WALKER'S "WOMANISM" AND HER PERSONAL CONSTRUCT OF THE HISTORY OF BLACK WOMEN

A struggle to express ourselves. To be heard. To be seen. In our own image. To construct the words. To name the deeds. Confront the risks. Write the history. Document it on radio, television and satellites. To analyze and live it.

- Alexis De Veaux

Since times of slavery, black womanhood has been destroyed, distorted, dismantled and abused with racial, sexual and inhuman practices by black men and white men and women. In the process, they have lost their genuine "self", and have developed a "double consciousness". W.E.B. DuBois calls this as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (DuBois 1969, 45). They see themselves with the eyes of white men and women and black men. This has ultimately been responsible for the destruction of their self-confidence and the feeling of being human. They looked upon themselves as chattel. They were called the "mules of the world" (MG: 237). Jean Tooner referred them as "the exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey" (MG: 232). The task of the black
womanist writers, therefore, is to give back to black women their own black woman self, their beauty, physical and sexual strength, motherhood, sisterhood, wifehood, etc. At the same time, they need to be educated and made aware of the need to recover from psychological and mental traumas of inferiority. This is possible only if their wholeness and roundness as women are restored.

In her essay, "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor," Walker responds to her mother's question: "When you make these trips back South ... what is it exactly that you're looking for?" by stating, "A wholeness .... because everything around me is split up, deliberately split up. History split up, literature split up, and people are split up too. It makes people do ignorant things" (MG: 48). She further tells her mother, "I believe that the truth about any subject comes when all the sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writers' story. And the whole story is what I'm after" (MG: 48). In her personal life and in her art, Walker insists upon searching through both cultural and psychological pasts, through the pain of slavery and segregation, for a meaningful synthesis. The South is inextricably a part of that search.
Walker objects to a white feminist scholar Jean McMohan Humez's labelling as lesbians Rebecca Jackson and Rebecca Perot, two nineteenth-century black women who lived together and later founded a religious settlement for women and their children. She writes:

The word 'lesbian' may not ... be suitable (or comfortable) for black women .... Indeed I can imagine black women who love women (sexually or not) ... referring to themselves as 'whole' women, from 'wholly' or 'holy' or as 'round' women - women who love other women, yes, but women who also have concern, in a culture that oppresses all black people (and this would go back very far), for their fathers, brothers, and sons, no matter how they feel about them as males. My own term for such women would be 'womanist'.

(MG: 81)

This term is preferred by many black feminists because it is rooted in black culture, whereas the word feminist is perceived as coming out of the white woman's culture.

In a letter published in New York Times Magazine, Walker says:

Feminism (all colors) definitely teaches women they are capable, one reason for its universal appeal. In addition to this, womanist (i.e. black feminist) tradition assumes, because of our experiences during slavery, that black women already "are" capable, .... I don't choose womanism because it is 'better' than feminism .... Since womanism means black feminism, this would be a nonsensical distinction. I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it; because I cherish
the spirit of the women (like Sojourner) the word calls to mind, and because I share the old ethnic American habit of offering society a new word when the word it is using fails to describe behavior and change that only a new word can help it more fully sees.

(Walker 1984b, 94)

Walker prefers "womanist" to "feminist" on the grounds that it sounds stronger and more inclusive.

In continuing her defence of the word she writes that it is "a word that said more than that they choose women over men. More than that they choose to live separate from men. In fact, to be consistent with black cultural values (which, whatever their shortcomings, still have considerable worth) it would have to be a word that affirmed connectedness to the entire community and the world, rather than separation, regardless of who worked and slept with whom" (MG: 81).

She further says:

'Womanist' encompasses 'feminist' as it is defined in Webster's, but also means instinctively pro-woman. It is not in the dictionary at all. Nonetheless, it has a strong root in black women's culture .... An advantage of using 'womanist' is that, because it is from my own culture, I needn't preface it with the word 'Black' (an awkward necessity and a problem I have with the word 'feminist'), since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface 'feminist' with the word 'white', since the word 'feminist' is accepted as coming out of white women's culture.

(Walker 1980, 100 fn)
Four definitions of womanist serve as epigraphs to In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, a collection of essays written by Alice Walker over twenty-six years and culled from a number of journals, periodicals, and books. She writes that the word 'womanist' means:

1. From womanish. (Opp. of 'girlish,' i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and / or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and / or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except
periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."


