

A Psychoanalytic Study of the Hero in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*

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Abstract—In this paper, the author first gives a general introduction of feminism, Alice Walker, her "womanism" and makes a comparison between "womanism" and "feminism". In the following part, the author illustrates Grange's three stages of life and tries to analyze them based on Freud's psychoanalysis. Finally, applying Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, the author concludes with recovering self-identity's significance in the advancement of "womanism".

Keywords—Alice Walker; feminism; womanism; Freud; psychoanalysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Alice Walker's works and her womanism have attracted the attention of readers and critics alike. There have been numerous researches and papers on her writings and theories. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Alice Walker expresses her understanding of black sufferings, black self-realization and black people's search for their dream by putting her story against the white-dominated society. In her early works, we can obviously feel that Walker's creative writing is largely influenced by black literary tradition: the search of black identity and the conflicts between the blacks and the whites. The present paper aims to synthesize studies in feminism and womanism and figure out their differences and finally analyze the hero in Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* from the theory of Freud's psychoanalysis.

II. ALICE WALKER AND HER "WOMANISM"

Alice Walker, born into a sharecropper's family in Eatonton, Georgia, on February 9, 1944, is a prolific African American author and poet. She has written at length on issues of race and gender, and is most famous for the novel *The Color Purple* (1982) for which she won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, published in 1970, is the debut novel of Alice Walker. Her other works include *Meridian* (1976), *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1990) and many other poetry collections and non-fictions.

Alice Walker coins "womanism" to elaborate on her feminist views. In order to get a better understanding of Walker's "womanism", first it is essential to have a review of

feminism. As Charles E. Bresslerhas (p.144) summarized, the central issues of feminism are as follows:

"That men, either unconsciously or consciously, have oppressed women, allowing them little or no voice in the political, social, or economic issues of their society; That by not giving voice and value to women's opinions, responses, and writings, men have therefore suppressed the female, defined what it means to be feminine, and thereby de-voiced, devalued, and trivialized what it means to be a woman; and that in effect, men have made women the 'no significant Other'."

Since Aristotle, there have been gender discrimination and defaming opinions against women in western culture. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft authored *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, in which she declared women must fight for their rights and try to define themselves instead of letting the patriarchal society to define what it means to be a woman. Therefore, feminists seek to change the derogatory view of woman and advocate for equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for both men and women. Due to the lack of a unifying feminist approach for analyzing a text, Charles E. Bressler classifies feminism based on the geographical strains. According to her, American feminists wish to restore female writers' writings to the literary canon so that they can tell "herstory"; British feminists emphasize oppression and are concerned with how women are treated unequally in society and aim to change the unfair situation of women; French feminists pay more attention to the repression of women and their theories are closely connected with Freud's psychoanalysis.

However, Alice Walker associates herself with "womanism" rather than traditional "feminism". The word "womanism" and "black feminism" are almost used interchangeably. Walker's better-known definition of 'womanism' is adapted from her use of the term in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* in 1983. According to Alice Walker, a "womanist" was a feminist of color. She believes the difference between "womanism" and "feminism" lies in that womanism cannot be separated from the black women's unique history in racial and gender oppression and the black folk tradition. Her well-known phrase, "womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender," clearly shows womanists' differences. Her womanists' adovations are committed to achieve the

wholeness of both black men and women and she states the potential for the oppressed men and women to "possess a moral vision and standpoint on society that grows from their situation of oppression." (Collins, p.12)

This definition shows Walker's praise of black women's unique historic and racial background different from that of the feminists. In her book, Walker uses the word to describe the perspective and experiences of black feminist. Both black and white feminists are primarily concerned with women, whereas womanists are devoted to the welfare of both black women and black men. Men, and their welfare, are sometimes claimed to enjoy a higher priority to womanists than to feminists. Reed contends that the difference between Africana womanism and any other female-based theory lies in that that "we are inseparable and one — as the other, I should say the other side of the coin from the Africana man — collectively struggling, as we've always done as Africans: A people collectively working." (Reed, p.169)

