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## **Alice Walker's Biographical Motivation in Her Early Fiction**

(Bakalárska práca)

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Mária Benková

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## Introduction

Donald Morison Murray, an American professor and journalist, believes that it is not completely possible to separate an author's life and their writing. He advocates this idea in his article "All Writing Is Autobiography:"

I publish in many forms—poetry, fiction, academic article, essay, newspaper column, newsletter, textbook, juvenile nonfiction and I have even been a ghost writer for corporate and government leaders—yet when I am at my writing desk I am the same person. As I look back, I suspect that no matter how I tuned the lyre, I played the same tune. All my writing—and yours—is autobiographical.<sup>1</sup>

It is true. There is always author's experience, background, upbringing, or environment in general, speaking from their writings. The aim of this bachelor thesis is to find parallels between the life of the contemporary African American author, Alice Walker, and that of the characters in her early fiction. The writer cannot free themselves from their life experience completely but will always be affected by it to some extent, which results in occurrence of autobiographical elements in their fiction. The reason may be that the author is simply using their own experience as a source of inspiration for their writing. On the other hand, it can be the experience itself, unbeknown to the author, speaking from their works. Various works centering on Walker's writings mention the occurrence of autobiographical elements and it is known that her life informs her writing to some extent, however, these works often mention this only peripherally. In this thesis, I will summarize the autobiographical elements mentioned in works of other literary scholars and offer also my own observations based on reading of her selected works.

This thesis focuses on the early fiction of Alice Walker, namely her two novels *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and *Meridian* (1976); her collection of short stories *In Love and Trouble* (1973); and her short story "The Abortion" (1981). Walker's collections of essays *In Search for Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) and *Living by the World* (1988) provide a fascinating insight into her life, thoughts, and motivation behind her stories. Her biography, written by Evelyn C. White, named *Alice Walker: A Life* (2004), which tracks her family history and her life from an early childhood, serves as an excellent source, which sheds light

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<sup>1</sup> Donald M. Murray, "All Writing Is Autobiography," *College Composition and Communication* 42, no. 1 (1991): 66, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2307/357540>.

on her life journey. It is important not to overlook Walker's three early collections of poems, namely *Once* (1968), *Revolutionary Petunias & Other Poems* (1973) and *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning* (1979), which also draw inspiration from her life.

## **Biography**

Alice Malsenior Walker was born as the eighth child in an African American family of sharecroppers in Eatonton, Georgia on February 9, 1944. She was a bright, friendly child, showing an interest in literature from an early age. Unfortunately, aged eight, Walker suffered an injury while playing with her older brothers, which not only left her blind in one eye, but also with white scar tissue on her damaged pupil. She became extremely self-conscious after this incident and after her family moved to Milledgeville, she became a target of bullying until she returned to her hometown. This had a profound effect on her early life and her personality. When she was fourteen years old, her brother Bill could not stand to see his sister depressed anymore and sought medical help for her in Boston. The scar tissue was successfully removed, and Walker regained her enthusiasm and cheerfulness. She started to live like a normal teenager, making friends, falling in love, and enjoying life again. It was at this time that she became interested in racial injustice issues and unlike many of her peers, she did not keep her opinions to herself.

At the age of seventeen, Walker decided to attend women's Spelman College in Atlanta, which offered scholarship for the disabled. Walker was eligible for this scholarship because of her eye. The community at home collected money for her as a goodbye gift. She attended a variety of classes earning outstanding grades, became involved in political activism and impressed her professors with flawless essays. This was the beginning of her writing career. She even started a romantic relationship with a white exchange student. After two years she decided to transfer to Sarah Lawrence College and finish her studies at a more open-minded university, which, in addition, supported her writing ambitions.

After her first year at the new university, Walker flew to Africa to help the local communities in Kenya and Uganda. Unfortunately, upon her return, she found out that she was pregnant. Walker was adamant about getting an abortion, but the laws at the time made it illegal and without money her options were limited. This was the most difficult time for Walker, and as a result, she suffered from severe depression. But with the help of her friends, Walker found a doctor willing to perform the procedure and even collected enough money for the fee. After regaining control of her life again, Walker was reborn. She wrote many poems expressing her suppressed feelings and a short story "To Hell with Dying" (1967) her first

fiction, which was published in *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* (1967). She received her university degree, Bachelor of Arts, in 1966, and on the same day rejected her first marriage proposal.

She started working after finishing her studies but felt that it was taking up too much of her time at the expense of her writing. For this reason, she accepted a grant which allowed her to resign and join the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) in Mississippi. The Civil Rights Movement was at its peak in the fifties and sixties and helped to form Walker's views on the importance of racial equality from her early childhood. She became a civil rights worker and met a white law student Melvyn Leventhal, who later became her husband. She had another abortion while they were married but did not talk about it openly until recently. The couple had one daughter, Rebecca, but got divorced after nine years and Walker moved to California, where she still lives today.

Walker has written seven novels, the most famous of which is *The Color Purple*; four collections of short stories; five books for children; ten collections of essays and nine collections of poems. She is highly appraised for her depiction of the African American community, the struggles, abuse, and racial tension. She coined the term "womanist" and as Layli Maparyan writes, the term appeared for the first time in Walker's short story "Coming Apart" (1979).<sup>2</sup> Walker later defined it in a dictionary entry style at the beginning of *In Search for Our Mothers' Gardens*. Walker was among others awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, both for *The Color Purple* in 1983.

## **Autobiographical Elements**

As Paula C. Barnes points out in *African American Autobiographers: A Sourcebook* (2002), "Alice Walker has not written a book-length autobiography; however, she has revealed much about her life in her five collections of essays."<sup>3</sup> These autobiographical fragments are incorporated into her essays on purpose. Walker provides insight into her life journey by mentioning episodes from her life as examples in her essays, which are supposed to help us understand her point. However, it does not necessarily have to be like this in her fiction too. Some of the autobiographical elements are certainly incorporated intentionally. For instance, the short story "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" is based on the actual experience of the

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<sup>2</sup> See Layli Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea* (2011; New York: Routledge, 2012), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Paula C. Barnes, "Alice Walker," in *African American Autobiographers: A Sourcebook*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), 361.

Walker family. Walker even confirmed it in *In Search for Our Mothers' Gardens*. Walker writes that the initial inspiration is her mother's experience, but the story evolving around it is purely fictional.<sup>4</sup> Another example can be Walker being exposed to a sight of a murdered woman from Eatonton as a child, which she later used while creating the death scene of Mem in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*.<sup>5</sup> The moment was probably too powerful for her, and she wanted to convey at least the second-hand experience also to the readers.

