



ALICE WALKER: ANOTHER SOUTHERN WRITER CRITICIZING CODES NOT PUT TO "EVERYDAY USE"

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A number of parallels can be drawn between stories in Alice Walker's *In Love and Trouble* and the works of other Southern writers, including William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor. The fact that these four writers are white and one of them is male supports the notion that Walker's subtitle for this collection, *Stories of Black Women*, is somewhat misleading and definitely limiting. In common with these other Southern writers, Walker holds up for scrutiny the tendency to support social and religious codes at the expense of individual fulfillment. With these conflicts, she emerges from this collection, not just as a black woman writer, but as a Southern writer. And like these other Southern writers, her work then reaches out even further and achieves universal appeal.

In "The Child Who Favored Daughter," Walker bravely explores the same inner conflicts illustrated by the giant himself in *The Sound and the Fury*. In the tradition of Quentin Compson, the story is told from the point of view of a confused male character whose whole life is influenced by his repressed incestuous feelings for his sister. Trudier Harris has already noted the comparison between Faulkner's notorious siblings and the brother and sister in Walker's story (Harris 495-505). Further analysis of the parallels reveals an ironic similarity between the respective emotional struggles of a white and a black Southern male.

Walker's description of the sister, who is called Daughter, from the perspective of her brother, is amazingly reminiscent of Quentin's view of Caddy. Walker writes:

She was like honey, tawny, wild, and sweet. She was a generous girl and pretty, and he [her brother] could not remember a time when he did not love her intensely, with his whole heart. She would give him anything she had, give anybody anything she had. (38)

Quentin often associates Caddy with honeysuckle. From the earliest memories of her, reported by her brothers, the reader gets a sense of her "wildness," particularly in comparison to Quentin's more timid nature. Her altruism is obvious. She gives to her brothers much more than they are capable of giving to her, for she gives love unconditionally. And neither is she discriminate in her generosity outside of the family. Much to Quentin's horror she gives her love and her "virtue" to an "unsuitable" man and later agrees to marry another. To Quentin, even incest is preferable to such impropriety. This illogical devotion to social codes rather than to love gives the reader insight into and sympathy for the developing "immorality" of Caddy's behavior. Caddy simply does not share Quentin's values. To her, the chance for love is more important than Dalton Ames's social inferiority. Once Quentin interferes with her love, Caddy passively accepts her brother's view that she has been hopelessly tainted and, consequently, is hopelessly doomed, and behaves promiscuously from then on. In spite of his substantial responsibility for Caddy's behavior, Quentin rages against it. His idea of her represents to him the South he must serve and protect; but the reality of her behavior fails to support this ideal.

Walker notes that Daughter did not "seem to care for the love that came to her too easily" (38); this attitude plagues her brother. Like Quentin, he begs her to cease her promiscuous behavior—"not to go out, to stay with him" (38). Also like Quentin, he is particularly appalled by her choice of lovers:

the very man in whose cruel, hot, and lonely fields he, her brother, worked. . . . That she had given herself to the lord of his own bondage was what galled him! . . . He could not forgive her the love she gave that knew nothing of master and slave. (38-39)

Ironically then, both males are concerned with social position. Comparable to Quentin's socially induced psychological confusion, as it is revealed in his section of the novel, is Walker's description of the brother's mental torment: "In a world where innocence and guilt became further complicated by questions of color and race, he felt hesitant and weary of living as though all the world were out to trick him" (40). The reader may

find the black man's fury more understandable than Quentin's, since in his sister's white lover's fields he is "not treated as a man, scarcely as well as a poor man treats his beast" (38). Quentin, on the other hand, is a member of this oppressive race. Yet one can still sympathize with Quentin's frustration as he watches his way of life being threatened. As the oldest son, it is his duty to do what he can to revitalize the family's social position; and his sister is not cooperating. And, more significantly, one can sympathize more with Quentin since it is against himself, not Caddy, that he ultimately acts upon these frustrations with violence.

It is not enough, however, for either man that his sister is eventually abandoned by her poorly chosen lover. Quentin takes his own life, but not before having stripped his sister of the chance for happiness. Not only has he driven Dalton Ames away and broken Caddy's self-esteem, but he also leaves her with the guilt of his suicide. Walker's brother is more consciously vindictive once he perceives that

his only guard against the deception he believed life had in store for him was a knowledge that evil and deception *would come* to him; and a readiness to provide them with a match. (40; author's emphasis)

Too late to punish Daughter for her crime, he brutally takes revenge out on the other women in his life—first his wife, then his own daughter.