The Third Life of Grange Copeland, Alice Walker's first novel, recounts three generations of a family under racial and economic oppression in rural Georgia in the South: the hero Grange, his wife Margaret, their son Brownfield and his wife Mem and their daughter Ruth. Like many first novels, this is a disguised autobiography as Brownfield and Mem's circumstances resemble Alice Walker's parents and their daughter herself. According to Walker, both men characters, Grange and Brownfield, are the victims of the white's patriarchal society and racial oppression. In this novel, on one hand, Walker illustrates the price of failing to achieve survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female womanists pursue in the black community, namely, "the importance of maintaining the individual soul" (Cochran, p.79). Grange's lack of individual soul lead to Margaret's suicide and Brownfield's wickedness, which further resulted in Brownfield's killing of Mem and destruction of his family. On the other hand, Walker tries to figure out the possible ways of surviving — Grange finally found his soul and atonement on Ruth, the hope of Grange, but Brownfield never found his soul and degraded to almost a tyrant-monster figure. Womanists' theory is clearly shown in this novel: to attain the wholeness and individual soul of both black women and men through morality and let the black women gain equal rights without attacking the black men.

Analyzing the hero from a womanist point of view is common and persuasive. However, there are usually several angles of looking into the same literature of work. Freud's psychoanalysis can shed light on the characters in Walker's novel and is shown to be in accordance with the pleas of womanists.

III. FREUD'S PSYCHOANALYSIS

Psychoanalysis, a body of ideas developed by Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud and continued by Carl Jung, Northrop Frye and Jacques Lacan, is a method of treating emotional and psychological disorders. When applying it to the interpretations of works of literature, we get psychoanalytic criticism, which "may best be called an

approach to literary interpretations rather than a particular school of criticism." (Bressler, p. 120)

Freud's important standpoints mainly include tripartite model of human psyche, libido theory, the Oedipus and Electra Complexes, the significance of dreams, literature and psychoanalysis, artists and daydreaming, etc. In his early works, Freud posited the dynamic model in which he asserted that human minds consist of the unconscious (the irrational), and the conscious (the rational). Freud argued, the conscious is what makes us reason, analyze and behave properly, while it is the unconscious, whose presence we are often unaware of, directs and governs our most actions. For Freud, the unconscious stores the suppressed and disguised truths and desires, usually associated with sexuality, which reveal our true intentions in our dreams, art and literature. In his later work, Freud propose the "tripartite model of human psyche" and discussed this model in the 1920 essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and fully elaborated upon it in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), in which he developed it as an alternative to his previous dynamic model. According to Freud, human psyche is made up of three parts: id, ego, and superego. The "id" is the irrational, instinctual, unknown, and unconscious part of the psyche and only takes into account what it wants and disregards all consequences. The "id" operates on the pleasure principle and it houses "libido", from which our "psychosexual desires and all our psychic energy" stem. (Bressler, p.123) The "ego", the second part of the psyche, signifies reason and logic and operates in accordance with the reality principle. The third part of the psyche, the "superego", the moral component of the psyche, causes us to make moral judgments, and serves as "a filtering agent, suppressing the desires and instincts forbidden by society and thrusting them back into the unconscious" and operates according to the morality principle. (Bressler, p.123)

The "ego" acts as the mediator between the irrational instincts of the id and the moral demands of the superego. The rational ego attempts to reach a balance between the impractical hedonism of the id and the equally impractical moralism of the superego; it is the part of the psyche that usually reflects itself most directly in a person's actions. Normally, these three parts are in harmony with each other. If this balance is broken, people will suffer mental disorders or abnormality of personality or even neurosis.

IV. A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF THE HERO GRANGE

The text's title, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, implies that Grange Copeland, the protagonist within the text, went through three stages of life and that it is "the third" life that has the most significance.