On the other hand, there is another type of autobiographical element that can be found in her works of fiction. Some links between her life and her fiction are subtle, and it is probable that she included them subconsciously. One can be, for example, her family background, which probably seemed so natural to her, or typical for an African American family that she often shared it with her characters. For instance, mothers of main female characters in both of her analyzed novels were housemaids, just like Walker's mother; and her father, similarly to Grange Copeland and Brownfield from *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, was a sharecropper.

In some cases, it can be only argued whether it is Walker, revealing glimpses from her life on purpose, or Walker, being affected by her own experience, and her life subconsciously creeping into her works. Both, intentional and unintentional autobiographical motivation can be found in the fiction of Alice Walker, but it is impossible to distinguish which one belongs to which category. In addition, an interesting idea is whether the influence can work both ways. Whether there, in Walker's fiction, is a process that would be the opposite of fictionalizing autobiographical elements, a process that would concern the influence of the writing on the life of the author.

When it comes to the fiction of Alice Walker, the majority of autobiographical elements found in it can be put into one of the two main categories of autobiographical elements. First one comprises of elements connected with her childhood and the second one of those connected with her university years. As regards her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the autobiographical elements that can be found in it are mostly connected to her family and early childhood. Her second novel, *Meridian*, can be connected more with her teenage years, university life and involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, which aimed to abolish segregation and achieve equality for African Americans. As for her short stories, they track various happenings throughout her whole life.

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<sup>4</sup> See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1983), 9.

<sup>5</sup> See Evelyn C. White, *Alice Walker: A Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 172.



## *In Love and Trouble*

Her collection *In Love and Trouble* consists of thirteen short stories, all of which display some autobiographical elements. Most of them are set in places that were familiar to Walker. For instance, “The Welcome Table” and “The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff” are both set in Walker’s home state, Georgia. Furthermore, “Roselily” (1972), published for the first time in *Ms. magazine*, and “The Diary of an African Nun” (1968), originally published in the journal *Freedomways*, are set in Mississippi and Uganda respectively, both places where Walker spent some time of her life. “Roselily” is set in a small rural town Panther Burn, which is only hour and a half from Jackson, the city where Walker lived with her husband, and “The Diary of an African Nun” is set in Uganda, which Walker visited as a Spelman College student. It tells a story of a nun, working at a missionary school, who is torn between her devotion to God and her desire to experience love and have children. She refers to herself as a “wife of Christ”<sup>6</sup> and voices her longing in her diary: “*How long must I sit by my window before I lure you down from the sky? Pale lover who never knew the dance and could not do it!*”<sup>7</sup> It is possible that Walker’s inspiration for this short story was her own visit of this country. The reason for her journey to Africa was to help local communities. This volunteering is in some way similar to the service of the main character, a nun working at a mission school. Furthermore, it was in Uganda that Walker conceived, which suggests, that Walker too longed for physical intimacy during her stay there. However, Walker’s situation was different as she was not tied by any religious vows. Another difference is that the main character of the story decides to live a chaste but unfulfilled life in the end. This ending might suggest that even though Walker’s African experience led to unwanted pregnancy, depression, and an illegal abortion, all of which was extremely traumatic for her, she did not regret anything, rather saw it as a formative experience. It can be said that if Walker had not experienced it, her life would have been “unfulfilled,” and she would not have become her present self.

Some short stories from this collection display only subtle similarities to Walker’s life. The main character in “Really, Doesn’t Crime Pay?” loves to write, or in “Entertaining God,” one of the characters gives lectures about civil rights and the will to fight for them. Both of these passions are characteristic of Walker herself. Something that relates to the author’s life can always be found in these short stories. For example, learning the French language, which Walker studied too, in “We Drink the Wine in France,” or a mention of civil right activists

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<sup>6</sup> Alice Walker, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 114.

<sup>7</sup> Walker, *In Love and Trouble*, 115.

that wanted a revolution in “Her Sweet Jerome.” All of this is linked with Walker’s life, even though the links are only subtle. It is obvious that Walker is writing about what interests her the most. It can be said that she is writing about her own world, about things that are significant to her, about things she considers to be interesting to explore or about everything she is involved in. Simply about topics that are the closest to her heart and have their own place in her life.

There are more powerful and logical links in the rest of the stories from this collection. In “The Child Who Favored Daughter,” a father brutally beats up his daughter, after he discovers her love letter to a white man. She resembles his sister named Daughter, to whom he felt a deep connection, and who similarly eloped with a white man. In the short story, the father plans to “frighten her into chastity with his voice”<sup>8</sup> or “threaten her with the gun,”<sup>9</sup> if she does not give up her white lover. This short story could be based on the relationship of Walker’s father and her sister Ruth. He was obsessed with his daughter Ruth’s innocence. In *Alice Walker: A Life*, Evelyn C. White notes: “When the teenaged Ruth showed an interest in boys, Mr. Walker ... beat and locked her in a room. He threatened to disown Ruth if she ever became pregnant.”<sup>10</sup> In her short story, Walker decided to exchange “any man” for a “white man.” In *Black Woman Writers at Work* (1983) Walker states that she was “trying to understand how an African American father would feel about a daughter who fell in love with a white man.”<sup>11</sup> Walker admits that she was toying with this idea because of her being in a relationship with a white man.<sup>12</sup> Walker also wrote a few poems on this topic, one of them, “Forbidden Things,” published in *Revolutionary Petunias*, captures the disapproval of her neighbors when she brought her white boyfriend home.<sup>13</sup> Another one, “While Love Is Unfashionable,” talks about her relationship with her first husband, who was also white.<sup>14</sup>

Another short story from the collection *In Love and Trouble*, “The Welcome Table,” focuses on an old woman who is forced to leave a church because of the segregation policy. She meets Jesus outside of the church, and he invites her for a walk. She tells him about the injustice she suffered while working for white people and feels relieved instantly. She is found dead next day, having “walked herself to death.”<sup>15</sup> White claims that the story has its

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<sup>8</sup> Walker, *In Love and Trouble*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Walker, *In Love and Trouble*, 37.

<sup>10</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 241.

<sup>11</sup> Alice Walker, “Alice Walker,” in *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate (1983; Harpenden: Oldcastle, 1989), 186–7.

<sup>12</sup> See Walker, *Black Women Writers*, 187.

<sup>13</sup> See White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 82.

<sup>14</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 145.

