Chapter IV

Poverty

Life is a struggle for survival and one faces hardships at all stages of life. This struggle gets magnified when one lives in poverty and thereby finds an uncongenial atmosphere for living. Racial discrimination plays a vital role for African American economic crisis. Living amidst racial oppression and poverty, Blacks interacted with one another in despair and distrust, and consequently they lost their peace of mind and became violent at the least provocation.

This chapter analyzes how cultural and socio-political factors affected the domestic relationships among Blacks in the American society. It gives rise to conflicts, mutual distrust, and killings. Many relationships such as man-woman, husband-wife, and parents-children are marked with discontents. Man-woman relationships generally cater to physical and emotional aspects of life where the economic factor plays a major role. The husband-wife relationships lay greater demand on the couple. The husband is expected to provide finance and resources for physical survival. Sometimes, wife is forced to take up the provider role leading to feelings of inadequacy, jealousy and violation of traditional sexual behavior.

Alice Walker’s *The Third life of Grange Copeland* presents the aggressive black men who indulge in physical abuse of their wives due to their racial and financial difficulty. Set in the 1920s in the rural South, the novel depicts the helplessness of a black man when pitted against the white society. Barbara Smith asserts that:
It analyses how economic struggle is linked to racism and sexism for the people she focuses on are southern sharecroppers. Her protagonists must contend with the restrictiveness of the economic order, of capitalism on their lives, even as they do not understand its nature. The effects of capitalism on the southern black families cannot be understood only in terms of the present. (52)

Grange Copeland, the protagonist of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, has three lives. The first phase of Grange’s life is dominated by his response to an oppressive, and dehumanizing socio-economic structure of sharecropping that deprives him of his personality. His placement in the white dominated sharecropper’s world generates in him self-hatred, and results in violence that he inflicts on his wife Margaret, and denial of parental love and care to his son Brownfield.

Grange is a tall, thin and brooding man, slightly stooped from plowing. His skin is the deep glossy brown of pecans. He is thirty five years old but seemed to be much older. His dispassionate vacancy and sadness are reflected in his face and eyes. He is seemed devoid of any emotion and bewilderment. Being a sharecropper on the farm of a white man named Shipley, Grange has no control over his life. He is a victim of the dictates of the situations created by his employer. Grange’s role as a sharecropper turns him into ‘a stone or a robot’ (TLGC 8). As a result, Grange does not like his son, Brownfield, or his wife, Margaret. In fact, Margaret wants to leave Granges and go to the North, to Philadelphia, with Brownfield’s uncle Silas, and aunt Marilyn. Brownfield reveals, “His father never spoke to him unless they
had company” (TLGC 5), and he feels as if he was a strain and burden to his father. His mother is a person who, "agrees with his father whenever possible” (TLGC 5) and he thinks his mother is “like their dog” (TLGC 5) in some ways; she says nothing that does not in some ways show her submission to his father. Abject of poverty plays havoc with Margaret’s life: she is forced to work though she feels guilty about leaving her son, Brownfield, along without proper care.

His mother left each morning with a hasty hug and a sugar it, on which he sucked through wet weather and dry, across the dusty clearing or miry, until she returned. She worked all day pulling baits for ready money. Her legs were always clean when she left home and always coated with mud and slime of baits when she came back. (TLGC 6)

When he is a boy, she has taken him once with her to the baits factory, but that place is terrified him. One day Margaret sit him down near the piles of squiring baits, he rolled over and became entangled in them. He is screamed. After that his mother is ordered to take him out of there at once and “never to bring him back” (TLGC 7). Margaret wants Brownfield go to school but it is impossible to Grange. Even Grange has no way to buy dress when Margaret needs it. He merely shrugged, never saying a word about it again. Grange rarely speaks to her, and if at all he does, he usually insults her. Brownfield comes to know through Angeline, his girl cousin that his mother wants to leave his father, as he is not a good man. He has tried to sell her to Mr. Shipley to relieve himself of his debt. He has borrowed so heavily that Grange tries to persuade his wife to take to prostitution.
In spite of the fact that Margaret works hard, and tries to shoulder as many responsibilities of her family as she can, she is neglected and abandoned. Therefore, she always feels alone, alienated, and rejected.

Grange Copeland’s behavior makes it very difficult for Margaret to lead a peaceful life. She has to suffer all the heredities that he enforces upon her, and on Brownfield, her son. The way they spend their week has a typical sequence. Their life follows a kind of cycle that depends on Grange’s moods:

On Monday, suffering from a hangover and the aftereffects of a violent quarrel with his wife the night before, Grange was morose, sullen, reserved, deeply in pain under the hot early morning sun. Margaret was tense and hard, exceedingly nervous. Brownfield moved about the house like a mouse. On Tuesday, Grange was merely quiet. His wife and son began to relax. On Wednesday, as the day stretched out and the cotton even longer, Grange muttered and sighed. He sat outside in the night air longer before going to bed; he would speak of moving away, of going North. He might even try to figure out how much he owed the man who owned the fields. The man who drove the truck and who owned the shack they occupied. But these activities depressed him, and he said thing on Wednesday nights that made his wife cry. By Thursday Grange’s gloominess reached its peak and he grimaced respectfully, with veiled eyes, at the jokes told by the man who drove the truck. On Thursday nights he stalked the house from room to room and pulled
himself up and swung from the rafters of the porch. Brownfield could hear his joints creaking against the sounds of the porch, for the whole porch shook when his father swung. By Friday Grange was so stupefied with the work and the sun he wanted nothing but rest the next two days before it started all over again. (TLGC 11-12)

The routine almost attains a vicious cycle from which there is neither relief nor change. The monotony symbolizes the static and unprogressive state of his life. His life follows the same trodden path:

On Saturday afternoon Grange shaved, bathed, put clean overalls and a shirt and took the wagon into town to buy groceries. While he was away his wife washed and straightened her hair. She dressed up and sat, all shining and pretty, in the open door, hoping anxiously for visitors, who never came. …. Late Saturday night Granges would come home lurching drunk, threatening to kill his wife and Brownfield, stumbling and shooting off his shotgun. He threatened Margaret and she ran and hid in the woods with Brownfield huddled at her feet. Then Grange would roll out the door and into the yard, crying like a child in big wrenching sobs and rubbing his whole head in the dirt. He would lie there until Sunday morning, when the chickens pecked around him, and the dog sniffed at him and neither his wife nor Brownfield went near him. …. Steady on his feet but still ashen by noon, Grange would make his way across the pasture and through the woods, headlong, like a blind man to the Baptist
church, where his voice above, all the others was raised in song and prayer. Margaret would be there too, Brownfield asleep on the bench beside her. Back home again after church, Grange and Margaret would begin a supper quarrel which launched them into another week just about like the one before. (TLGC 12-13)

Each week in the sharecropping homes follows a cycle of depression and violence, so too does the lineage of the character continue a pattern.

Unable to bear his failure, Grange becomes desperate and resorts to drinking and violence. He becomes jealous of Margaret and gets angry with her when she just says, “how’re you” (TLGC 11) to other men. On the contrary, Margaret is aware that Grange is going with other women and has been meeting them since the day they got married. His persistent faithlessness and his increasing disregard provoke Margaret into indulging in acts of infidelity, and she, at last, decides that she can no longer continue her life without some diversion from the drudgery. As a result, she begins to lead a life of debauchery. After carrying on in this manner for some years, she gives birth to a light skinned child, Star, the symbol of her betrayal.