In his first life, as a poor sharecropper, Grange is virtually a slave; in cotton-era Baker County, Georgia, the more he works, the more money he ends up owing to Mr. Shipley, who owns the fields he works and the house he lives in. Eventually life becomes too much for him and he runs away from his debts to start a new life up North, leaving his family behind. During this stage, he is clearly short of manhood, which is oppressed by the white society. Physically, he keeps working day and night: "planting,

chopping, poisoning and picking in the cotton field..." (*Third Life* p.7) which changes him into "a stone or a robot." (p.8) He is rude and indifferent to his wife and son. As Brownfield noted, "his mother was like their dog in some ways. She didn't have a thing to say that did not in some way show her submission to his father." (p.5) Brownfield himself was scared of Grange even hated him, which can be drawn from Grange's telling to him "I ought to throw you down the goddam well" and "Maybe his mother was scared of Grange as he was, terrified by Grange's tense composure." (p.10-11) When Brownfield was a child, his family's "life followed a kind of cycle that depended almost totally on Grange's moods." (p.12) Due to the racial discrimination and unequal treatment from the white society, Grange was overwhelmed and frustrated: "he was thirty-five but seemed much older. His face and eyes had a dispassionate vacancy and sadness...; he seemed devoid of any emotion." (p.13) Both physical and mental numbness lead to his brutal treatment to his family.

Grange is "without a soul in his first life" (Hellenbrand, p.115) and loses a balance of his id and superego. His id takes absolute advantage and suppresses the ego and superego, which lets him lose his reason, ignore ethnics and forsake the reality principle and morality principle. He passes his pain to his son and wife through misusing them and finally abandoning them, which further causes his wife's betrayal and suicide and sows in his son Brownfield's heart the seeds of hatred, "he hated him for everything and always would." (*Third Life*, p.21) In this sense, Brownfield should take the inescapable responsibility for his wife's death and his son's loss of humanity.

In New York City, Grange enters the second stage of life. The pregnant white woman's death in the Central Park acts as a catalyst to his change. Although the woman's death has been haunting Grange and condemning his soul (as in fact no matter how deep the racial hatred, he could save her life anyway). Nevertheless, it is this sense of guilt that frees Grange from self-hatred and awakes his repeated thinking of human life: "at the time, he could think of no matterable difference between them. Misery leveled all beings..." (*Third Life*, p.149) and "It was the taking of that white woman's life...that forced him to want to try to live again." (p.153) From that moment, he begins to have a different understanding of Margaret's death and his responsibility for her death; it is also from that moment on that he stops self-hatred and recognizes the necessity and importance of the survival and wholeness of entire people, both black men and women and maintaining the individual spiritual life. Grange reasons that "...against his will, he had stumbled on the necessary act that black men must commit to regain...their manhood..., and, by killing, he is taken with the most passionate desire to live!" (p.153) From above, it can be concluded that this accident helps Grange to find the will and aspiration to live.

Grange's change in his second life is accompanied by his attitudes towards the whites and getting rid of the idea that interracial hatred and killing will bring manhood and self-respect to black men. Initially, his resentment to the white people, especially the farm owner, results in the tragedy of his family in his first life. In the North, he begins to get a

further understanding of his former racial hatred. After the death of the white woman, he feels frustrated and hates the whites, "Hatred for them will someday unite us." (p.154) Later Grange realizes that "he could not fight all the whites he met." (*Third Life* p.155) He knows this continuous hatred will only destruct the black individual, the black family even the whole black people. To eliminate racial discrimination, black people must unite. Because of the limitedness for the individual to change the entire American society, Grange figures out "Each man would have to free himself" and decides temporarily to retire and he "would withdraw completely from them, find a sanctuary make a life..., to keep it from the whites, inviolate." (p.155) Therefore, Grange begins to look for a new way to recover his individual soul. As Hellenbrand noted, "Walker has so contextualized the murder that it returns Grange, with a newly found will to live, to the life that he originally abandoned." (Hellenbrand, p.121)

In Grange's second life, the imbalance between his id and superego has gained some improvement, which is also the process in which he is searching for his individual soul. His ego mediates the relationship between his id and superego, promoting him to realize his responsibility for his wife and family and not to escape again: "And so he had come back to Baker Country, because it was home..." (p.155) Then he starts his third life. To a large extent, Grange's second life prepares him for his third life, in which he learns the importance of individual soul: "he comes to realize that such hate is futile. He cannot combat all the whites in the world, and soon returns South to construct an 'inviolable' life." (Hellenbrand, p.119)