<sup>15</sup> Walker, *In Love and Trouble*, 87.

roots in Walker's childhood, when she saw that even though Christianity preaches equality, the white people would rather keep their churches segregated.<sup>16</sup> The protagonist is stopped by the reverend, who asks: "'Auntie, you know this is not your church?'"<sup>17</sup> In addition, Walker and her friend acquired a first-hand experience of this common practice. Her friend, Constance Nabwire, reveals: "When Alice and I tried to enter the church, the door was slammed in our faces. I didn't understand."<sup>18</sup> Walker might have drawn inspiration for this short story from these experiences.

"The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" is the story that is from the biggest part based on a true event. The plot revolves around Mrs. Kemhuff, who is denied government support during the Depression only because she comes to collect it well dressed. As a result, her children die of malnutrition. Now, she has decided to seek revenge and use hoodoo against the woman who wronged her in this way. As Hans A. Baer explains, hoodoo or rootwork refers to a "system of medicine, magic, divination, herbalism, and witchcraft widespread among slaves in the United States."<sup>19</sup> The first part of the story that takes place during Depression is in fact the story of Walker's mother, who took her small children to the town to get some food. Walker puts it in this way: "She had gone, during the Depression, into town to apply for some government surplus food at the local commissary, and had been turned down, in a particularly humiliating way, by the white woman in charge."<sup>20</sup> In the short story, Mrs. Kemhuff also mentions the humiliation when "the whole line behind [her] beg[ins] to laugh and snigger, and that little white moppet [the woman in charge] sort of grin[s] behind her hands."<sup>21</sup> In addition, her husband leaves her for his mistress after he sees this fiasco. The difference between these two stories is that Walker exaggerated the consequences of this incident, as her mother did not lose her husband, nor did her children starve to death. However, the exaggeration made the story more interesting and dramatical. What is more, it made the second part of the story more believable, as it gave Mrs. Kemhuff a reason to seek revenge. The second part of the story is not based on any real-life events. It was born after Walker suddenly realized "the possibilities of the story, for fiction"<sup>22</sup> and decided to explore traditional rootwork and hoodoo practices in the South. Walker just built her story around this experience of her mother, who, unlike Mrs. Kemhuff, did not seek revenge. The topic of rootworking is explored also in the short story

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<sup>16</sup> See White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 161.

<sup>17</sup> Walker, *In Love and Trouble*, 83.

<sup>18</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 161.

<sup>19</sup> Hans A. Baer, "Toward a Systematic Typology of Black Folk Healers," *Phylon* (1960-) 43, no. 4 (1982): 327, Accessed April 22, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2307/274755>.

<sup>20</sup> Walker, *In Search*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Walker, *In Love and Trouble*, 65.

<sup>22</sup> Walker, *In Search*, 10.

“Strong Horse Tea,” which also appears in *In Love and Trouble* and portrays a desperate mother who tries to cure her child using traditional rootworking remedies

In her collection of essays, *Living by the World*, Walker confesses: “I like to use the case of Mr. Sweet, in ‘To Hell with Dying,’ as an example of a story that is ‘autobiographical’ ... though little of it ever happened.”<sup>23</sup> The short story is about an old man, Mr. Sweet Little, who repeatedly finds himself on the verge of dying. Every time this happens, the narrator’s family performs a revival ritual to bring his will to live back. As Walker unveils: “There was, in fact, in my rural, farming, middle-Georgia childhood, in the late forties and early fifties, an old guitar player called Mr. Sweet. If people had used his given name, he would have been called Mr. Little; obviously nobody agreed that this was accurate.”<sup>24</sup> The character in the short story and the actual person share both the surname Little and the nickname Mr. Sweet, but there are more similarities between them. For instance, guitar playing or heavy drinking. Walker also writes that “Mr. Sweet died in the sixties, while I was a student at Sarah Lawrence College.”<sup>25</sup> And similarly, fictional Mr. Sweet dies when the narrator is “finishing [her] doctorate in Massachusetts,”<sup>26</sup> with the only difference, that the narrator is able to fly back and spend the last moments with him. It seems that Walker regretted not having a chance to say goodbye to Mr. Sweet and therefore created a different ending of the short story, one that she also wished for.

White believes that Walker’s short story “The Flowers” is also autobiographical in a sense and that Walker tried to express the emotions she felt after the accident that impaired her vision.<sup>27</sup> The short story is actually very short, only two pages long. It tells a story of a young girl Myop, who is cheerfully running around in the forest picking flowers when, suddenly, she discovers a skeleton of a hangman. Walker finishes the short story with sentences: “*Myop laid down her flowers. And the summer was over.*”<sup>28</sup> White notices that “Walker has voiced similar sentiments”<sup>29</sup> when she, in her essay “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self” said: “It was great fun being cute. But then, one day, it ended.”<sup>30</sup> The innocence and carelessness were destroyed in both girls in an instant. In Walker’s case, she refers to the incident that made her insecure and self-conscious about her appearance. The

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<sup>23</sup> Alice Walker, *Living by the Word: Selected Writings 1973–1987* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 37.

<sup>24</sup> Walker, *Living by the Word*, 37–8.

<sup>25</sup> Walker, *Living by the Word*, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Walker, *In Love and Trouble*, 136.

<sup>27</sup> See White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Walker, *In Love and Trouble*, 120.

<sup>29</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 36.

<sup>30</sup> Walker, *In Search*, 363.

name Myop refers to myopia, nearsightedness, which creates yet another link between the protagonist and Walker, as both of them had impaired vision.

Another short story worth mentioning is “Everyday Use.” The story is told from the point of view of a mother of two adult daughters. One of them, Maggie, heavily scarred in a house fire, stays home, continues living in a way her predecessors did and honors their traditions, while the other one, Dee, does not approve of their primitive way of life and moves out to pursue education. Now she returns, amazed by their cultural heritage, and is horrified that her family sees priceless quilts and a historic churn as items of everyday use. White claims that the short story is “infused with the childhood memories.”<sup>31</sup> As Walker mentioned in an interview with John O’Brien, her sister Mamie, who got to the university, “was ashamed of us [the Walkers]. We were so poor, so dusty and sunburnt. We talked wrong. We didn't know how to dress, or use the right eating utensils.”<sup>32</sup> Mamie is similar to Dee, who “abhors [her family’s lifestyle] as ‘backward.’”<sup>33</sup> This can be connected also with the poem “For My Sister Molly Who in the Fifties,” which deals with the same issue. In addition, it is addressed to Mamie. Walker talks about various achievements of her sister and is describing her with admiration, but the mood changes in last two stanzas:

#### FOR MY SISTER MOLLY WHO IN THE FIFTIES

Found much  
Unbearable  
Who walked where few had  
Understood   And sensed our  
Groping after light  
And saw some extinguished  
And no doubt mourned.