After the birth of Star, Margaret’s illicit child, Grange ill-treats her. When the ill treatment reaches a point of intolerance, she chooses to react by way of rebellion. The relentless persecution turns her a woman who in the beginning is kind, submissive, smelling faintly of milk, into a wild woman looking for frivolous things, into a “huntress of soft touches, gentle voices, and sex without the arguments over the constant and compelling pressures of everyday life” (TLGC 20). She decides to live her life the way she prefers. However, the moment Grange leaves her, she poisons herself and her son, Star.
Instead of blaming racial discrimination and other social evils, black women are held responsible for their poverty. Thus they turned to be targets of attacks at home and society. They suffered at the hands of both whites and Blacks. The racial and cultural dilemma determined the new and disharmonious relationship between black men and their women. To escape from the life of a sharecropper, Brownfield, son of Grange, leaves the field of Shipley and goes to the owner of Dew Drop Inn, Josie. Josie is the link between the father and the son by being the concubine of both. In his travel to the North, Brownfield first encounters women who are temporarily without men company and who lavish all their attention on him. Preening himself, he thinks that a man is one who is tenderly waited upon by women and remains sexually active. Josie’s interest in Brownfield is initially kindled by his name and she shows keen interest in what he has to say about Grange. Brownfield, for his part, never Josie and her daughter Loren, Brownfield is a young animal they have not finished soiling.

He was constantly dependent on Josie or Lorene for money, which they give him readily enough, but with the understanding that he must work for his living and in exactly the ways they specified. There was no longer any joy in his conquest of the two women, for he had long since realized that he wasn’t using them, they were using him. He was a pawn in a game that Josie and Lorene enjoyed.

(TLGC 62)
At seventeen, Brownfield is well set up between the mother and the daughter, and Josie is like a cat devouring him. There he meets Mem, the adopted daughter of Josie, inspires something spiritual in Brownfield and he regards her as the ultimate in womanhood:

What he felt always when he thought of Mem was guilt, and shame that he was no better than grime, dirt. He thought of her as of another mother. She is someone to be loved and spoken to softly, someone never to be frightened with his rough, coarse ways. (TLGC 45)

Brownfield wants to redeem himself by marrying her: “Mem was cherry brown, not yellow like Josie, or dark and hairy like Lorene. She was plump and quiet, with demure slant eyes” (TLGC 44) every aspect of Mem has fascinated Brownfield – her purity, her gentleness, her speech and her knowledge of books. She inspires tenderness and the need for refinement in Brownfield. He follows Mem to school and drive great pleasure in learning from her and listening to speak: “She was a good teacher. He had never had one. He learned to write his own name to recite the ABC’s and to write his name and her name linked together” (TLGC 46). Brownfield begins to see himself more and more like an animal and wants to be a better person worthy of Mem’s love. He thinks that the pinnacle of his achievement in life would be to marry her. But he was unable to communicate his feelings to her. When he sees Mem with a schoolteacher, Brownfield is stung. He realizes that if he does not act fast, he may lose Mem. Spurred on, he proposes to Mem and is accepted by her.
Mem is not a perfect match for Brownfield. Even from the beginning, he is mystified and intrigued by her. She is clean, whereas he is ugly. She is educated, sophisticated, and teaches in a school whereas he is uneducated, rough, and illiterate, and works on the farm as a field-hand. She can read books and magazines, and he can only look at the picture in them and hazard a guess at what the print means. She teaches him, when school begins in the fall and takes him along with her to school. It is from her that Brownfield learns to read and write at least his own name. In spite of their contradictory nature, he develops a deep love for her, and it culminates in their marriage. Initially their marriage is an idyllic one. They start their life with lots of love and affection. After their marriage, they care for each other and share joys and sorrows together. Thus Walker presents their initial joy:

For Mem was the kind of woman who sang while she cooked breakfast in the morning and sang when getting ready for bed at night. And sang when she nursed her babies, and sang to him when he crawled in weariness and dejection into the warm life giving circle of her breast. He did not care, what anybody thought it, but she was so good to him, so much what he needed. That her body became his shrine and he kissed it endlessly, shamelessly, lovingly and celebrated its magic with flowers and dancing and as the babies, knowing their places beside her as well as life, sucked and nursed at her bosom. So did he, and grew big and grew firm with love, and grew strong. (TLGC 49)

Enveloped in the “Cool fire” of Mem’s love, Brownfield considers himself a lucky man.
This state of affairs lasted for more than three years and then frustration sets in. Brownfield slowly, realizes that his life is becoming a repetition of his fathers. Helplessly, he watches his five year old daughter working beyond her capacity and is overwhelmed with depression at his debts. Thoughts of suicide never leave him: “he felt himself destined to become no more than an overseer, on the Whiteman’s plantation, of his own children” (TLGC 54). This is the time that their marital disharmony has taken root. In his hopeless state, he gains power by accusing Mem of faithlessness and blames all failures on her. He fails to realize that basically it is his inability to better the position of his family. His crushed pride and his battered ego make him drag Mem away from school teaching. Her knowledge reflects badly on a husband who could scarcely read and write. It is his great ignorance to send her into white homes as a domestic, to bring her down to his level. It is his rage at himself, his life, and his worlds that make him beat her. An unbelievable decline sets in. Brownfield’s nature and he begins to consider his submissive wife as a snare and a pitfall: “Like his father, vents his rage against a black woman who understands attempts to soothe his pain” (Gayles 305).

The rage that characterizes Grange is transmitted to his son and it manifests itself in the men’s insensitivity to the needs of their wives. Mental cruelty, physical brutality, and infidelity – infidelity that is unique – in both men ultimately turn them into lovers of the same woman. In all earnestness Brownfield sets out to destroy Mem. Even the books she reads are utilized for fire. He deliberately changes her into something he does not, could not want. In this way, he recovers apart of his ego and feels superior to her. Brownfield sees himself as a failure in the role of husband and father. He could his lost sense of pride by exercising tyrannical control over his wife and daughters.
He starts beating her because it makes him feel good, at least for the time being. Like his father, every Saturday night he beats her, trying to put the blame for his failure on her. In due course, Brownfield degenerates and is dehumanized, so much so that the marriage that promised indefinite love comes to a state of a total failure. When she tries to correct his language, he asks, “Why don’t you talk like the rest of us poor niggars? Why do you always have to be damn proper? Whether I say ‘is’ or ‘ain’t’ no damn humping off your built” (TLGC 56). He forces Mem to revert from Standard English to African American dialect because the dialect identifies her as a degraded victim, thus feeding his desperate desire for masculine power. He wants her “to talk like what she was, a hopeless nagger woman who got her ass beat every Saturday night” (TLGC 81). The unemployment and resultant poverty compounded with her racial, gender, and socio-economic persecutions. Her life changes from stupor to horror, and horror to desolation, and desolation to hatred. Through all this, Mem’s docility allows Brownfield freedom because she thinks she is promoting his sense of manhood.