Grange's third life concerns his return South and his attempt to exorcise past iniquities, and his benevolence to his granddaughter. After returning home, he got a farm and became a free man: "He raised his own bread, fermented his own wine, cured his own meat. At last, he was free." He gradually learned the significance of love: "at least love was something that left a man proud that he had loved. Hate left a man shamed..." (p.156-157) He discarded his former hatred, cultivated love, and passed it to his granddaughter Ruth: "hate is the last thing he wishes to beget in his granddaughter." (p.157) In Baker Country, Grange worked on his own farm, which is his "sanctuary" he seeks to find in his second life. Within this "sanctuary", Grange manages to keep from being interrupted from the outside world, including Josie, his lover and the whites. "The fence was inspected with care, rotting parts replaced, the wire restrung to make it more taut", (p.213) from which we can see Grange is building his boundaries and protecting his individual self. This symbol "fence" is similar to the "brick wall" in *What Means Switch* authored by Gish Jen, who uses the "brick wall" to signify protection of the Chinese identity in American mainstream culture.

In Grange's kingdom, he is the host and "his one duty in the world was to prepare Ruth for some great and herculean task, some significant and deadly struggle..." (p.198) and his plan is to "teach her everything he knew." (p.214) Grange himself has survived, but "survival was not everything... but to survive whole was what he wanted for Ruth." (p.214)

What he provides for Ruth is not only a comfortable material life, but also education. When Grange realized that there was little time left for him, he gave Ruth the money he had been putting away for her to go to college. It shows Grange's uncompromising attempt to create a new environment where his granddaughter Ruth can have more options and opportunities in her life than he or his son. In this atonement process does he fulfill his third life. Moreover, as Hellenbrand reasons: "Grange is a rebellious storyteller, a cultural and historical revisionist who enlivens his discourse with sardonic analogies..." (Hellenbrand, p.123) Grange tells Ruth his aversion to white people and the miserable history of their ancestors: "the forced slavery of her ancestors, the rapid demise of the red man; and the natural predatory tendencies of the whites..." (p.138) Grange devotes all his rest life to Ruth with the hope that his granddaughter would live a different and happy life, free of self-hate and helplessness.

In the third life, Grange has returned completely to his self-identity as a black man. His id, ego and super ego reach a state of balance. He acts rationally and sacrifices his life for offering beneficial living surroundings for Ruth. His sense of responsibility is reflected in his upbringing and teaching of Ruth. He uses fence and weapons to protect his own home, teaching the reality of racial consciousness to Ruth. Ruth is the hope he is living on and the catalyst for him to realize his individual soul. However, what deserves notice here is that Grange's means of recovering his wholeness of individual soul is incomplete in the white's hegemony: He has returned South with some of the white woman's money, and Josie's funds from the Dew Drop Inn, and made enough money gambling to ensure Ruth through college. Grange "escapes silence and enters the world of individuation partly by capitalizing on the scant 'goods' that he can gather in a world dominated by whites." (Hellenbrand, p.122) Therefore, his realizing of wholeness isn't and can't be complete or thorough in the mainstream society.

V. CONCLUSION

The Third Life of Grange Copeland exemplifies the process that Grange, a black sharecropper in the South undergoes in search of his individual soul and identity and finally ends up being a whole being. This process involves the dynamic relations between the id, ego and superego in Freud's psychoanalysis. From a racial standpoint, Grange's three stages of life are simultaneously his change of attitudes towards the white people: from silence in his first life to the deep hatred in his second and then finally to recovering his individual soul in his sanctuary. His killing of his son Brownfield and his final death is just the explanation of his unrelenting efforts to protect Ruth, who gives him the impetus to achieve moral integrity. Through the analysis of the character, we can conclude Alice Walker's deep concern for the spiritual life and self-identity of the black men, not only the black women. The text defines how the black men can retrieve the lost and repressed manhood. As Hogue mentions, it "reproduces an established definition of manhood-taking care of self and family — that becomes the model for measuring the worth and value of the Afro-

American male" (Hogue, p.56). The final balance of Grange's id, ego and super ego is what Walker hopes for every Afro-American male. This complies with her womanist ideal in that she calls for survival and wholeness of both Afro-American female and male.

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