4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.

(MG: xi-xii)

It is evident, from these four definitions, that black womanism celebrates blackness, black roots, the aspirations of black people, and presents a balanced picture of black womanhood. Elliott Butler-Evans observes that these definitions can be used as framework for interpreting the works of the black women writers. She notices the "movement from the specific racial reference in the first definition to a broader application of the term in the second definition
and the somewhat open definition of the term in the last
definition" (Butler-Evans 1989, 12).

The layered meaning of womanist is in keeping with
Walker's refusal to embrace any ideological mould that is
narrow and exclusive and therefore out of harmony with
spirituality. It reflects her comment to balance, the beauty
and power of which make her womanist aesthetic distinctive
and healing. There is balance in her thought and in all of
her art: balance between concern for women's reality and
concern for the larger universe to which black women, like
all people, are connected.

Gloria Wade-Gayles observes: "As a black writer, Alice
Walker is 'preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the
spiritual whole'" of her people. As a womanist writer, she is
'committed to exploring the oppressions, insanities, the
loyalties, and the triumphs of black women' " (Wade-Gayles
1990, 303).

Walker's primary emphasis is consciousness of herself
as a Black woman empowered to narrate the stories of Black
women who are past or present creators of a Black female
culture. Her role is one of enabling Black women, especially
those most marginalized by race, caste, and class, to have
their voices heard and their histories read.
Walker employs the term 'womanism' to denote the metamorphosis that occurs in an adolescent girl, such as Ruth or Celie, when she comes to a sense of herself as a woman. Toni Morrison calls it "the little-girl-gone-to-woman" (Morrison 1970, 91). The young girl inherits womanism after a traumatic event such as menarche or after an epiphany or as a result of the experience of racism, rape, death in the family, or sudden responsibility. Through coping with the experience she moves creatively beyond the self to that concern for the needs of others characteristic of adult womanists.

As a "womanist" writer, Walker, along with sexual issues, incorporates racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy. Protesting against sexism and the patriarchal power structure, Walker is unapologetically a propagandist. Her writing demands that the readers, whether the male oppressors or the female oppressed, be aware of the ideological issues in order that it may change their attitudes about patriarchy.

Her works just don't deal with women and women's issues but posit some aspects of a womanist ideology. Since Walker continues to write and since the Afro-American novel is still evolving, the following descriptive statements are tentative
and hypothetical but serve as a working base. One can find a framework of the combination of the following themes in them:

a) A critical perception of and reaction to patriarchy, often articulated through the struggle of a victim or rebel who must face a patriarchal institution.

b) Sensitivity to the inequities of sexism allied with an acceptance of women and understanding of the choices open to them.

c) A metamorphosis leading to female victory in a feminist Utopia, or a stasis, signifying the failure to eliminate sexism.

d) A style spiced with the acrimony of feminist discourse.

As with recipes, so with works of art, results are variable.

Walker's call for new definitions echoes Toni Cade Bambara's appeal in one of her early articles, "On the Issue of Roles":

I have always ... opposed the stereotypic definitions of "masculine" and "feminine" ... because I always found the either / or implicit in those definitions antithetical to what I was all about - and what revolution for Self is about - the whole
person. It seems to me you find yourself in destroying illusions, smashing myths... being responsible to some truth... The job then regarding "roles" is to submerge all breezy definitions of manhood/womanhood... until realistic definitions emerge through commitment to Blackhood.

(Bambara 1970, 108)

Basing on this view, Marie H. Buncombe contends that "Walker uses androgyny as a metaphor for the "wholeness," the totality of the black experiences as she sees it" (Buncombe 1987, 420). The question which Walker raises in her collection of essays proves this point:

"I wanted to explore the relationship between men and women, and why women are always condemned for doing what men do as an expression of their masculinity. Why are women so easily "tramps" and "traitors" when men are heroes for engaging in the same activity?" (MG: 256).

In a recent interview with Justine Toms and Michael Toms, Walker says: "...people are naturally bisexual, as they are naturally bispiritual, that they have a male and female spirit. You have been a male and a female sexually because you have a male and female parent" (Walker 1993, 10).