Brownfield keeps shifting the family from one shack to another, wherever he can get work. Ultimately, Mem decides to take the reins in her hands for family comfort. She saves money to buy a house but Brownfield uses it to buy pig and then to buy a car. In her misery, Mem wants to leave him and go, but there is nowhere to go. Unable to accept such shoddy existence for her children, Mem fights back. The horrible sight of Mem’s children working in the dangerous cotton field, the poor food they take, and all the tough time which Brownfield enforces upon them make Mem to challenge her husband, the very powerful Brwonfield. All of a sudden, she is awakened into her womanist censoriousness. Consequently,
the survival of the whole becomes important to her; she tries to grab power from him as the head of the family and decides to work for her family. The moment he informs her that they were going to move to Mr. J.L’s, she challenges his decision:

I already told you […] you ain’t dragging me and three children through no pigpens. We have put up with mud long enough. I want Dephne, to be a young lady where there is other decent folks around, not out here in the sticks on some white man’s property like the slavery times […]. Me and these children got a right to live in a house where it don’t rain and there is no holes in the floor. (TLGC 110)

She decides not to move to the place chosen by her husband, and finds out a new and better house and signs the lease. In addition to this, she wants him to work in a factory in the town, instead of living in a shack on a white man’s farm. The very act of her taking decision on behalf of the family is an affront on his manliness. Therefore, he believes that the decision made by him should prevail. He says:

We moving exactly when and where I say we moving. Long as I’m supporting this sucking family we go where I says go […]. I may not be able to read and write but I’m still the man that wears pants in this outfit. (TLGC 115)

Though Brownfield never has the courage to say what he says is right, his ego does not allow him to accept his mistakes. Therefore, he insists upon forcing his decision down her throat. By this time, she has grown too bold to be cowed down in the matters related to her family. She declares:
You do what you want to. Brownfield […]. You do exactly what you want and go precisely where you please. But me and these children going to live in the house I leased. We ain’t living in no more dog patches; we going to have toilets and baths ‘lectric lights like other people! (TLGC 115)

And also for the first time she reveals what she has done for the family:

Let me tell you something, man, ‘[…] I have worked hard all my life, first trying to be something and then just trying to be. It’s over for me now, but if you think I won’t work harder than ever before to support these children you ain’t only mean and evil and lazy as the devil, but you’re a fool!’ (TLGC 116)

In order to fulfill her children’s dream, as well as hers, she takes a job and asks Brownfield to follow her. But it is something impossible for him to nod to his wife’s decision. His claim for importance is on the basis of his being born a man. When he tries to beat her, she reacts, “I’m sick and tired of this mess, I’m sick of you” (TLGC 121). She adds further, “I have just about let you play man long enough to find out you ain’t one.” (TLGC 124).

Mem is always stoic, even when Brownfield beats her severely, but she loses all her patience when he tries to spoil her daughter’s future. When he tries to beat her, she retaliates with the help of a butcher knife, and later on with a shotgun, warning him, “you move just a teeny weeny little bit more, Mr. Brownfield, and you ain’t going to have nary a ball left to play catch with” (TLGC 124). And she shouts:
To think I let you drag me round from one corncrib to another just cause I don’t want to hurt your feelings. And just think of how many times I done got my head beat by you just so you could feel a little bit like a man, Brownfield Copeland […]. And just think how much take an old no-count dog you done treated me for nine years.

(TLGC 126)

She saves enough to rent out a house and even signs the lease. This act of signing which Brownfield as an illiterate is unable to do, is a great blow to his pride. Mem, for her part, declares that she has allowed Brownfield to be man of the house for nine years and shares only misery with her children as Brownfield is unable to enact the role adequately. Now, it is her turn and asks Brownfield to choose whether he would toe the line or not. Brownfield is furious and Mem does not cow down before him. In the confrontation Mem stands up boldly against him and dictates the Ten Commandments to be followed in the new house. She levels the gun and threatens to blow his balls off – symbolically seeking liberation from seeking oppression. She even calls him a boy. This act of rebellion on the part of the meek Mem does not discredit her in any way.

As Brownfield’s power lies in his maleness, Mem’s weakness lies in her femaleness. Like white masters who used to rape black women in order to crush their resistance and to humble the black man, Brownfield also decides to use his maleness to control and weaken Mem. The only way he can achieve this is by forcing on her an unwanted pregnancy, he broods:
He surveyed with sly interest the bleaching out of every crease on her wrinkled stomach. Waiting. She could not hold out against him with nausea, aching feet and teeth, swollen legs, bursting veins and head; or the grim and dizzying reality, or her trapped self and her children’s despair. He could bring her back to lowness she even guessed at before. (TLGC 101)

The two pregnancies forced on her spoil her health. She could not believe that he planned it. Her health breaks down so much that she couldn’t even get out of bed to look for work. As a result, she cannot pay the house rent and consequently, Brownfield succeeds in bringing her back to Mr.J.L’s place, the place of his choice. Shamelessly he tells Mem:

You was going to have your house straight and narrow and painted and scrubbed, like white folks. You was going to do this, you was going to do this shit […] you thought I fucked you cause I wanted it? Josie better than you ever been. Your trouble is you just never learnt how not to git pregnant. How long did you think you could keep going. Will your belly full of children? (TLGC 107)

Brownfield never feels sorry for the misfortune he has brought on his family. Instead, he is happy that he has succeeded in bringing down his family. No doubt, Mem has been defeated by her husband, but she has not lost hope. Ready to face life once again, she tells Brownfield: “I’m going to git well again, and git work again, and when I do I’m going to leave you” (TLGC 107). However, once they move to the country, Brownfield murders Mem in cold blood. Parker smith
says about Brownfield he is the cancer of Black – Female relationship. He is parasite – a warm, wretched, contemptible maggot – and he must bring everything he touches to his level (148). Walker’s woman characters are all fighters. They fight against the hardities in their life. Few of them succeed and others fail.

In this novel the South is a place of terrible entrapment which destroys family life and enslaves blacks to an endless cycle of physical and spiritual poverty. Critics have looked at walker in terms of her southern heritage. One such scholar is Robert James Butler. He argues in Alice Walker vision of the south in The Third Life of Grange Copeland “That the novel is an accurate depiction of south. Maintaining that although or perhaps due to the fact – Brownfield’s life crystallizes “all that is negative about southern culture”. He argues persuasively, that the novel nevertheless describes a’ whole truth, about the south which is complex’ and multifaceted (196,203). He also suggests that the novel ‘succeeds’ because it consciously avoids an oversimplified vision which express only one side of southern life (203).

In “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience”, Alice Walker defines her response to South in a richly ambivalent way. (1) although she stress that she does not intend to “romanticize southern black country life and is quick to point out that she “hated” the south, “generally”, when growing up in rural Georgia, she nevertheless emphasizes that southern black writers have “enormous richness and beauty to draw from” (21) this ‘double vision’ (19) of the south is at the center of most of her fiction and is given extremely complex treatment in her best work. While Walker can remember with considerable resentment the larger white world composed of “evil greedy men” who paid her sharecropper father three hundred dollars for twelve months of labor while working him “to death’ (21), she can also
call vividly to mind the “sense of community” (17) which gave blacks a way of coping with sometimes transcending the hardships of such a racist society. Although she emphatically states that she is not “nostalgic... for lost poverty” (17), she can also lyrically recall the beauties of the southern land, “loving the earth so much that one longs to taste it and sometimes does” (21). Even the Southern black religious traditions, which she consciously rejected as a college student because she saw them with one part of her mind as “a white man’s palliative”, she values in another way because her people “had made [religion] into something at once simple and noble” (18), an “antidote against bitterness” (16).