The parallel between Caddy and Quentin is repeated with the brother and his daughter ("who favored Daughter"). She is depicted as unable "to quench her inner thirst" (43) with the fallacious morals of her brother. The author's description of her reminds the reader of Caddy and her hunger for love, which she could give, but has not received: "Silent and lovely, but barren of essential hope if not of the ability to love, hers was a world of double images, as if constantly seen through tears" (43). The reader sympathizes with the loneliness of this child, which drives her into the arms of a member of the race of her oppressors. Of course, this has outraged her father. From the passage opening the third section of the short story, one can infer that he has preached Christian morality to her in order to coerce her to "change her ways" (43). But, like Caddy, she fails to understand what these codes have to do with her—particularly, one can further deduce, because of the hypocrisy of her father's words, in light of his brutality toward her mother. Walker writes that Christianity's "hard Southern rudeness fell flat outside her house, its agony of selfishness failed completely to pervade the deep subterranean country of her mind" (43). Like Caddy, she is doomed to disappointment because of her inability to conform her uninhibited sensuality to her father's liking. She is unwilling or incapable of hypocritically repressing her desires for the sake of abstractions:

When asked to abandon her simple way of looking at simple flowers, she could only yearn the more to touch those glowing points of bloom that lived and died away among the foliage over there, rising and falling like certain stars of which she was told, coming and being and going on again, always beyond her reach. Staring often and intently into the ivory hearts of fallen magnolia blossoms she sought the answer to the question that had never really been defined for her, although she was expected to know it, but she only learned from this that it is the fallen flower most earnestly hated, most easily bruised. (43)

In this short story, Walker's women make the same mistake that Caddy Compson makes: they step out of their expected roles. As a white Southern woman, daughter of an aristocratic family, Caddy is supposed to value her virtue and deny any sexual desires. As black women in the South, Daughter and her niece may have white lovers, but not by their own choice; and they are definitely not to fall in love with these white men. As both the novel and the short story illustrate, to violate these codes spells doom for the transgressor.

In "The Diary of an African Nun" Walker makes a more direct and developed attack on Christianity, joining many of her fellow Southerners in examining its values and traditions. In this story, her treatment of Catholicism in particular can be associated with Katherine Anne Porter and Flannery O'Connor. More specifically, "The Diary of an African Nun" includes a scene reminiscent of the death scene in Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." The young woman in Walker's story is looking out of her window, subconsciously questioning her choice to become a nun. She is frustrated by the contradiction between her title and the emptiness of her life: as a Catholic nun, she is "a wife of Christ, a wife of the Catholic church" (114), but she does not feel much like a bride. She asks,

How long must I sit by my window before I lure you down from the sky? Pale lover who never knew the dance and could not do it!

I bear your colors, I am in your livery, I belong to you. Will you not come down and take me! (115; author's italics)

If she is considered a "wife of Christ," why should she not expect to be allowed to fulfill her "wifely duties"? To consummate the marriage? To have children? Her frustration and dejection over the absence of Christ as a tangible presence in the room echoes the despair of Granny Weatherall at the close of Porter's story when she begs inwardly, "God, give a sign!

[and f]or the second time there was no sign. Again no bridegroom and the priest in the house" (89). Peter Wolfe explains that "the emptiness and pain of Granny's death merges with her earlier jilting; neither George nor Christ, the bridegroom in the Roman Catholic pantheon, arrives to grace her life with a satisfying meaning" (147). Consequently, Granny is decidedly frustrated over this second great disappointment, suffered because of high expectations.

Early in her life, Ellen Weatherall had been thrown off guard when she was jilted on her wedding day, a day, one can imagine, when she thought she knew exactly what to expect. She had fallen in love and was going to be married and commence fulfilling her role as wife and mother; but "what does a woman do when she has put on the white veil and set out the white cake for a man and he doesn't come?" (84). Ellen quickly married another man and "had [her] husband . . . and [her] children and [her] house like any other woman" (86). But something was missing, something she does not allow herself to think about until it forces its way into her mind as death approaches. By insuring her fulfillment of her traditional role, she has given up love. And she gives it up a second time (and this time it is Love with a capital "L," i.e., Christ, that she is giving up) when her expectations are again disappointed. Her Catholic upbringing has taught her that Christ would come for her upon her death. When He does not show up as she expected, she is overwhelmed with grief and rejects Him with "I'll never forgive it" (89).