Walker extends this argument to God. In her collection of essays, she quotes Rebecca Jackson, the nineteenth century black preacher and mystic who believed that God was spirit: "


'As well ask how Jesus could be a man as how can Jesus be a woman. God is spirit' " (MG: 76). Celie, in Walker's The Color Purple, echoes the same: "God ain't a he or she, but a It" (CP: 177). Susan Marie in "A Letter of the Times, or Should This Sado-Masochism Be Saved?" defines God as: "The inner spirit, the inner voice; the human compulsion when deeply distressed to seek healing counsel within ourselves, and the capacity within ourselves both to create this counsel and receive it (GW: 119). Walker extends this concept of Androgyny to God and stresses that is innate. She further extends the concept of God saying that she has replaced the "oppressive image with ... everything there is, ... the desert, the trees ... the birds, the dirt, ... And that's all God" (Walker 1983b, 179).

Walker stresses the oneness of the natural and the human world. She quotes a passage from Anne Cameron which says:

There are people who think that only people have emotions like pride, fear, and joy, but those who know will tell you all things are alive, perhaps not in the same way we are alive, but each in its own way, as should be, for we are not all the same. And though different from us in shape and life span, different in Time and knowing, yet are trees alive. And rocks. And water. And all know emotion.

(LW: 139)
Walker's anger during the years blacks were denied the right to coexist in peace and dignity with whites has allied her with people of all colours who share her belief that the right to peaceful coexistence should also extend to animals, trees, and all human and nonhuman inhabitants of the earth. To John O'Brien she defines animism as "a belief that makes it possible to view all creation as living, as being inhabited by spirit" (Walker 1973c, 193).

Her concern for the planet is seen when she tells Oprah Winfrey in 1989: "There is no heaven. This is it. We're already in heaven, you know, and so in order ... for the earth to survive, we have to acknowledge each other as part of the family, the same family, and also reaffirm those things in ourselves and in other people that we've been brought up to fear or to hate" (qtd. in Winchell 1992, 133).

She acknowledges and prays to a Great Spirit that sounds suspiciously like God without the male trappings formerly incompatible with her womanist sensibilities. In the last essay in Living by the Word "The Universe Responds", written in 1987, she defines prayer as "the active affirmation in the physical world of our inseparableness from the divine" (LW: 192), and she ends with this adaptation of the Gospel:
Knock and the door shall be opened. Ask and you shall receive. WHATSOEVER you do unto the least of these, you do also unto me – and to yourself. For we are one.

"God" answers prayers. Which is another way of saying, "the universe responds".

We are indeed the world. Only if we have reason to fear what is in our hearts need we fear for the planet. Teach yourself peace.

Pass it on.

( LW: 193 )

As a womanist writer, Walker has also experimented with the old forms used by her predecessors, male and female. She uses the African myths, folklore, story-telling, voodoo, songs, dance, black English and the epistolary form. Myths, by definition, voice a culture's most profound perceptions, and, when given fictional form, can awaken the audience's strongest impulses. It is taken to mean a dramatic embodiment of cultural values, of ideal states of being found in Afro-American history and experience. It dares to posit a world of infinite possibility, a world in which cultural heroes and heroines come to grips with those negative forces, or villains, that interfere with the attainment of an ideal world. Walker's return to the epistolary form of the novel enables her to exploit its qualities of simplicity, relative intimacy, and candour. The letter pretends to be authentic and, like oral tradition, gives the impression that the story teller is not lying. Walker also intersperses her novels with
songs, verse, reiterated phrases. These seem to have the communal function of the call-and-response usually employed during African story telling sessions. They relieve the tedium of a long speech or a long stretch of narration and involve the audience in the spinning of the yarn. Walker uses them to emphasize climatic points in the narration where the emotion is so intense that prose can no longer serve as a suitable vehicle.

Walker's women range from the slave woman to the revolutionary woman of the 90s. Within each of these roles, she has examined the external realities facing these women as well as the internal world of each woman. She makes a conscious effort to explore the imaginings, dreams and rituals of the subconscious of black women which contain their accumulated collective reality.