Walker’s ambivalence, therefore, is a rich and complex mode of vision, a way of seeing her Southern background which prevents her from either naively romanticizing the south or reducing it to an over simplified vision of despair and resentment. Ambivalence, or what Grange Copeland might call “two-heading” (TLGC 129), allows Walker to tell the full truth about her experience in the South. Avoiding the “blindness” created by her awareness of the injustices done to blacks in the South, she is able to draw “a great deal of positive material” from her outwardly “underprivileged” background. Indeed, she stresses that her status as a black Southern writer endows her with special advantages:

No one could wish for a more advantageous heritage than that bequeathed to the black writer in the South; a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil and an abiding sense of justice. We inherit a great responsibility as well, for we must give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love. (ISMG 21)
The single work which best expresses Walker’s powerful ambivalence toward Southern life in her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, a book notable for its vitality and its resonance. Walker’s complex vision of the South can be seen in her development of the novel’s three main character, Brownfield, Ruth, and Grange Copeland. While Brownfield is a terrifying example of how the South can physically enslave and spiritually cripple black people, Ruth’s story offers considerable hope because she is able to leave the South, rejecting the racist world which destroys Brownfield and, in so doing move toward a larger, freer world which offers her fresh possibilities. Grange Copeland’s narrative points out some of the positive features of Southern black life. He returns to Georgia after an unsuccessful journey to north, to find the things he needs for his identity – a sense of place and a feeling of family and community. Although the narrative, taken in isolation, do not express the author’s whole vision of Southern life, together they offer a series of interrelated perspectives which capture walker’s richly ambivalent vision of the South. While Grange’s story in isolation might suggest a glib romanticizing of the black South and while the stories of Ruth and Brownfield might suggested at equally simplistic debunking of black Southern life, all three narratives constitute what Walker called “the richness of the black writer’s experience in the south” (ISMG 18).

Brownfield’s narrative concentrates all that is negative about southern culture. He is cruelly victimized by the extreme racism and poverty of the Georgia backwoods world in which he is born and raised. As his name clearly suggests, he is a case of plighted growth; he is a person who has been physically and emotionally withered by the nearly pathological environment which surrounds him. By the end of the novel, he is portrayed as “a human being …completely
destroyed” by the worst features of rural Southern life of ignorance, poverty, racism and violence. Appropriately, one of the earliest images of him in the novel describes him as undernourished and diseased, his head covered with tatter sores, his legs afflicted with tomato sore and armpits filled with boils running with pus.

As his narrative develops, these images of disease coalesce into a frightening metaphor which dramatizes how Brownfield is infected and eventually destroyed by a racist world which systematically deprives him of human nourishment.

This is particularly true of the way in which the system of Southern sharecropping destroys his family enslaving them to the land which would otherwise nourish them, because Brownfield’s father Grange cannot make an adequate living for his family. He therefore fails as a husband and a father, driving his wife to suicide and withdrawing emotionally from his son. The net effect on Brownfield is to engrave deep emotional scars into his character which ultimately stunt his growth. After being abandoned by Grange and losing his mother shortly afterwards, Brownfield is frozen into a condition of Southern servitude. His efforts to establish a new life fail to materialize because his loss of family and the destruction of self-esteem caused by a racist environment trap him in a kind of moral vacuum:

He was expected to raise himself up on air, which was all that was left after his work for others. Others who were always within their rights to pay practically nothing for his labor. He was never able to do more than exist on air; he was never able to build on it, and was never able to have any land of his own; and was never able to set his woman up in the style, which more than anything else was what he wanted to do. (TLGC 54-55)
Literally cheated out of land and morally disposed of a human foundation for his life, Brownfield is ironically condemned to repeat his father’s failures. As he realizes not long after being abandoned by Grange, “… his own life was becoming a repetition of his father’s” (TLGC 54). His efforts to go north result in “weeks of indecisive wandering”, (TLGC 31) eventually bringing him to a small Georgia town where he forms a debilitating relationship with Josie, one of his father’s discarded lovers. When he discovers a fruitful relationship with Mem, their marriage is ruined by the same factors which destroyed his parents’ marriage. The “warm, life-giving circle” of their life together is gradually dissolved by “the shadow of eternal bondage” (TLGC 49) which eroded his father’s self-esteem. Bound like his father by “the chain that held him to the land” (TLGC 50), Brownfield too becomes neurotically jealous of his wife and degrades her to the point where he can recover part of his ego by feeling superior to her. Like his father, who pushed his wife into suicide because he could not bear loving her and could not adequately support her, Brownfield murders Mem because a social environment that strips him of manhood cancels out his love for her. Forced by an oppressively racist society to “plow a furrow his father had laid” (TLGC 45), Brownfield is indeed a “brown field”, a crop that has failed to mature and bear fruit because his life has been deprived of necessary nutrients.

Like his five-year-old daughter, who is slowly poisoned by the arsenic she uses to dust the cotton crop in order to protect it from boll weevils, he is gradually victimized by a uniquely Southern system of segregation and sharecropping which infects his life. He eventually becomes exactly what his social environment wants his to be an extension of its most pathological impulses. Indeed, Brownfield not only comes to accept the South but develops a perverse love of the world which
dehumanizes him. Thus, he blankly accepts the impoverished roles extended to him by his Southern environment and makes no attempt either to rebel against these roles or to seek a better world:

He had no faith that any other place would be better. He fitted himself into the slot in which he found himself; for fun he poured oil into the streams to kill the fish and tickled his own vanity by drowning cats. (TLGC 59)

A normal boy early in the novel, Brownfield becomes the book’s most degraded character, for in accepting his “place” in Southern society, he degenerates into a killer of families and a prisoner of innocent life. In this novel, the life of the sharecropper is a cycle dependent upon the whim of the father. Grange’s moods determine the atmosphere for Brownfield and Margaret. Abandonment by the father is an integral part of the cycle. While nothing is said about Grange’s father, that perhaps only underscores the theme of abandonment, the absence of Grange’s father foreshadows Grange’s abandonment of Brownfield and Brownfield’s abandonment of his own children. The children of this book, though, do not conceive of white folks as the source of their problems. Trapped by their youth, they are the ones most affected by their parents’ pattern of self-hatred. In their prepubescent period they catch this disease by abhorring their parents, and then as their sexuality begins to manifest itself and they become parents, that hatred turns in on them. The children of Brownfield, Daphne, Ornette, and Ruth, delineate the complexity of cause and effect. Parents are responsible of their condition. They are themselves victims because they allow themselves to be. When their responsibilities come to an end, the inevitability of fate begins.
Throughout the novel, children give their feeling, their sense of confusion about their parents and the life imposed on them. In fact, one way in which the novel could be described is as a two-child narrative. The first narrative flows through the consciousness of the child Brownfield who never really grows up, who never believes he is a man. The second is concerned with the child Ruth as she struggles into adulthood. At the center of each of these narratives is the figure of Grange first as the daddy that Brownfield never had and then as the transformed Grange who is Ruth’s father in place of her real daddy, Brownfield. Certainly the child point of view is recurrent in Walker’s quilting, particularly the point of view of the child who feels rejected or abandonment by the father.