#### FOR MY SISTER MOLLY WHO IN THE FIFTIES

Left us.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 233.

<sup>32</sup> Alice Walker, “Alice Walker,” in *Interviews with Black Writers*, ed. John O’Brien (New York: Liveright, 1973), 209–10.

<sup>33</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 233.

<sup>34</sup> Alice Walker, *Revolutionary Petunias & Other Poems*, (1973; London: The Women’s Press, 1988), 19.

The other character from the short story, Maggie, can be connected with Alice Walker herself. Maggie is described as with “chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle, ever since the fire that burned the other house to the ground”<sup>35</sup> and left her scarred. Similarly, Walker had an accident which resulted in her losing sight in one eye and left her with an ugly scar. In an interview, she confesses: “I thought I was very ugly and disfigured. This made me shy and timid.”<sup>36</sup> Both Maggie and Walker became self-conscious and experienced difficulties with coming to terms with their changed bodies. As White remarks: “For her [Walker], ‘normal’ had meant running, full-out, through the fields with her vision unhampered. It had meant smiling back at a delighted sea of black faces.”<sup>37</sup> This implies, that Walker might have had a problem with looking people in the eyes after the accident, probably because she did not want them to see her injury. This behavior is very similar to that of Maggie. It seems, that these two characters, Maggie and Dee, share some similarities with Walker and her sister Mamie respectively. However, Maggie is not criticizing Dee in the short story, as Walker gently criticized her sister in the poem. The only criticism of Dee’s behavior and opinions can be found in the theme of the short story, which relates to various views on the importance of traditions and their preservation. The readers must realize the critical view of the author themselves after reading the short story, as it is not explicitly stated anywhere.

## “The Abortion”

The theme of abortion is recurrent in the works of Alice Walker. The reason for this is probably the fact that she underwent two abortions herself. This theme can be found in her short story “The Abortion,” which was published in the collection of short stories *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981). I chose to include this short story because of its autobiographical potential. The main character of the story, Imani, becomes pregnant during her university years and opts for an abortion. Walker found herself in exactly the same situation after her trip to Africa, when she was still a student at Sarah Lawrence College. Imani refers to her abortion as “wonderful, bearing as it had all the marks of a supreme coming of age and a seizing of the direction of her [Imani’s] own life.”<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Walker mentions feelings of “gladness”<sup>39</sup> and a realization “how much [she] love[d] being alive.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Walker, *In Love and Trouble*, 49.

<sup>36</sup> Walker, *Interviews with Black Writers*, 186.

<sup>37</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 36.

<sup>38</sup> Alice Walker, *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down: Stories* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1981), 67.

<sup>39</sup> Walker, *Interviews with Black Writers*, 190.

<sup>40</sup> Walker, *Interviews with Black Writers*, 190.

Even though the feelings of these two women are not exactly the same, we can see a striking similarity. Both of them are feeling immense relief and realize the value of their lives. Both experience positive feelings and do not regret their decision.

However, Imani becomes pregnant again later in the story. She is already married, but decides to abort the child, because of the lack of support she is getting from her husband. He is a “legal adviser and defender of the new black mayor of the town.”<sup>41</sup> He dedicates all his time to his obligations at the expense of his wife’s wellbeing. As a result, Imani has to go through this difficult experience herself. She flies to New York by herself, the anesthesia, unfortunately, fails and she faints from pain, only to return to her husband, who cannot understand what she has been through. This part of the story is also similar to Walker’s experience. On her website, Walker reveals that she experienced a very difficult time and felt neglected, while living in Mississippi with her husband, who was as a lawyer fighting for equal rights for African Americans.<sup>42</sup> She also mentions details like how “lonely [the] flight from Mississippi to New York”<sup>43</sup> was, that she “was given no anesthetic and the pain was so severe [she] fainted,”<sup>44</sup> or her feeling that no one understood her suffering, “not even the man [she] had married.”<sup>45</sup> This short story is heavily influenced by Walker’s life. Walker and Imani find themselves under similar circumstances twice during their lives, make the same decisions and share the same feelings both times.

### ***The Third Life of Grange Copeland***

*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is the first novel written by Walker. Harold Hellenbrand calls this novel a “family chronicle,”<sup>46</sup> which suits the novel very well, as it tracks the life of three generations of the Copeland family. It starts with a sharecropper Grange who left his family and ran away to the North due to the frustration he felt from working basically as a slave. His son, Brownfield, is determined to lead a different life from his father’s. However, he ends up treading exactly the same path after marrying Mem. Her education and resourcefulness soon start to annoy him as he feels inferior to her, and their marriage turns into a disaster, ending with him shooting her. Grange, who in the meantime changed and

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<sup>41</sup> Walker, *Good Woman*, 66.

<sup>42</sup> See Alice Walker, “When I Had My First Abortion: Or, I Was Spared to Be Here For You,” *Alice Walker: The Official Website*, last modified June 26, 2022. <https://alicewalkersgarden.com/2022/06/when-i-had-my-first-abortion-or-i-was-spared-to-be-here-for-you/>.

<sup>43</sup> Walker, “My First Abortion.”

<sup>44</sup> Walker, “My First Abortion.”

<sup>45</sup> Walker, “My First Abortion.”

<sup>46</sup> Harold Hellenbrand, “Speech, after Silence: Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*,” *Black American Literature Forum* 20, no. 1/2 (1986): 114, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2904555>.

again appeared in his son's life, takes in Ruth, the youngest daughter of his son, on whom the rest of the story is focused, and provides her with loving care that he never showed towards Brownfield. Enraged by this and finally out of prison, Brownfield attempts to get hold of Ruth again, which results in Grange shooting his son to protect her and later committing suicide.

This novel surely contains some autobiographical elements, and they usually relate to Walker's childhood. As this novel's focus is on relationships in a family, it can be observed that Walker's family background is reflected in it. The name of one of the main characters is Ruth, the same as Walker's sister, with whom she was especially close. On her website, she notes: "We were close as children, but grew apart as the years turned into decades since we lived near each other."<sup>47</sup> Naming the character Ruth could not have been a sheer coincidence. Rather it might have been Walker paying tribute to her sister. Another similarity is connected with the occupations of Walker's parents. Her mother used to work as a housemaid, just like Mem at one point in the book; and her father, similarly to Grange and Brownfield was a sharecropper working on a cotton plantation.