To make her point about womanism effective, Walker uses the woman who is docile, hardworking, and pitted against a terrible fate who suffers from poverty or racism allied with sexism, and sometimes from all three together. Its ideal is for black unity where every black person has a modicum of power and so can be a "brother" or a "sister" or a "father" or a "mother" to the other. Its aim is the dynamism of the wholeness and self-healing.
To achieve her end, Walker shares with the other Afro-American writers the heritage of "blues". The blues have had a tremendous impact on the Afro-American womanist novels as there is a connection between the blues and the capacity to experience hope. For it is "the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together, and if any of it is lost, the people suffer and are without soul" (M: 271).

In spite of the blues, black women occasionally go mad. Unlike negatively presented white mad women, the black mad woman in novels written by Afro-American women novelists knows in her subconscious that she must survive because she has her people without other resources depending on her; in a positive about-face she usually recovers through a superhuman effort, or somehow, aids others. Madness becomes a temporary aberration preceding spiritual growth, healing, and integration.

One theme Walker discusses in her writings is that of the black woman as suppressed artist. Walker contends that, for two centuries, black women have been hidden artists - creative geniuses - whose creative impulses have been denied and thwarted in a society in which they have been valued only as a source of cheap labour. She asks:
What did it mean for a Black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers' time...? How was the creativity of the Black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for the most of the years Black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a Black person to read or write? And the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action, did not exist.

(MG: 233-34)

Walker adds that these black women artists and creators, who were stifled instead of cultivated, spent their lives in slow motion and, unaware of their own richness, they "stared out at the world, wildly, like lunatics - or quietly, like suicides" (MG: 232).

Another theme that has become central to the works of Alice Walker is the collective and historical violation of black women. This can be used to point the way to an intensive historical study of the black woman writer and the black woman herself. Alice Walker using her definitions on "womanism" as a base, outlined a personal historical view of black women in her interview with Mary Helen Washington. Walker sees the experiences of black women as a series of movements from a woman totally victimized by society and by men to a growing, developing woman whose consciousness allows her to have some control over her life. "The recurrent theme running throughout that interview," Mary Helen Washington says, "and in much of her other pieces on women is her belief
that 'Black women ... are the most oppressed people in the world' " (Washington 1979, 134).

In her personal construct of the black women's history, Walker classifies them under three cycles: 'Suspended', 'Assimilated', and 'Emergent'. The first cycle of women belongs to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the early decades of the twentieth century. To be precise, it extends from the end of the Reconstruction Era to the first two decades of the twentieth century. The women of the second cycle are the women who belong to the forties and fifties, those decades when black people (then "Negroes") wanted most to be a part of the main stream of American life. The women of the third cycle are, for the most part, women of the late sixties, although there are some older women in Walker's fiction who exhibit the qualities of the developing, emergent model.

Walker explains the state of the women of the first cycle as caused by pressures in society which made it impossible for the black women of this era to move forward. She says:

They were suspended in a time in history where the options for Black women were severely limited. ... And they either kill themselves or they are used by the man, or by the children, or by ... whatever the pressures against them. And they cannot go anywhere. I mean, you can't, you just can't move, until there is room for you to move into. And that
is the way I see many of the women I have created in fiction. They are closer to my mother's generation than to mine. They had few choices.

(qtd. in Washington 1979, 137-138)

Carrying the burdens heaped upon them by society and by the family, these women are the victims of both racial and sexual oppression. To quote Zora Neale Hurston, they are "the mules of the world" (MG: 237). They have also been called "Matriarchs", "Super women", "Mean and Evil Bitches", "Castraters", and "Sapphire's Mama" (MG: 237). Walker terms these women as 'suspended', a concept she develops in an important historical essay entitled "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: The Creativity of the Black Woman in the South". She writes:

...black women whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so unconscious, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held. They stumbled blindly through their lives: creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope. In the selfless abstractions their bodies became to the men who used them, they became more than "sexual objects", more even than mere women: they became "Saints".

(MG: 231-232)

Pain, violence, and death form the essential content of these women's lives. Walker referred to them as "suspended" women because the pressures against them are so great they cannot move anywhere. Washington observes:
Suspended in time and place, they are women whose life choices are so severely limited that they either kill themselves, retreat into insanity, or are simply defeated one way or another by the external circumstances of their lives. Most of these women suffer severe physical abuse, sometimes at the hands of their men, sometimes because of poverty or child-bearing.