In this novel, as in her short stories, Walker puts much emphasis on the relationship between the fathers and their children. Since the society in which the children develop their sense of values is patriarchal, their belief in their own worth is very much related to the ways their fathers judge them.

The novel begins with a child, Brownfield, as he tries to understand his father. At ten he loves his mother, already his father seems unreachable. Grange hardly ever talks to his son, hardly ever admits his existence. They lack physical as well as emotional communication with each other, “His father almost never spoke to him unless they had company. Even then he acted as if talking to his son was a strain, a burdensome requirement” (TLGC 5). Practically the only words we hear him speak directly to Brownfield when he is a child are, “I ought to throw you down the goddam well”, (TLGC 11) words Brownfield tells that are not spoken in anger but with pity and regret. Of course, Brownfield is too young to understand that Grange sees his son the continuation of a life of slavery. Unable to free his son from bondage, he regrets that Brownfield exists at all.
At ten, Brownfield gets a headache, like any child would, trying to comprehend his parents’ actions. By fifteen, he has given up trying. By now even his mother eludes him, for her attentions are riveted on securing some small, if fleeting, happiness for herself. Enveloped by the depression of their lives, his parents no longer see him. Even when Grange leaves her home forever, he cannot bear to touch Brownfield or acknowledge any feeling of tenderness for him:

Brownfield pretended to be asleep, though his heart was pounding so loudly he was sure his father would hear it. He saw Grange bend over him to inspect his head and face. He saw him reach down to touch him. He saw his hand stop, just before it reached his cheek. Brownfield was crying silently and wanted his father to touch the tears. He moved toward his father’s hand, as if moving unconsciously in his sleep. He saw his father’s hand draw back, without touching him. He saw him turn sharply and leave the room. He heard him leave the house. And he knew, even before he realized his father would never be back, that he hated him for everything and always would. And he most hated him because even in private and in the dark and with Brownfield presumably asleep, Grange could not bear to touch his son with his hand. (TLGC 25–26)

Forevermore, Brownfield will repeat to himself and to everyone else that Grange was never a daddy to him, as indeed he was not. When Margaret kills herself, the son realizes that even she would prefer to die for the father rather than live for the son.
In tune with his father’s despair, Brownfield begins his abuse of his own children when he realizes that he is caught in the same square of life that his father before him had been caught in. So Daphne, his first child, receives love and tenderness from him until he realizes that he cannot free her from a life of slavery. Also, Brownfield himself never grows up, so it is difficult for him to give the love that he never received. He is forever seeking his father’s love even as he hates him. The only way that he can resolve that emotional contradiction is in some way to destroy his father.

Many of the characters in this novel waver between an intense love for the father and an equally intense self-hatred engendered by the rejection of the father. The father’s rejection of his child is very much related to his view of that child’s future as man or woman. So Grange rejects Brownfield because he believes he cannot give his son the qualities of power that will fit the society’s definition of a man. Brownfield becomes an abusive father when he realizes he cannot give his daughter the gifts that will allow them to be ladies. The society’s definition of a person’s worth as man or woman distorts the love between father and child.

In the course of the novel, Walker stitches together squares that grotesquely reveals how dependent the children are on the humaneness or inhumaness of their father. One of these squares, perhaps more than any other in the book, lays out the damages done to Brownfield by his father and by his own inability to accept responsibility for his soul. Brownfield tells Josie that his last child, a boy, was white, not real white but an albino baby who looked just like Grange. In his insanity, the figures that have controlled his life-the daddy who rejected him and the white man - seem to mesh in this baby. Brownfield deliberately kills his only son:
An’ one night when that baby was ‘bout three months old, and it was in January and there was ice on the ground, I takes ‘im by the arm when he was sleeping, and like putting out the cat I jest set ‘im outdoors on the do’ steps. Then I turned in and went to sleep…. I never slept so soundly before in my life-and when I woke up it was because of her (Mem) moaning and carrying on in front of the fire. She was jest rubbing that baby what wasn’t no more then than a block of ice. Dark as he’d ever been though, sorta blue looking….

(TLGC 285)

Brownfield explains his action. He killed his son, his future because he doesn’t believe there is any future. The instinct in all living things to see their offspring as the future is reversed in Brownfield’s mind. For him his son is despair not hope: “I jest didn’t feel like going on over my own baby who didn’t have a chance in the world whether I went on over him or no” (TLGC 286). In Brownfield’s twisted mind, his despair, his futility, meshes with his hatred of his father and his hatred of himself, for his father’s blood flows through him to his son: “I got sick of keeping up the strain” (TLGC 286). His act is the essence of self-hatred.

The bereft children of the book, Brownfield, Daphne, Ornette, and Ruth, invent ways of ameliorating their pain. Left with no vessel for their trust and faith or the experience to understand what is happening to them, fantasy, particularly about fatherhood, becomes their outlet. The child Brownfield’s persistent daydream, a fantasy that he first has after his northern cousins’ visit, lasts for five years. Dreaming this dream becomes his favorite occupation:
He saw himself grown-up, twenty-one or so, arriving home at sunset in the snow. In this daydream there was always snow…. In his daydream he pulled up to his house, a stately mansion with cherry-red brick chimneys and matching brick porch and steps, in a long chauffeur-driven car. The chauffeur glided out of the car first and opened the back door, where Brownfield sat puffing on a cigar. Then the chauffeur vanished around the back of the house, where his wife waited for him on the kitchen steps. She was beloved and very respected cook and had been with the house and the chauffeur and Brownfield’s family for many years. Brownfield’s wife and children- two children, a girl and a boy- waited anxiously for him just inside the door in the foyer. They jumped all over him, showering him with kisses. While he told his wife of the big deals he’d pushed through that day she fixed him a mint julep. After a splendid dinner, presided over by the cook, dressed in black uniform and white starched cap, he and his wife, their arms around each other, tucked the children in bed and spent the rest of the evening discussing her day (which she had spent walking in her garden), and making love.

There was one thing that was odd about the daydream. The face of Brownfield’s wife and that of the cook constantly in interchanged. So that his wife was first black and glistening from cooking and then white and powdery to his touch; his dreaming self could not make up its mind. His children’s faces were never in focus. He recognized them by their angelic presence alone, two bright spots of warmth; they hovered about calling him “Daddy” endearingly, while he stroked the empty air, assuming it to be their heads.

(TLGC 21 – 22)
At the age of ten, Brownfield’s first daughter Daphne calls herself the Copeland Family Secret Keeper and makes her childhood days bearable by telling her younger sister stories about the good old days when Brownfield had been a good daddy. In the only way she knows how, the older daughter tries to sow in the younger ones the seeds for regeneration. But the memories are not enough; in fact, they help make Daphne a nervous child, “she tried so hard to retain some love for him, perhaps because of her memories of an earlier time, that she became very nervous” (TLGC 147).