The African nun of Walker's story is similarly disappointed by false expectations. As a child, she is attracted to the nuns and priests of the mission school she attended. "They seemed so productive and full of intense, regal life. [She] wanted to be like them" (114). She learns later that this productivity and vitality is false—"that they could not have children" (114), for example—and that she would have to give up much of herself to be one of them. Not only is she not allowed to have children, but she is not allowed to be a woman. She must "wear [her] mission-cropped hair well covered, [her] nails clean and neatly clipped. The boys [she] knew as a child are kind to [her] now and gentle" (114), rather than passionate. Even her "husband," Jesus, "a celibate martyr and saint" (114), does not desire her. So she, too, separates herself from such cold, sterile traditions as she lashes out, "What have I or my mountains to do with a childless marriage, or with eyes that can see only the snow; or with you or friends of yours . . . who do not yet realize that barrenness is death?" (117). As Chester J. Fontenot points out, she is drawn to "the down-to-earth sensuality of African tribal religion," which she suddenly finds more appealing than "the aloofness of Christianity" (194). Both the nun and Granny Weatherall realize a flaw in Christian living: it may prepare one for salvation after

death, but it often leaves one so dissatisfied with life that she will reject this promise of deliverance in sheer frustration.

Walker provides a more positive view of salvation in "The Welcome Table." This story of an old woman's dying day is more elevating than Porter's story of Granny Weatherall, for Christ does come for Walker's character. Furthermore, whereas some readers of Porter's story believe Christ's absence indicates that Granny is damned for her inability to forgive George, the old woman in Walker's story is allowed to tell Christ her grievances without castigation. And yet, there is still a troubling tone to this story. Although Christ does appear to the old woman, His silence as they walk together is somewhat disconcerting to the reader. He offers no words of comfort, reminding the reader of the nun's image of a cold Savior in the other Walker story. It should be noticed, too, that at one point the old woman does worry about "annoy[ing] Jesus" (86).

In addition, the story ends with the somewhat disparaging account of the old woman from the people who had seen her walking along talking to herself before she dropped dead on the side of the road. If the reader compares this apparently senile old lady with Eudora Welty's Phoenix Jackson, however, the character regains her dignity. During Phoenix's pilgrimage in "A Worn Path," the reader is also given reason to suspect her mental stability. She mutters to herself and to inanimate objects as she travels, has hallucinations, and even forgets what she came for when she finally gets to the doctor's office (all of which may also remind the reader of Granny Weatherall's behavior on her deathbed). She, too, is treated condescendingly by the people she encounters in the story, and yet it is not she who gets the author's, and consequently the reader's, ultimate reproof. In comparison to Phoenix Jackson's charity and good nature, the other characters in the story appear selfish and petty. Moreover, her determination to complete her task, in spite of its difficulty given her old age, reveals a stronger faith than that exhibited by the other characters, who try to discourage her. Elmo Howell alludes to this notion when he writes that criticism can be found in the story against "white society"

in the mere choice of Phoenix as protagonist, rather than a white person, whose sophistication has cut him off from this basic communion with nature. Old Phoenix is a triumphant human being because of her acceptance of the conditions of life and because, even at her great age, she still reflects the primal joy of creation. (32)

Similarly, in Walker's story the strength of the old woman's faith, indicated by her ability to see Christ, adds irony to her being considered unworthy of attending any Christian church. So, although this story's

Christ does appear, at least to the old woman, the story is still another censure of Christianity.

Walker reminds her readers of another Southern Catholic writer in the short story "Entertaining God." The story's disjointedness, the presence of a gorilla, and the grotesque god in the story may all bring to mind Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. Both "Entertaining God" and *Wise Blood* include more than one story line, so that the central character alternates with each section or chapter. Writing of *Wise Blood*, many critics have focused on explaining how the separate story lines of Hazel Motes and Enoch Emory can be brought together to form a cohesive novel. Similar disjunction of the three sections of "Entertaining God" may also trouble Walker's readers. The common thread, other than the family ties of the three characters separately focused on, is the search for a god, just as it is ultimately the common quest of Hazel and Enoch. In each work, then, the author explores man's tendency to worship a false god.