Furthermore, some similarity can be found between the relationship of her grandparents and that of Grange and his wife Margaret. The marriage of Brownfield's parents is not harmonious. Grange is unfaithful to his wife during his Sunday outings and this in conclusion leads to her finding a lover herself, too. Similarly, as Walker's brother Bill reveals in an interview with White, even though their grandfather, Henry, was forced by his family to leave his lover and marry another woman, whom they deemed more suitable for him, he continued his affair.<sup>48</sup> Ruth Walker also adds that this was the reason behind their grandmother's infidelity.<sup>49</sup> In addition, the relationship of Walker's grandparents suffered from other problems, too. Henry was an alcoholic and displayed aggressive behavior towards his wife. As White summarizes: "Having married a woman he did not love, [he] was filled with rage and quick to erupt into drunken tirades."<sup>50</sup> This is very similar to Grange, who "would come home lurching drunk, threatening to kill his wife and Brownfield, stumbling and shooting off his shotgun."<sup>51</sup> The disharmonious relationship of Walker's grandparents probably served as base for the one shown between Grange and Margaret.

While describing Walker's family, White also mentions that "Alice was well aware of her grandfathers' mistreatment of women" and that, fortunately, "both mellowed in their elder

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<sup>47</sup> Alice Walker, "Sister Loss," *Alice Walker: The Official Website*, last modified January 15, 2009. <https://alicewalkersgarden.com/2009/01/sister-loss/>.

<sup>48</sup> See White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 18.

<sup>49</sup> See White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 19.

<sup>50</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 18–19.

<sup>51</sup> Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970; New York: Pocket Books, 1988), 15.



years.”<sup>52</sup> There is a striking similarity between these male figures in Walker’s life and the male characters in her works. Grange is probably the main example of a man undergoing this change from violent to gentle, and the novel partially centers on this transition. One can observe that the rest of the male characters in Walker’s works are portrayed either in their middle age or as the elderly and their personalities differ based on to which group they belong. For instance, Mr. Sweet from “To Hell with Dying” is an old man who is portrayed as loving and gentle. On the other hand, Brownfield and the main character in “The Child Who Favored Daughter” are middle-aged and can be characterized as brutal and aggressive. It can be assumed that Walker gained this perspective on men from her family background and later applied it while creating her characters.

Regarding female figures, a feature which can be attributed to both Mem and Walker’s mother Minnie is the love of flowers. Walker herself acknowledges this in her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* when she says: “Like Mem, a character in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, my mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in.”<sup>53</sup> Mem’s interest in flowers is mentioned multiple times throughout the story. One instance of it can be: “She hated leaving her flowers, which she always planted whenever she got her hands on flower seeds.”<sup>54</sup> For both mothers, Walker’s mother and the one from the novel, flowers represented some kind of a coping mechanism or their way of getting used to a new home.

Another similarity is that her mother, briefly described as “a large, soft, loving-eyed woman who was rarely impatient,”<sup>55</sup> was very similar to Mem. Regarding physical features, Mem was also described as “plump.”<sup>56</sup> Apropos her personality, it can be seen in her actions, that she cared about her family, protecting the children, and working her fingers to the bone trying to ensure a better life for them. This similarity can be found among other mother figures in Walker’s short stories as well, for instance mother trying to obtain “strong horse tea” in the eponymous short story is willing to lose her human dignity in order to save her sick child. It is possible that Walker’s positive perception of her mother is reflected in mother figures in her works.

There is another similarity between Walker’s family and the family in the novel. Walker describes a certain issue in her family as: “my father’s need to dominate my mother

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<sup>52</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 173.

<sup>53</sup> Walker, *In Search*, 241.

<sup>54</sup> Walker, *The Third Life*, 84.

<sup>55</sup> Walker, *In Search*, 238.

<sup>56</sup> Walker, *The Third Life*, 64.

and their children and ... her resistance (and ours), verbal and physical, to any such domination.”<sup>57</sup> It seems to be the same case with Brownfield despising Mem for her knowledge and manners to such extent, that he is determined to unteach her these “noble habits” and make her equal, if not worse than him. But Mem fights back and even partially succeeds and moves her family to a house that ““has got sinks and a toilet inside the house and it’s got ’lectric lights and even garden space for flowers and greens.””<sup>58</sup> The fact that Mem is able to provide for the family hurts his manly pride and makes him sabotage her efforts completely, as he cannot stand being inferior to a woman in any way. It seems that Walker’s father showed similar tendencies.

In addition, the novel itself starts with a description of a visit from the North. Brownfield’s uncle with cousins came to visit their family in the South. Brownfield complains that “they had bombarded him with talk about automobiles and street lights and paved walks and trash collectors and about something they had ridden in once in a department store that went up, up, up from one floor to the next.”<sup>59</sup> The Walker family had a similar experience as Ruth said in an interview with White: ““When relatives would come visit us from up North, or even Macon, they’d be bragging about their houses and cars and how much money they had in the bank.””<sup>60</sup> This experience can be found also in one of Walker’s poems, ‘Uncles,’ published in *Revolutionary Petunias & Other Poems*.

They were uncles.  
It was their *job*  
To come home every summer  
From the North  
And tell my father  
He wasn’t no man  
And make my mother  
Cry and long  
For Denver, Jersey City,  
Philadelphia.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Walker, *The Third Life*, 343.

<sup>58</sup> Walker, *The Third Life*, 121.

<sup>59</sup> Walker, *The Third Life*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 241.

<sup>61</sup> Walker, *Revolutionary Petunias*, 9.

It is possible that this experience gave rise to the opening scene of the novel. The fact that all seven siblings of Walker's similarly left for the North may have contributed, too.

One of the main characters of the novel, Ruth, and Alice Walker herself seem to have something in common too. For example, the part of the novel describing Ruth's life with her grandfather, Grange, may stem from Walker's own experience. After the accident, her family moved to Milledgeville for a shorter period of time, but due to bullying at the new school, Walker had to be sent back to live with her grandparents,<sup>62</sup> so both Walker and Ruth experienced living without parents and being taken care of only by grandparents at an early age. Another similarity can be found in the way they were born. According to White, Walker "entered the world before the midwife's arrival"<sup>63</sup> and in the novel "Ruth had popped out by herself."<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore, White mentions Walker's concerns about African American children getting used textbooks with racial slurs written in them by previous owners. This concern comes across as sincerely heartfelt and personal and naturally makes the reader question whether Walker talks from her own experience. In fact, this situation occurs also in the novel when Ruth opens her new textbook, she notices that: "Underneath his [African man] picture Jacqueline Paine, in her neat note-taking script, had written just one descriptive word. ... A nigger."<sup>65</sup> One can argue that Walker wanted to share this undoubtedly common experience also with the readers.