In spite her efforts to remain whole, Brownfield’s attitudes condition Daphne and her sisters’ development. His nickname for the nervous Daphne is “Daffy”, as adult she would become a mental patient. Ornette, Brownfield’s second daughter, who has no memory of her father’s tenderness, is jolly and tough by the age of eight. By the age of four Ruth, the third daughter, tells her father, “You nothing but a sonnabit” (TLGC 143). And also they see him only as,

Human devil and felt wherever he place them would naturally Hell.
They were as afraid of him as Daphne was, but in a more distant, impersonal way. He was like bad weather, a toothache, daily bad news. (TLGC 147)

*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, each begins their journey utterly subjected by poverty and misery. When the novel opens, the reader meets Brownfield as a suffering child covered in sores, sitting in the desolation of the sharecropping cabin: “Tetter sores covered his head… under his armpit” (TLGC
8). The child, Brownfield’s physical suffering is in addition to spiritual or mental sufferings as reflected not only in the squalor and poverty of his cabin but also in his solitude. It is clear that Brownfield’s childhood is spent in tension between his mother and his father, his mother offers sweet and milk-scented, if harried, support while his father’s depression and violence doom him to continued misery.

Brownfield’s childhood is ruled by fear. His fears his father, fears the white men who frighten his father, fears never getting out of the South. That fear is toughened by his growing bitterness and proclivities to violence. His resentment and bitterness increase as his oppression is fueled by being unable to understand his father’s abandonment and by losing hope of ever leaving the South. Brownfield stals his fate by marrying Mem. Though her sweetness is reminiscent of his mother and therefore comforting, by marrying her Brownfield weds himself to the sharecropping system.

As the water, cooling, life-giving, ran down his chin and neck, so did her love run down, bathing him in cool fire and oblivion, bathing him in forgetfulness, as another link in the chain that held him to the land and to a responsibility for her and her children, was forged. (TLGC 67)

Thus, Brownfield turns his attention to love, thereby turning his back on escape. Their marriage is complicated by mem’s education since Brownfield feels unworthy of her even before they are married, and so he sets himself up to fail.
What he felt always when he thought of mem was guilt. Shame that he was no better than he was. Grime. Dirt…. But he could never successfully communicate his feeling to her; he did not know the words she knew, and even if he could learn them he had no faith that they would fit the emotions he had. (TLGC 60)

Brownfield sentences himself to continued feelings of oppression and to increased feelings of rage by maintaining the faulty paradigm by which he views himself. Brownfield curses his situation by raging at those around him.

The turning point that shifts Brownfield from fear to rage is watching his eldest daughter spraying poison on the cotton bolls. To see her work in the fields simultaneously reminds him of his own anguished youth and makes clear to him that he is trapped in his father’s life:

It was a year when endless sunup to sundown work on fifty rich bottom acres of cotton land and a good crop brought them two diseased shoats for winter meat, some dried potatoes and apples from the boss’s cellar, and some cast off clothes for his children from his boss’s family. It was the summer that he watched, that he had to teach, his frail five-year old daughter the tricky, dangerous and disgusting business of handmopping the cotton bushes with arsenic to keep off boll weevils. (TLGC 71)

Brownfield teaches his five-year old daughter how to work in the cotton field, which is a compulsion. In the white dominated society, no African Americans, even a child can ever dream of escape from labor. It is as if they are born to suffer, and work under the hot sun. It is this fate that Grange undergoes in the beginning and later Brownfield too. Walker continues:
His heart had actually started to hurt him, like an ache in the bones, when he watched her swinging he mop, stumbling over the clumps of hard clay, the hot tin bucket full of arsenic making a blooded scrape against her small short leg. She stumbled and almost fell with her bucket, so much too large for her, and each time he saw it his stomach flinched. She was drenched with sweat, her tattered dress wringing wet with perspiration and arsenic; her large eyes reddened by the poison. She breathed with difficulty through the deadly smell. At the end of the day she trembled and vomited and looked beaten down like a tiny, asthmatic old lady; but she did not complain to her father, as afraid of him as she was of the white boss who occasionally deigned to drive by with friends to watch the lone little pickanniny, so tired she barely saw them, poisoning his cotton.

That pickanniny was Brownfield’s oldest child, Daphne, and that year of awakening roused him not from sleep but from hope that someday she would be a fine lady and carry parasols and wear light silks. That was the year he first saw how his own life was becoming a repetition of his father’s. he could not save his children from slavery; they did not even belong to him. (TLGC 71-72)

In the domain of white masters, African Americans are reduced to the level of cattle and denied of their human dignity. Even the dresses are old and out-worn like that of his children. His five-year old daughter, Daphne is also pushed to the same cotton field to learn the disgusting business of handmopping of cotton bushes. It is a pitiable sight for Brownfield, a father, to see his five-year old child working in such a risky cotton field. Throughout the day, she has to struggle with a
heavy bucket full of arsenic. She is much scared to open her mouth to talk about her pain, for the fear that his father of boss may beat her. But at the end of the day, she trembles and vomits but even then, she never complains. This is the condition of most of the African American children. They believe that it is their fate, and they have to undergo sufferings like their parents. So they never complain, as their parents never do it. Thus, the graphic portrayal of their inhuman working condition under the white sharecropping system, reinforces Walker’s persistent view that generation after generation, such labor batters their spirits, negates their hopes, deprives of all the human feelings, and leads them to resignation and contempt of life. Grange, his son, Brownfield, and his daughter, Daphne, symbolically represent the succession of generation that toil without any sign of redemption. Walker’s photographic details of their physical plight, soon turns into an X-ray that maps their mental state of depravity:

He thought of suicide and never forgets it, even in Mem’s arms. He prayed for help, in a caring President, for a listening Jesus. He prayed for a decent job in Mem’s arms. But like all prayers sent up from there it turned into another mouth to feed, another body to enslave to pay his debts. He felt himself destined to become no more than overseer, on the white man’s plantation, of his own children. (TLGC 72)

Brownfield sets himself up as the victim of a downfall in which his possessions, in this case his children, are taken from him. That is the time Brownfield accuses Mem of being unfaithful to him, of being used by white men, his oppressors; a
Brownfield becomes more and more a creature of hate.

Brownfield’s diffuse rage is defined by the conflict of feelings of pride, hatred, jealousy, guilt, shame, fear, and loneliness. No fewer than seven times in the novel does Walker highlight Brownfield’s “bitterness,” a word which at once distills his conflict of feeling. Brownfield feels jealousy for his father’s successful trip to North, for Grange’s newfound wealth, and for any kindness Grange shows anyone, including Brownfield’s own children:

He clutched the bags in a confusion of feeling. He was hungry, he was suffering from a malaise of the spirit, he was jealous of his children’s good fortune. He wished he did not have children down whose gullets the good fruit would go; he wished he were a child himself. (TLGC 235)

In wishing to be a child again, Brownfield is wishing not so much for the good fortune Grange bestows on his children but rather to have a beneficent father figure for himself. While not all of Brownfield’s “bitterness” could or should be traced back to his father’s abandonment of him, it is clear that Brownfield has chosen to blame Grange for his present misery.
Brownfield’s sick spirit is mirrored in his appearance. While the tatter and tomato sores of his youth have faded, Brownfield the man is still a monstrous figure. His eyes are held in a constant squint, he walks with a decided limp, and more:

From working in the fields and with the cows in all kinds of weather he developed a serious bronchitis aggravated by rashes and allergies. He was not a healthy man. When he first started working with cows his hands broke out and the skin itched so much he nearly scratched it off… by then his hands were like gray leather on the outside, the inside scaly and softly cracked, too deformed for any work except that done to and for animals. (TLGC 118)

His external appearance seems linked to his spiritual sickness. Brownfield’s development of rashes and illness is as much a result of his miserable environment as is his rage. As Robert Butler notes, “he is a case of blighted growth; he is a person who has been physically and emotionally withered by the nearly pathological environment which surrounds him” (196). But part of the pathology of Brownfield’s diffuse rage is that he learns to love that environment.