(Washington 1975, 212)

To Jean Toomer, these black women appear "vacant and fallow as autumn fields, with harvest time never in sight", and he saw them "enter loveless marriages, without joy; and become prostitutes, without resistance; and become mothers of children, without fulfillment" (qtd. in MG: 233). June Jordan calls them Alice Walker's black-eyed Susans - flowers of the blood-soaked American soil" (qtd. in Washington 1979, 138). The condition of these black women oriented in the blues tradition is "in love and trouble" according to John Callahan (qtd. in Washington 1975, 212).

In spite of these conditions, some evidences of the creative genius of the black women of that age still remain. Some of them excelled in quilt-making, some sold hats and roots and some designed and created brilliant and original gardens. Thus, the creative spirit was being nourished somehow, showing itself in wild and unlikely places. Most of Walker's women characters belong to the first cycle. They are
cruelly exploited, spirits and bodies mutilated, relegated to the most narrow and confining lives, sometimes driven to madness. The concept of the suspended woman is developed in a speech given by Alice Walker at a symposium on Black women, held at Radcliffe College in May 1972 and is based on Walker's personal sense of the history of Black women in America.

In the second cycle of Walker's personal construct of the history of black women are the women who wanted to integrate with the mainstream of American life alienating themselves from their roots and denying their ethnicity. The black woman who had some chance at education is pushed and pulled by the larger world outside of her and is urged to assimilate the mainstream of American life in order to overcome her background. In Walker's historical construct, these black women are ironically, victims of what are ostensibly greater opportunities.

These women are also victims like the women of the first cycle but not of physical violence but of a kind of psychic violence. Washington says:

What is typical of the women in this cycle is that they are more aware of their condition than those women in the first cycle, but, in spite of their great potential for shaping their lives, they are still thwarted because they feel themselves coming to life before the necessary changes have been made
in the political environment, before there is space for them to move into.

(Washington 1975, 213)

To Mary Helen Washington Walker says:

I have this theory that Black women in the Fifties, in the Forties - the late Forties and early Fifties - got away from their roots much more than they will probably ever do again, because that was the time of greatest striving to get into White Society and to erase all the backgrounds of poverty. It was a time when you could be the exception, could be The One, and my sister was The One. But I think she's not unique - so many, many Black families have a daughter or a sister who was the one who escaped because, you see, that was what was set up for her; she was going to be the one who escaped, and the rest of us weren't supposed to escape, because we had given our One.

(qtd. in Washington 1979, 143)

Thus, even though these women appear to have more options than sisters before them - they are educated, they are not subjected to extreme physical abuse, they have even managed to become acceptable to the white world - the price they have to pay for their acceptance is the negation of their racial identity and the separation from the sustenance that such an identity could afford them.

These women are destroyed spiritually rather than physically. But one can still find some movement forward, some hope that did not exist for the earlier generation of
American black women. These women are also hindered by "contrary instincts" (MG: 235), the sense of "twoness" that W.E.B. DuBois spoke of in *Souls of Black Folk*.

Walker made one of the first statements about the direction and development of her black women characters into a third cycle in her interview with Mary Helen Washington in June 1973:

> My women, in the future, will not burn themselves up - that is what I mean by coming to the end of the cycle, and understanding something to the end ... now I am ready to look at women who have made the room larger for others to move in. ... I think one reason I never stay away from the Southern Movement is because I realize how deeply political changes affect the choices and life styles of people. The Movement of the Sixties, Black Power, the Muslims, the Panthers... have changed the options of Black people generally and of Black women in particular. So that my women characters won't all end the way they have been, because Black women now offer varied, live models of how it is possible to live. We have made a new place to move.

(qtd. in Washington 1979, 146)

The women in the third cycle come just to the edge of a new awareness. They make the first tentative steps into an uncharted region. They are totally aware of the political, sexual and psychological oppressions. Many of these women experience a sort of epiphany before they occupy and claim any new territory.
In the essay "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" Walker speaks of herself having been called to life by that movement of the sixties as being called from the shadows of a world in which Black people existed as statistics, problems, beasts of burden, a life that resembled death (MG: 119-129). The black women were not aware of the possibilities within themselves or about the possibilities in the larger world outside of the narrow restraints of the world they inhabited before the struggles of the sixties. These characters lay the groundwork for a new type of woman to emerge through suffering and struggle.