The most direct parallels between the two works are in the first section of the short story:¹ the zoo setting and the central character John's kidnapping of a gorilla, which he treats as a god. It will be remembered that Enoch works in a zoo; that he, too, kidnaps a "god," the mummy he perceives to be the "new jesus" Hazel needs for his ministry; and that he is last seen wearing an ape suit. According to William Rodney Allen, the mummy "is for Enoch the incarnation of Haze[l]'s abstract notion of the 'new jesus'—a purely secular savior" (262). Margaret Peller Feeley explains that "the 'new jesus' is the incarnation of all people who reject the true God and make a god in their own image: shrunken in stature and spiritually dried up" (115-16). Walker's character's gorilla combines the two ideas. Not only has John chosen an earthly creature as his god, but one from the animal family that most closely resembles man physically. Thus, John's god also emerges from man, in that he shares man's bestial nature, rather than man's ability to reason. Or, combining Darwin's theory of evolution with a literal acceptance of the notion that man was made in God's image, one can understand John's choice of a "savage idol" (105).

In either case, John is particularly attracted by the strength of this great animal. As the gorilla sleeps, John "look[s] wonderingly into his open mouth . . . [with its] big swooping teeth" (101). In contrast, the

¹The central character of the second section of the story can be briefly compared with Hazel Motes. The character is John's father; Hazel is a father figure for Enoch. Just as Hazel tries to shake Enoch's company, John's father abandons his son. Both men are involved in crusading and are in the midst of their own spiritual crises, leaving them no time for the boys. And both men achieve self-awareness not long before they are destroyed.

reader is told of John that "there was a wistful gentleness in his face" and that "he had suffered" (100). The reader learns in the other two sections, which focus on his parents, that he has been a neglected child. This establishes another link with Enoch Emory, who is repeatedly put off by the people he comes in contact with during his life. Enoch finds peace by joining with a gorilla that shows a quality he lacks, in this case the ability to attract children. John, too, finds a kind of peace—or at least escape—from his worldly cares, when, after his offering of bread and wine at the gorilla's feet, he is "hurled out of the violent jungle of the world into nothingness and a blinding light" (105). Walker's character, like O'Connor's Hazel Motes, is destroyed by the god of his own creation.

In "Everyday Use" Walker explores another conflict in common with O'Connor's work. In this story Walker writes of the superior-minded child looking down on her mother's simplicity, and, in effect, the simplicity of her heritage. This plot line and character type can be found in a number of O'Connor short stories, for example, "Good Country People," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," and "The Enduring Chill." O'Connor ends these stories with an epiphanic awareness on the part of the arrogant intellectual of his or her true fragility, thereby providing, too, a more positive view of the parent (in comparison to her child). By telling the story from the mother's point of view, Walker portrays the mother as a more sympathetic character than her condescending daughter much earlier in her story. Although the daughter in Walker's story does not experience self-awareness, the author does give the mother the last word, thus providing the reader a clear idea of where the author's sympathies lie.² And the reader, if not the daughter, sees clearly that it is the mother who truly understands and promotes the continuation of their "heritage"

²Readers of Flannery O'Connor have found this more difficult to decide; the mothers in these stories are not much less despicable than their self-righteous offspring, and these mothers do not gain self-knowledge from their experiences. Robert Coles explains O'Connor's "complicated attitude toward intellectuals" as resulting from her sharing many of their beliefs (49). He contends that perhaps, too, she perceives within herself "a source of the very 'smugness'" (49) she portrays in her "Southern Intellectuals." This allows her to portray them more sympathetically and to show that they are not wrong about "the nonsense and stupidity and arrogance and pettiness that are to be found . . . in rural Georgia" (Coles 64). However, Coles also notes O'Connor's distaste for the "snobbishness they can't help demonstrating—a wry insouciance toward the feelings of their own kin and, in contrast, a complete devotion to the values and feelings of certain others: the distant liberals of Yankeedom, the nearby blacks, or the South's own 'progressive' people" (49). Their condescension toward their family leads to sympathy toward the parent each child is condemning.

by giving her daughter a name that she could trace "beyond the Civil War through the branches" (54) of her family, rather than an African name she could not; and by putting the handed-down, pieced-together quilts to "everyday use," rather than hanging them on walls.

In "Everyday Use," Walker again joins these four and many other Southern writers in the common criticism of Southern priorities, as the stories discussed above illustrate. Too often the tendency in the South has been toward upholding abstract codes at the expense of the human individual. Rather than use a quilt to keep the living warm, the proud Southerner wants to hang it on the wall, in respect for and in memory of the dead from whose clothes the quilt was made. Such idolatry, Walker shows, promotes the continuation of the oppression of her people. Like Faulkner, Porter, Welty, and O'Connor, then, she shows how her particular segment of Southerners keep themselves from living productive lives. Perhaps this accounts for the title of this collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble*. Alice Walker is writing of a group she loves, but who trouble her, just as Faulkner, speaking through Quentin, claims, "I don't hate [the South]," even though he writes critically of it.

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