Brownfield’s murder of Mem represents the ultimate capitulation to his pathological environment. During his seven years in the penitentiary, Brownfield learns to love the South:

He felt he had a real understanding of it. Its ways did not mystify him in the least. It was a sweet, violent, peculiarly accommodating land. It bent itself to fit its own laws. One’s life, under the rigidity of caste, was essentially one of invisibility and luck. One did not feel alone in one’s guilt. (TLGC 230)
Brownfield recognizes himself in the South; that is, he realizes that Southerners share both the crime and the guilt of abuse and so he is home. Not only does Brownfield manifest bitterness of spirit and of body, but also he feels comforted by regional bitterness. The bitterness of the South justifies Brownfield’s spiritual bitterness, then, as being wedded with its original cause. But Brownfield also makes the connection that the South’s injustice somehow vindicates own unjust acts:

The punishment was made to fit the man and not the crime. It was individual punishment. One felt unique in one’s punishment if not in one’s crime…. This appealed to Brownfield. It meant to him that one could punish one’s own enemies with a torture of one’s own choosing. One could make up the punishment and no one had the right to interfere. (TLGC 231)

Therefore, the South’s bitterness, Brownfield decides, is responsible for both the cause and the effect of his misery. Once he makes that realization, Brownfield seems less conflicted in his hate, he becomes almost purely impelled by rage.

Brownfield’s prison introspection leads him to verbalize his vision of himself in the context of Southern bitterness. Paramount to this vision is his sense of a lack of control. Brownfield and a fellow prisoner discuss their motives for imprisonment:

The motive that got him into prison, said Brownfield, was a keen desire to see if he had any control over himself. No matter which way he wanted to go, he said, some unseen force pushed him in the opposite direction. (TLGC 223)
Instead of discussing their motives for committing the crime that led to their imprisonment, both men see the crime as separate from the punishment. Brownfield elucidates why he came to be punished, not why he shot his wife.

Brownfield recognizes that he is not in control of his own life: he lives in another man’s house, farms another man’s land, watches his children turned into field hands just as he was. His murder of Mem, then, is his one chance at regaining control. He does, in fact, “blot her out” and perversely reenacts another part of his father’s life. Whereas Grange first leaves Baker Country and then causes his wife’s death, Brownfield kills Mem and then leaves the country to go to prison. Although this distinction may seem insignificant, surely to Brownfield, ever conscious of repeating his father’s life, the difference is vast. He actively destroys Mem, so thoroughly that her body is horribly disfigured for the funereal viewing. That shotgun blast prefigures his own death at the hands of his father, but Brownfield is never to appreciate the irony of his choices: each instance of trying to wrest control over his life evinces another step into chaos. At the end of his life, as he takes part in the artificial trial for custody of Ruth, Brownfield surrenders the last shred of control he has over his life.

If Brownfield’s narrative dramatizes Walker’s most severe criticisms of the South, the story of his daughter Ruth qualifies this pessimistic vision by providing an alternative to the meaninglessness of Brownfield’s life. Even though Ruth spends her formative years in the same environment which poisoned her father, she is able to protect herself with a number of antidotes because she develops a consciousness of Southern life which makes her aware of both its strengths and
dangers. She is thus able to empower herself with some of the strengths of black
top culture in the Deep South and is also able to imagine her life in terms which
transcend the south, ultimately leaving it for a larger world which offers her new
possibilities. Whereas Brownfield’s life travels a deterministic circle of futility (all
his efforts to gain physical and emotional distance from the racist south fail),
Ruth’s story is existential in outlook. It involves a process of awakening and
liberation.

A crucial part of her liberation is contained in the fact that she does not
grow up in the kind of spiritual and emotional vacuum which blighted
Brownfield’s life. Although she has had to face the physical poverty and racism
which characterize her father’s existence, she gains the benefit of the family life he
was deprived of, and this puts her in contact with nourishing cultural and personal
values. In contrast to Brownfield, who spins in futile circles because he “was
expected to raise himself up on air” (TLGC 72), Ruth is raised by a mother whom
she comes to regard as “a saint” (TLGC 126), someone who makes heroic efforts
to meet her human needs. Although Mem literally gives up her life opposing
Brownfield’s acceptance of his “place” in Southern society, she succeeds in
moving the family to a town where Ruth, for a time at least, has the benefit of a
real house and formal schooling. More importantly, Mem provides Ruth with a
powerful role model, for she is a woman who maintains her human dignity in a
dehumanizing environment. Like the women whom Walker describes in In Search
of Our Mother’s Gardens who provides her with role models, Mem is an
“exquisiste butter fully trapped in an evil honey” (TLGC 232). By “inheriting” her
mother’s “vibrant, creative spirit” (ISMG 239), Ruth comes to transcend the
limitations which white society seeks to impose on black women. After Mem is murdered – literally by Brownfield and symbolically by the Southern society he comes to love and represent – Ruth is taken in by Grange, who becomes her surrogate father. From the moment of her birth, Grange sees Ruth as unique and beautiful, someone who almost magically appears in the midst of an environment which is harsh and ugly. Marveling at Ruth as a newborn child, he exclaims, “out of all kinds of shit comes something soft, clean, and sweet smelling” (TLGC 71). From this point on, Grange dedicates himself to protecting Ruth from the foulness of the Southern environment into which she was born, and he commits himself to nurturing that which is “sweet” and “clean” in her. He provides her with a “snug house” in which to live and also gives her for the first time in her life an adequate supply of nourishing food.

Grange nourishes her mind and soul. He forbids her to work in the cotton fields which have helped to destroy Brownfield’s life, telling her, “You not some kind of field hand!” (TLGC 125), and he arranges for her to attend school. But in an important way he also becomes her teacher, instructing her in “the realities of life” (TLGC 136), drawing material from his own wide experience and his extensive knowledge of black folklore. His retelling of folktales from the black South provides her with a vivid sense of a mythic hero – the trickster “who could talk himself out of any situation” (TLGC 128). She thus learns a lesson from an early age which her father never acquired – that words and intelligence, not raw violence, have the power to transform experience by creating understanding and control over life. When listening to Grange sing blues music, she likewise feels “kin to something very old” (TLGC 133).
By connecting Ruth to the life-giving tradition of the black folk art of the South, Grange provides her with the time-tested values which will help her to survive and even triumph over the racist world which destroys so many other people in the novel. His recounting episodes from black history reinforces in her mind the crucial idea that black people established a strong and viable culture in the South, despite the efforts of the dominant society to destroy that culture. His accounts of his personal past, especially from his boyhood, also bring to life in Ruth’s consciousness “all sorts of encounters with dead folks and spirits and occasionally the Holy Ghost” (TLGC 129). In other words, his stories give her vital access to an imaginatively rich, emotionally potent world – precisely the kind of world which the psychologically underdeveloped Brownfield never becomes aware of. As Ruth grows older, Grange also teaches her about the world beyond the South. He steals books from the white library which open her mind and stimulate her imagination – books about the mythology, geography, Africa, and romantic rebellion. He also reads her episodes from the Bible, especially the story of Exodus, again empowering her with the compelling myth of an oppressed people who triumph over circumstance through the strength of their will and spirit.