These women are also active in their search for meaning in their roots and traditions. Washington says: "As they struggle to reclaim their past and to re-examine their relationship to the Black community, there is a consequent reconciliation between themselves and their cultural heritage and between themselves and Black men" (Washington 1975, 215).

Interestingly, the cycles of Alice Walker correspond to the so-called priorities on the national agenda for change in America. Racial liberation was the priority in the 1960s. In 1970, if not as early as the late 1960s, racial liberation had to make room for, or yield its space entirely to, sexual liberation. A new movement was born, similar in goals to women's movements as far back as the nineteenth century. In
1973, with the founding of the National Black Feminist Organisation and Black Women Organized for Women, hundreds of black women discussed publicly, as they had done privately among themselves, the victimization of black women at the hands of black men.

These women invoked the spirit of Harriet Tubman, Ida Wells-Barnett, Frances Harper, and other nineteenth-century black women activists and held before the nation the womanist example of Shirley Chisholm, Angela Davis, Fannie Lou Hamer, and other contemporary black women activists. Achieving their goal, the racial and sexual liberation of black women, required the courage to speak, write, and even sing about "doublejeopardy". Their focus was on black women as powerless and brutalized human beings, as victims.

By the mid-1970s and certainly by 1980, the movement had gained larger numbers, more visibility, and unquestionable strength. Black women in the movement no longer focused on women as victims. To this stage belong women of the third cycle that Walker describes. These women insist on their own space and the right to their own names. They refuse to be victims of any kind.

The distinctive voice in Walker's works is the voice of a woman deeply immersed in her blackness, her womanness, and her Southerness. She is, probably, one among the few black
women Southern writers who persistently identifies herself and her concerns with her native region - the deep South of Georgia and Mississippi. Even when she writes passionately about problems that ravage the land and the lives of people, Alice Walker emphasizes the healing power of love and the possibility of "change; change personal, and change in society" (MG: 252).

This message of hope is a gift from the South, which Walker embraces as her spiritual home. In "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience," she writes with pride and gratitude of her "underprivileged background." The Southern experience, she explains, is an "advantageous heritage" for the sensitive black writer, offering "a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and an abiding love of justice" (MG: 21).

While Walker's paradigm communities are nearly always black, rural, and Southern, they become viable emblems by means of her creation of familial and social generations that underscore her concerns with familial identity, continuity and rupture, and with social roles, order and change. In shaping her fiction according to pattern of generations, she has established a concrete means of portraying who her people are and what their lives mean.
Her heritage and history provide a vehicle for understanding the modern world in which her characters live. She has observed to Krista Brewer:

Because I'm black and I'm a woman and because I was brought up poor and because I'm a Southerner, ... the way I see the world is quite different from the way many people see it. I could help but have a radical vision of society ... the way I see things can help people see what needs to be changed.

(qtd. in Davis 1983, 40)

Her vision, however, is a disturbing one. For she relies much upon sexual violence and physical abuse to portray breaches in black generations. Typically, she brings to her work a terrible observance of black self-hatred and destruction. Her images of people destroyed or destroying others originate in a vision of cultural reality as it is seen in "You Had to Go to Funerals" from Revolutionary Petunias: "At six and seven / The face in the gray box / Is nearly always your daddy's / Old schoolmate / Mowed down before his / Time" (RP: 7).

Walker's fiction expresses the outrage she feels about the injustices of society; "I think," she has stated, "that growing up in the South, I have a very keen sense of injustice - a very prompt response to it" (qtd. in Davis 1983, 40). Some of her brutal depictions of life reveal her ways of responding to both particular and general injustices
suffered by blacks throughout their history in the United States. Gloria Steinem, in her interview with Walker, observes: "the rage and the imaginings of righteous murders that are in her writing are also in her. You just have to know her long enough to see the anger flash" (Walker 1982b, 271). Her fictional use of rage, however, is more often than not contained within a family environment and directed towards self or kin, rather than towards outsiders.

In fact, Walker has discussed her writing, and need to write, in terms that articulate her deflection of rage and her reconciliation with it. In her essay "One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s)", she puts her frustration and her energy into her work: "Write I did, night and day, something, and it was not even a choice, ... but a necessity. Writing saved me from the sin and inconvenience of violence - as it saves most writers who live in 'interesting' oppressive times and are not afflicted by personal immunity" (MG: 369).

