee is connected to the sisterhood of her family. Yet, she still leaves in disgust at being denied what she believed should have been hers. There is still hope that since this first step of the sisterhood has been made, and that Dee has started to become interested in the heritage of quilting, that Dee may ultimately benefit from the trinity of power provided through the heritage of the quilt. In the meantime, she has left Maggie with "a real smile" and Mama and Maggie sit outside "just enjoying, until it was time to go in the house and go to bed" (Walker, 2004, p. 2442).

Alice Walker clearly understood the power of the quilt when she considered the metaphors that would convey the messages of empowerment, nature and sisterhood in her works. Walker is a quilter herself. When she was struggling with writing *The Color Purple*, she said, "I bought some beautiful blue-and-red-and-purple fabric... and a quilt pattern my mama swore was easy, and I headed for the hills" (Walker, 1983, p. 358). Not only did Walker consider that quilting tied her to her mother, but she felt it linked her to her African American traditions and would help provide the creative muse of irregularity and improvisation for her to complete her work on *The Color Purple*. Walker understands the artistry of quilting and turned to it to provide inspiration for her own art.

In Walker's *The Color Purple* and "Everyday Use," the quilt transcends being just a link to history. The examination of the quilt as a means to move everyday women from oppression to empowerment provides a new way to consider Walker's work. Her quilt metaphor is loaded with a triad of positive traits: sisterhood, empowerment and bonding with nature. As the women in her stories experience quilting, they enter into this recursive triangle that gives them the power to overcome the miseries of their existence. For Celie, she is empowered to overcome abuse, isolation, poverty, ignorance and sexism. As she moves through all the steps of the triad and is locked within the recursive power of it, she begins to piece together her fragmented life. As these pieces bond, she is empowered to be self-confident and self-sufficient. Walker never claims to make her a whole person, as there are always places where Celie will have room to strive for more, thus providing her an impetus to continue to move

within the triangle and seek new ways to express herself, but Celie has a weapon at her side to take on the world.

With the sisterhood behind her and the power cursing around her, she has the ability to achieve success in any endeavor of her choosing. Maggie, too, is awakened within herself by the power of the trinity through the quilt. Her mother reports that for the first time Maggie smiles a real smile after she enters into the final phase of the triad. Maggie has felt fragmented and incomplete when held in comparison with her burnished sister; but once her mother hands her the final segment of the trinity, empowerment, Maggie can finally relax in her own skin and truly enjoy the world around her. Maggie, too, has room to grow and change; and once again, Walker does not claim she is made whole. However, she is empowered to enforce the changes of her choosing. Walker's decision to leave the women works in progress is a valid one. Wholeness is not obtainable, but every woman can be empowered to achieve her desires, and enabled to identify and continue on a life-long course of self-discovery and improvement by enjoying the flow of strength from the quilt's trinity of power.

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