Grange loves Ruth enough to prepare her for the most dramatic action of her life, her flight from the South. Late in the novel, when Ruth asks him about her future, he tells her, “We got this farm. We can stay here till kingdom come” (TLGC 193). But by this point in her life she feels stifled by the segregated South and tells him, “I’m not going to be a hermit. I want to get away from here someday” (TLGC 193). The same fences which provide Grange with a sense of security Ruth perceives as encroachments.
The final third of the novel, therefore, deals with Ruth’s increasing dissatisfaction with the rural South and her desire to move forward a larger, broader world which her protean identity needs. This struggle finally takes the form of her gaining independence from Brownfield and everything he represents about the South. A man who “had enslaved his own family” (TLGC 227), as well as himself, he is intent on taking Ruth back after he has been released from prison. When he encounters Ruth late in the novel as she walks to school, he shouts at her, “You belongs to me, just my chickens or my hogs” (TLGC 220). “You need shooting”, she defiantly replies (TLGC 220). Rejecting the crippling roles imposed on her mother and grandmother by Southern society, she observes that “I’m not yours” (TLGC 219).

As the novel draws to its close, Ruth, with Grange’s help, achieves her independence from her father and Southern life in general. It becomes increasingly clear to Grange that the only way to protect Ruth from Brownfield is to encourage her to leave the South, for the full weight of Southern law is in favor of returning her to Brownfield. Grange, therefore, centers his life on helping her emancipation from Southern slavery and her pursuit of a new life. He buys her an automobile on her sixteenth birthday and begins saving money which she will use for college. He ultimately sacrifices his own life to save her from Brownfield, for he is killed by the police after shooting Brownfield when the court takes Ruth away from him. The novel ends on a painful note of ambivalence. Southern injustice erupts in violence which takes Grange’s life, yet his death frees Ruth for a new expanded possibilities.
But the novel strongly implies that Ruth will not stay long in the South because her own protean self require more space and possibilities than the South at this point in its history can provide. Eager to “rise up” in life, she dreams of going north. As she tells Grange, “I want to get away from here someday… I think maybe I’ll go North, like you did…” (TLGC 193). Later she thinks vaguely of journeying to Africa. The exact physical direction of her life is not made clear, nor could it be. She has a lucid notion of the Southern places she must leave but keeps an indeterminate vision of the open space to which she will move.

The third major narrative in the novel incorporates the vision of the South implicit in the other two narratives and offers one more critically important perspective on the South. Whereas Grange Copeland’s “first” life powerfully reinforces the beakly pessimistic view of the south implicit in Brownfield’s narrative, and his “second” life is very similar in certain ways to Ruth’s story, because it is a flight from the slavery of the segregated South, Grange’s third life contains an important element missing in the other two narratives – his remarkable return to the South, which regenerates him as a human being. In returning to Baker country, Grange achieves “his total triumph over life’s failures” (TLGC 136), creating a new place for himself by transforming the racist society which has withered Brownfield into a genuine “home” (141) which nurtures Ruth and also causes him to be “a reborn man” (TLGC 157).

Walker, who knew the most brutal features of the rural South firsthand, is careful not to romanticize the South to which Grange returns. She emphasizes that Grange goes to Georgia not because of a sudden nostalgia for magnolias and wisteria but simply because the circumstances of his life have made him as
Southerner, for better or for worse: “...though he hated it as much as any place else, where he was born would always be home for him. Georgia would be home for him, and every other place foreign” (TLGC 141). Crucial to Granges’ creation of a new home for himself in the South is his securing of land. Using the money he obtained in various devious ways in the North and the money he gets from Josie’s sale of the Dew Drop Inn, he builds a farm which constitutes “a sanctuary” (TLGC 155) from the white world which has victimized him economically and poisoned him with hatred. As his name suggests, he is able to “cope” with his “land” so that he can build a “grange” or farm which will nourish himself and others.

The South and north, therefore, are portrayed in Grange’s first two lives as dehumanized and dehumanizing environments. Although both environments pose severe threats to his humanity, Grange finally chooses the South over the North because he is humanly visible to Southerners, whereas Northern society is completely blind to him.

Walker, however, consciously avoids idealizing Grange’s Southern home. As the novel’s ending makes clear, it is a small oasis of human love surrounded by the same kind of Southern racism which has blighted the lives of scores of black people in the novel. Southern courts continue to mete out injustice, and Southern violence continues to take the lives of innocent people, most notably Fred Hill, who is murdered when his son attempts to integrate a previously all-white school. And as Ruth’s narrative demonstrates, even Grange’s home has its restrictive features. Although such a pastoral “refuge” satisfies Grange with a sense of place and continuity with the past. Walker clearly endorses Ruth’s desire to leave it for the open space which her young spirit desires.
As Alice Walker has observed in *In Search of Mother’s Gardens*, her sense of reality is inherently dialectical:

I believe that the truth of any subject comes out when all sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts of the other writer’s story. And the whole story is what I’m after. (ISMG 49)

The book thus remains true to its author’s deepest promptings and her profound sense of her southern black heritage.

In *The Third life of Grange Copeland*, she recounts three different experiences of racial and economic oppression in the South. In detailing the stories of Brownfield and Grange, Walker not only illustrates her own theories of the importance of maintaining the individual soul in the context of community, but also elucidates the methods of surviving suffering. Brownfield, Grange, and Ruth, begin their stories as uniquely oppressed in the sharecropping system and in the corresponding environment of domestic violence and consequent self-hatred of mid twentieth century Georgia. Kate Cochran rightly says, “They are figures of oppression, manifestation on suffering, and symbols of survival methods adopted by the subjugated” (80). Through Brownfield lack of self-examination, his ideas, as well as the descriptions of his physical body, Walker has constructed a truly a destructive character. By using abusive language towards his family and also regularly abusing them physically, Brownfield destroys everything that comes in his way. Ultimately, it is his lack of self-examination safe-untidier that constructs Brownfield as overtly destructive force.
Walker’s womanist objective and criticism is crystallized in the depiction of Brownfield: not only is he grotesque in body and mind, Brownfield also refuses to learn from his mistakes and wrongdoings, although faced with the opportunity repeatedly throughout the novel. Instead of transforming into a man the likes of Grange, who offers a transformed masculine ideal; Brownfield remains content in his abusive and oppressive state of mind.

Walker exposes the pain experienced by the African American individuals who are subjected to the hate of individual whites, as well as the psychological violence of white supremacist ideology. Moreover, the parodying of the system of racial categorization and the racialized gaze as depicted through Ruth further enhances Walker’s critique. Although Brownfield’s abuse and oppression of his wife and children is an extension of the oppression he has been subjected to by white racist society in the U.S. South, Brownfield cannot be excused. Although he may blame white society, Brownfield still has a responsibility for his actions. In the end Brownfield, the epitome of grotesque, must be sacrificed in order for Ruth to have a future. Therefore, Walker’s novel is prescriptive: by suggesting that in order for the African American woman to be truly free from oppression, both the grotesqueness of white supremacist society and African American Patriarchy must be destroyed.