What can be also mentioned is the part of the book which describes how Ruth discovered and became interested in the Civil Rights Movement after watching African American TV presenters discuss it in the news. It is probably not a coincidence that Walker got acquainted with it in a similar way, by seeing "the first black face [she] saw on [their] new television screen,"<sup>66</sup> that of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In addition, the novel mentions also Civil Rights workers trying to persuade African Americans to vote or being followed by people who did not agree with this initiative. Walker has personal experience with both of these situations.

A scene in this novel that is clearly based on an event in Walker's life is the death scene of Mem. White suggests it when she refers to the book as "a harrowing tale, inspired in

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<sup>62</sup> See White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 39.

<sup>63</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 11–12.

<sup>64</sup> Walker, *The Third Life*, 97.

<sup>65</sup> Walker, *The Third Life*, 261.

<sup>66</sup> Walker, *In Search*, 124.

part by the 1950s murder of an Eatonton woman, the mother of one of Alice's classmates."<sup>67</sup> Walker herself acknowledges it in the afterword to *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*: "The most disturbing incident in the novel, the brutal murder of a woman and mother by her husband and the father of her children, is unfortunately based on a real case."<sup>68</sup> The incident happened in Walker's hometown. Her sister Ruth made Walker visit the funeral home and see the victim with her own eyes.<sup>69</sup> "I describe her in the novel exactly as she appeared to me then. Writing about it years later was the only way I could be free of such a powerful and despairing image,"<sup>70</sup> writes Walker about this experience later. What is particularly interesting is, that she captured a specific detail about the dead woman: "the worn, run-over shoe with a ragged hole, covered with newspaper, in its bottom."<sup>71</sup> Not only was Mem, like the Eatonton woman, shot by her husband right into face, she was also said to be wearing a leaky shoe with "a flat packet of newspaper stuck halfway out."<sup>72</sup> This shows how strong this experience was for the author.

## ***Meridian***

The second novel written by Walker is *Meridian*. The story revolves around Meridian, a Civil Rights activist, with flashbacks to her teen years when she becomes pregnant and has to marry, but later gets divorced and gives up her child to continue her studies at a university, where she meets and has a sexual relationship with an African American Civil Rights worker, Truman. She becomes pregnant again, but opts for an abortion and Truman, unknowing of this, starts dating white Movement volunteer Lynne. Meridian continues to advocate rights of African Americans and a few years later meets with Truman, whose relationship with Lynne fell apart, but rejects his advances and finally acknowledges, that her feelings for him are not the same anymore.

In an interview published in "Black Women Writers at Work" (1983), Walker was asked whether people inquired about autobiographicality of this novel. Walker replied: "Oh yes. I don't think people really understand that a book like *Meridian* is autobiographical only in the sense of projection."<sup>73</sup> She subsequently compared herself and *Meridian*: "*Meridian* is

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<sup>67</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 172.

<sup>68</sup> Walker, *The Third Life*, 342.

<sup>69</sup> See Walker, *The Third Life*, 343.

<sup>70</sup> Walker, *The Third Life*, 343.

<sup>71</sup> Walker, *The Third Life*, 343.

<sup>72</sup> Walker, *The Third Life*, 172.

<sup>73</sup> Walker, *Black Women Writers*, 184.

entirely better than I am, for one thing. She is an exemplary person,”<sup>74</sup> and “my life has been, since I became an adult, much more middle-class than Meridian’s.”<sup>75</sup> But these are only subtle differences, which do not make it impossible for the character of Meridian to be inspired by Walker’s life. Walker actually confesses that she likes to create diverse representations of herself, with different viewpoints and objectives, acting under various circumstances, as this allows her to explore imaginary scenarios.<sup>76</sup> This means that Walker tries to put herself in her characters’ shoes and is in some way connected with them.

In *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (1987), Susan Willis refers to *Meridian* as a “semiautobiographical novel.”<sup>77</sup> She claims that the main character may be “the autobiographical embodiment of Walker herself.”<sup>78</sup> There is plentiful evidence supporting this theory. One is, for instance, their personality. In an interview with White, Porter Sanford, Walker’s high school boyfriend, mentions that “Alice had a tremendous amount of rebellion in her personality that made her a real force in our community [Walker’s hometown, Eatonton].”<sup>79</sup> The same can be said about Meridian, who displays this character streak outright at the beginning of the first chapter, where she fights the unfair treatment of the African Americans. Threatened by rifles and a tank, Meridian “kick[s] open the door”<sup>80</sup> of a circus wagon, to let poor, mostly African American children look at the exhibited “mummy,” because they, unlike white kids, are allowed to do so only one day of the week, namely on Thursdays. Her rebelliousness is clearly evident here. However, this personality trait is much more developed in Meridian. The difference between them is, that Walker rebels mostly through her writing, while Meridian does so through her actions. Walker’s way of fight or resistance is calmer, and Meridian seems to be Walker’s ideal self in this case, someone Walker aspired to be, but maybe lacked courage.

One of the autobiographical elements found in this novel, which is connected with Walker’s coming of age and university years is that both Walker and Meridian were awarded full scholarships at women’s colleges, namely Spelman College and Saxon College respectively. It may be only a coincidence, but the initial letter and short name of both of them suggest that there might be some parallels drawn between them. In her short summary of the

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<sup>74</sup> Walker, *Black Women Writers*, 184.

<sup>75</sup> Walker, *Black Women Writers*, 184–5.

<sup>76</sup> See Walker, *Black Women Writers*, 185.

<sup>77</sup> Susan Willis, *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 110.

<sup>78</sup> Willis, *Specifying*, 120.

<sup>79</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 52.