She speaks of her early writing as a means of survival, an alternative to despair. Over time, though, her writing has become not only a means of averting crisis but a means of achieving health. She told David Bradley in 1984, "I think writing helps you heal yourself. I think if you write long enough, you will be a healthy person. That is, if you write
what you need to write, as opposed to what will make money, or what will make fame" (Walker 1984c, 36).

To Claudia Tate, she says that writing is not about finding an audience but, "expanding myself as much as I can and seeing myself in as many roles and situations as possible" (Walker 1983b, 185). In her essay "Saving The Life That is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life", Walker gives one more reason for her writing:

It has been said that some one asked Toni Morrison why she writes the kind of books she writes, and that she replied: "Because they are the kind of books I want to read".... She (Toni Morrison) must be her own model as well as the artist attending, creating, learning from, realizing the model, which is to say, herself.... To take Toni Morrison's statement further,...I write not only what I want to read ... I write all the things I should have been able to read .... It is, in the end, the saving of the lives that we write about .... We care because we know this: the life we save is our own.

(MG: 7, 8, 13, 14)

Walker believes in the individual in whom she vests the responsibility for survival, because it is the action of a single individual that has caused the breakdown of experience or identity in private lives, and ultimately in the public or social life of the group. Individual characters acting alone are the harbingers of the messages embedded in the lives of generations of blacks.
While stressing the importance of the individual, Walker believes that as a writer she must work towards a larger perspective. She describes it as "connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass in one's glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying theme through immense diversity, a fearlessness of growth, of search, of looking, that enlarges the private and the public world" (MG: 5). She firmly believes that one way of structuring the "common thread" is by means of generations. She values the strength and purpose black generations have given to her writing.

She gains this strength and purpose from her mother as well as her grand and great-grand parents. Very often she uses the image of her mother's face "radiant", "ordering the universe in her personal conception of beauty. Her face ... is a legacy ... she leaves to me" (MG: 241). Walker also learnt so many stories from her mother. So many stories of her are her mother's stories. About that she says, "...I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories - like her life - must be recorded" (MG: 240).

Walker also learns the "love of beauty" from her mother. As a wonderful gardener, "whatever [her mother]
planted grew as if by magic ... whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden". Walker observes: "Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms - sunflowers, petunias, roses, dalias, ... verbena ... and on and on" (MG: 241). She keeps before her the vision of her own mother, who cultivated magnificent flower gardens, despite her work from sun up to dark either in the fields or as a domestic for less than twenty dollars a week. She refers to her mother's gardens as her "art", "her ability to hold on, even in simple ways" (MG: 242). Garden becomes a recurrent metaphor for both art and beauty, endurance and survival. It is also Walker's articulation of the process by which individuals find selfhood through examining the experiences of others who have preceded them. She states, "Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength, in search of my mother's garden, I found my own" (MG: 243). She gains a "respect for strength" in her grandmother's "so nearly undefeated face" and learns at what cost her people have survived (GNWL: 47).

As Walker recognizes the value of her mother's stories and her family's faces, she displays an enormous sympathy for the old generation of Southern women and men. The men in particular have been abusive in their youths, but they come to an essential understanding of their own lives and their
families' as they learn to be reflective, responsible, and expressive individuals. These old men to whom sexuality is no longer an issue are redeemed by learning to love and assume responsibility for their actions. But Walker first presents them as stereotypes with destructive emotional and psychological responses to black life, their women, children, friends, whites, and themselves. Then she loosens the confines of the stereotype and attempts to penetrate the nexus of feelings that make these lives valuable in themselves and for others.

Walker already saw a 'new man' beginning in some of her poetry from the 1970s. She thought that the new man would be like Christ putting love in front and the necessary clenched fist behind, as she explains in "The Abduction of Saints" (GNWL: 36-37). However, in her dedication to the 1984 volume of her poems Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning, Walker had set a slightly different standard for the new man. Her ideal man's rebellion now takes a more subtle form; he doesn't need fists. She terms him simply "the quiet man" (GNWL: vi). Walker considers such a new, nurturing man essential for the survival of the planet.