<sup>80</sup> Alice Walker, *Meridian* (1976; New York: Pocket Books, 1986), 22.

novel, White supports this idea too, when she says that Meridian “enrolls in Saxon College (read: Spelman).”<sup>81</sup>

Regarding their love life, both Meridian and Walker fall in love during their studies and accidentally become pregnant. Similarly to Walker, Meridian is not happy when she finds out about her pregnancy and wants to get an abortion. However, their cases were not exactly the same. It seems, that Walker just wanted to share the experience of unwanted pregnancy, not the actual struggle she had been through. It was a difficult time for Walker. She had a problem finding a doctor willing to perform the abortion and suffered from depression as her life turned upside down. On the other hand, the novel fully omits this part of Meridian’s life, and the description of the sexual encounter is almost immediately followed by a sentence starting with: “On her way to have an abortion.”<sup>82</sup> However, there is some resemblance between Walker’s depression during the pregnancy and Meridian’s mysterious “illness,” which started after the abortion. In an interview with White, which was published in *Alice Walker: A Life*, Walker’s friend Diana Young remembers that “Alice would be holed up in her room, ravaged by morning sickness and so weighted down by depression she could barely speak.”<sup>83</sup> Walker herself admits in one of her essays that she had suicidal thoughts: “For three days I lay on the bed with a razor blade under my pillow.”<sup>84</sup> It was her last resort, but fortunately, she never had to use it. As regards Meridian, her health suddenly deteriorates after the abortion. She becomes blind for a few days, then paralyzed, loses her appetite, and spends days in bed.<sup>85</sup> Her condition was never fully explained, but it resembles Walker’s experience with depression. The time when Walker was dealing with her unplanned pregnancy also served as an inspiration for the majority of poems in *Once*, her first collection of poems.<sup>86</sup> In her collection of essays *In Search for Our Mothers’ Gardens* Walker confirms that “most of the poems on suicide in *Once* come from [her] feelings during this period.”<sup>87</sup> It can be mentioned here that Meridian is a poet, too. Even though her poems are not published, she is mentioned to be writing poetry multiple times in the novel.

Another striking similarity is Meridian’s involvement in the Movement. The Civil Rights Movement was the most active in The United States in the fifties and sixties, which corresponds with Walker’s early life. As an African American woman, who experienced all

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<sup>81</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 288.

<sup>82</sup> Walker, *Meridian*, 114.

<sup>83</sup> Evelyn C. White, *Alice Walker: A Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 113.

<sup>84</sup> Walker, *In Search*, 246.

<sup>85</sup> See Walker, *Meridian*, 119.

<sup>86</sup> See Walker, *In Search*, 248.

<sup>87</sup> Walker, *In Search*, 247.

the hardships of racial inequality, Walker became involved in the Movement herself. Walker published this novel after being active in the Civil Rights Movement for a couple of years. She had already had experience with its activities, which is visible in the novel. Meridian joins the Movement even before going to college, which is earlier than Walker, who joined already as a Spelman College student. She was helping with the registration of voters and taking part in marches and demonstrations.<sup>88</sup> There are various mentions of these activities throughout the book. In her article “Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker, Meridian and the Civil Rights Movement,” Roberta M. Hendrickson says that Walker “has written about the Movement in some of her early poems, in short stories, in essays, and briefly in her first novel ..., but *Meridian* (1976) is her novel of the Civil Rights Movement.”<sup>89</sup> Hendrickson also notices that Walker “is the only major African American woman writer who came of age during the Civil Rights Movement and participated in it and the only one to write a novel about the Civil Rights Movement.”<sup>90</sup> It is clear, that the Movement played an important role in Walker’s life. Walker became involved in it during her early years, which must have had an immense influence on her.

What can be mentioned first regarding the autobiographical elements connected with the Movement is the experience with registering voters. Both Walker and Meridian did this job while helping the Movement. During the summer before her final year at college, “Alice had returned to the South, where she joined a group of Civil Rights workers registering voters in rural Liberty County, Georgia.”<sup>91</sup> She did this job only for a short time, because it was too dangerous there, but later returned to it, working with Melvyn Leventhal, who later became her husband. Registering voters is mentioned multiple times throughout the book but the 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> chapter of the book are entirely devoted to it. They describe the encounters with people whom Meridian and Truman meet while doing this job of visiting African American families as “people who ask people to vote.”<sup>92</sup> Meridian is, similarly to Walker, working in a pair, but instead of her future lover, she is working with a former one.

Another one of Walker’s experiences from the time when she was helping in the Movement is with being trailed. She got into numerous dangerous situations because of her involvement in the Movement. One such situation occurred while she was registering voters with Leventhal. He talks about it in an interview with White: “But as night fell, I noticed a

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<sup>88</sup> See Jessica Harris, “An Interview with Alice Walker.” *Essence*, July 1976, 33.

<sup>89</sup> Roberta M. Hendrickson, “Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker, *Meridian* and the Civil Rights Movement,” *MELUS* 24, no. 3 (1999): 111, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2307/468042>.

<sup>90</sup> Hendrickson, “Remembering the Dream,” 112.

<sup>91</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 110.

<sup>92</sup> Walker, *Meridian*, 212.

pickup truck following our car. There were two white men in it, and they looked pretty ominous.”<sup>93</sup> Fortunately, the NAACP came up with “a diversion to help them get out of town.”<sup>94</sup> This is very similar to a scene in the novel. Walker describes a situation in which her characters found themselves as follows: “But as they [Truman, Lynne and their friends] walked down the street a car slowly followed them until ... they were met by some of Tommy Odds’s NOTC, who walked them to safety in front of the pool hall.”<sup>95</sup> Tommy Odds’s NOTC refers to “niggers-on-the-corner,” a brigade Tommy Odds, a friend of Truman and Lynne, formed to help him register the voters. One of the members noticed that the group is being followed and decided to help them. It can be seen that the civil right activists are being trailed and subsequently saved by someone else in both cases.

It can be also mentioned that Meridian, just like Walker attended Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s funeral. In one of her essays, Walker mentions that she marched in his funeral procession with Leventhal, her husband at that time.<sup>96</sup> The 26<sup>th</sup> chapter of Meridian describes a funeral. Its subtitle “A Day in April, 1968” suggests that it can be a funeral of King himself, as he was assassinated on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 1968. Another more obvious evidence is a mention of a poster, which read “I have a dream.”<sup>97</sup> King was an extremely important figure for the Civil Rights Movement. It was only natural that Walker included a subtle mention of this tragedy also in her novel.

When looking for similarities between Walker and Meridian, it is important to consider also their beliefs and goals. In her article “Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker, Meridian and the Civil Rights Movement,” Hendrickson partially deals with this topic and suggests that Meridian and Walker share some opinions. Hendrickson claims that “Meridian expresses Walker’s concern for ‘the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people,’<sup>98,99</sup> or that “both Walker and her character Meridian believe, with Martin Luther King, Jr., that in using violence a [sic] people risk ‘losing... [their] soul.’<sup>100,101</sup> This personal philosophy can be seen for example in Walker’s calm way of disseminating awareness of the issues of racial equality through her writing and not being more “violent,”<sup>102</sup> as she herself puts it. Similarly,

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<sup>93</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 141.

<sup>94</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 142.

<sup>95</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 134.

<sup>96</sup> See Walker, *In Search*, 147–8.

<sup>97</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 186.

<sup>98</sup> Walker, *In Search*, 250.