Family is another concern of Walker. She takes into account the dynamics of collective identity along with the demands that social codes place upon the group, and she
considers the structure of personal identity with its unreflected social relations, especially family. She shapes her fiction so that both collective and personal identities become keys to character, theme, and plot. She structures the experience of identity in terms of social and familial generations that have the potential to transform black life.

In celebrating her people, Walker demonstrates a deeply-rooted consciousness of her role as an artist in a socially and politically complex world. "To acknowledge ancestors means," she states, "we are aware that we did not make ourselves.... The grace with which we embrace life, in spite of the pain, the sorrows, is always a measure of what has gone before" (RP: Preface 1). By acknowledging ancestors, she acknowledges that she is part of a black tradition of artists, particularly that strain stemming from Southern slave narrators, folk tellers of tales, and literary artists.

Her response to other writers has been extremely important to her literary development, as illustrated by the epigraphs for her books - excerpts from Albert Camus; West African writer Elechi Amadi; German poet Rainer Maria Rilke; the Russian woman poet Akhmatova; the African poet Okot'pek; the native American seer Black Elk; Stevie Wonder; Lissie Lyles; and Mirella Ricciardi. In her collection of essays,
Walker uses the insights of writers Zora Neale Hurston, Virginia Woolf, and Phillis Wheatley as a means of illuminating the creativity of black women.

The writers that have influenced Walker are indicators of her own preoccupations. In her sophomore year she read every Russian writer that she could get hands on, for it seemed to her that "Russia must have something floating about in the air that writers breathe from the time they are born" (MG: 257). What most impressed her was the ability of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Gorki, and Gogol to render the tone of their entire society while penetrating the essential spirit of individual persons. The result is both scope and depth and the sounding of the genuine which is the universal in all people. This configuration of qualities certainly marks Walker's fiction, for there is always an interrelation between the lives of the black women she portrays, the values of the entire society, and essential spiritual questions that are asked in every human society.

Walker is also drawn to writers who are not afraid of fantasy, myth, and mystery, qualities that inspired her in the works of African writers Okot'o tek; Elechi Amadi, whose Concubine she calls a perfect story; Camera Laye and Bessie Head. Like Black Elk, whose vision permeates Meridian, and Gabriel Garcia Márquez, the South American novelist, these
writers seem to Walker to be "like musicians: at one with their cultures and their historical subconscious" (MG: 259).

Though not in concert with their own cultures, the German writers Rilke and Hesse insisted on loving "those questions ... like locked rooms / full of treasure / to which [their] blind / and groping key / does not yet fit" (MG: 40). Like them, Walker believes that the artist "must be free to explore, otherwise she or he will never discover what is needed (by every one) to be known" (MG: 264). She has successfully applied their questions to the nature of black women as they struggle in America. Barbara Christian observes: "The process of stripping off layers and honing down to the core is apparent in her fiction as well as her poetry" (Christian 1984b, 263).

Walker is also influenced by Virginia Woolf, the Brontës, the South African writer Doris Lessing and by the white American writer Kate Chopin, because "their characters can always envision a solution, an evolution to higher consciousness on the part of society, even when society itself cannot" (MG: 251). Perhaps that belief in the possibility of change is related to retention of their own humanity despite the impact of oppressive forces.

Walker is equally influenced by Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston. Their concept of "animism" has infused their
books with the historical unconscious of black people in America. Nurtured by these two, Walker as an activist restored their works to the reading public. She writes: "We are a people. A people do not throw away their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone" (MG: 92).

Walker sees herself as part of an international community of writers from whom she learns and to whom she continually responds. This quality of hers is worth noting since white American society often views the Afro-American writer as separate from American literature, and therefore, from all other literature - despite the reciprocal impact Afro-American writers have had with other writers of the world. Like Richard Wright, Walker claims insights of the entire world of writers as connected to her own.

By revealing negative actions and violent encounters, Walker believes that she will be able to repair the damage done by unreflective people who are unable to recognize that their actions have more than personal consequences. Their actions have rended bonds between generations affecting all members of a family, community, race, or society. Her unrelenting portraits of human weaknesses convey her message that art should "make us better"; "if [it] doesn't ... then
what on earth is it for?" (Walker 1982b, 94). Her message, postulated in her novels, is that the breaches and violations must be mended for health and continuity, for "survival whole".