<sup>99</sup> Hendrickson, “Remembering the Dream,” 115.

<sup>100</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait* (1964; New York: New American Library, 1968), 35.

<sup>101</sup> Hendrickson, “Remembering the Dream,” 115.

<sup>102</sup> Walker, *In Search*, 225.



it is shown also in Meridian's reluctance, or inability, to say that she would "kill for the Revolution."<sup>103</sup> Meridian was more violent in her fight for racial equality, still, she would not take lives to achieve it. It suggests that even though Walker wanted to do more and contribute to the Movement, she had some boundaries that she believed in and made her characters respect them too.

Another point made by Hendrickson is, that Walker wanted Meridian "to be seen as a black revolutionary artist."<sup>104</sup> However, Walker did not perceive herself as one, because of her possessing qualities to be an artist, but not a revolutionary.<sup>105</sup> This time, as Hendrickson points out, it was "writing Meridian [that] allowed Walker to accept her role as ... a black revolutionary artist, one who passes on the story of the Civil Rights Movement to future generations, teaching them their history."<sup>106</sup> For the first time, it can be seen that it was not only Walker's life influencing her writing. The process was reversed, and the novel influenced the rest of the author's life in this case. It is possible that it was the writing of Meridian, which allowed Walker to come to terms with her non-violent way of contributing to the Revolution. Now, after a few decades have passed, it can be said that her writing did play a very important role in achieving equal rights for African Americans.

Other similarities between Walker and Meridian include their love for a particular type of music. White refers to Walker as "a lifelong lover of music,"<sup>107</sup> particularly interested in gospel music.<sup>108</sup> Meridian is also said to be "drunk as usual with the wonderful music"<sup>109</sup> during her visits of church. Her love for music is then mentioned repeatedly throughout the novel.

Furthermore, Meridian's father is keenly interested in the indigenous people and Meridian partially shares his passion. When visiting the Sacred Serpent, an Indian burial mound, she faints and experiences a weird sensation, similar to ecstasy. In *Black Women Writers at Work*, Walker briefly touches upon the topic of indigenous people and confesses: "I have something like visitations, and I know they come from what is Indian in me, and I don't necessarily mean Indian blood."<sup>110</sup> It is possible, that the sensation described in Meridian comes from the experience of the author herself. Another evidence supporting this theory is

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<sup>103</sup> Walker, *Meridian*, 27.

<sup>104</sup> Hendrickson, "Remembering the Dream," 116.

<sup>105</sup> See Hendrickson, "Remembering the Dream," 116.

<sup>106</sup> Hendrickson, "Remembering the Dream," 126.

<sup>107</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 207.

<sup>108</sup> See White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 207.

<sup>109</sup> Walker, *Meridian*, 28.

<sup>110</sup> Walker, *Black Women Writers*, 179.

that Walker also wrote a poem “Eagle Rock,” published in her collection of poems *Revolutionary Petunias & Other Poems*, which describes a mound located in her hometown, which suggests that she, similarly to Meridian, has visited these landmarks.

However, the connections cannot be found only between Walker and the character of Meridian. According to some of her close friends, Walker drew inspiration for some of her characters from the real people she knew. As White points out in *Alice Walker: A Life*, “some readers who had known Alice in Mississippi ... were crushed to discover what they perceived to be thinly veiled portraits of their lives in her narrative.”<sup>111</sup> One of them recognizes herself in Lynne Rabinowitz. They are both white, involved in the Movement, have an African American husband, and even share the same taste in fashion.<sup>112</sup> However, Walker never confirmed these theories.

## Conclusion

The aim of this bachelor thesis was to find and summarize links between the life of Alice Walker and stories of her early fiction, more specifically her first two novels *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian*; her first collection of short stories *In Love and Trouble*; and her short story “The Abortion”. This was achieved by looking for similarities and connecting characters or events of these works with the real life of the author. Walker’s biography by White, various interviews or her own essays were the main sources of information used when writing this thesis.

This thesis confirmed that a great number of autobiographical elements can be found in the early fiction of Alice Walker. Various parallels can be drawn between the life of Walker and lives of her characters. The majority of autobiographical elements found can be categorized as belonging into one of two main groups, namely elements connected with the author’s family background and early childhood, and elements connected with author’s teenage and university years. Those that relate to the family life, or the childhood of the author can be found predominantly in the novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and those that are connected with Walker’s coming of age can be found especially in her second novel *Meridian*. The absolute majority of these elements are examples of how author’s life and experiences shape and influence their writing. However, on one instance, it was the writing that changed Walker’s mindset and helped her to cope with a personal problem.

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<sup>111</sup> White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 294.

<sup>112</sup> See White, *Alice Walker: A Life*, 294.

What is interesting is that Walker often shares her family background with her characters. For example, occupation of her parents, family dynamics or relationships between certain members of her family. Another recurrent motif is the motif of unwanted pregnancy and abortion, which probably has its roots in Walker's own experience. In addition, Walker devotes a lot of attention to the Civil Rights Movement and uses her own experiences to depict the Movement in her fiction.

The autobiographical elements could be also categorized into two groups based on whether they were incorporated deliberately and were meant to mediate a message to a reader, or if it was a subconscious process. It is not possible to determine Walker's real motivation behind incorporating these elements, but it seems, that most of them were incorporated on purpose. Walker wrote about topics that she felt a deep connection with and wanted people to read about. For example, she wanted to raise awareness about the racial injustice issues. It was her own peaceful way of contributing towards the Revolution. Furthermore, Walker usually works with the autobiographical elements incorporated in her works. She either uses them as an inspiration and then creates a different story evolving around them, exaggerates them or omits some elements.

In conclusion, the works of Alice Walker are brimming with autobiographical elements. They either reflect her life or give her an opportunity to explore imaginary scenarios.

## **Abstrakt**

Táto bakalárska práca sa snaží dokázať existenciu a uviesť príklady autobiografických prvkov v ranej beletrii americkej autorky Alice Walker, konkrétne v jej prvých dvoch románoch *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* a *Meridian*; v poviedkach z jej prvej zbierky *In Love and Trouble* a v jej poviedke „The Abortion“ zo zbierky *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*. Ako zdroj informácií o autorkinom živote poslúžil jej životopis od Evelyn C. White, rôzne rozhovory s Alice Walker, zbierky esejí od samotnej autorky a aj jej prvé zbierky básní. Cieľom práce je dokázať, že život autora sa odzrkadľuje aj v jeho dielach.

## **Abstract**

The aim of this bachelor thesis is to find and summarize autobiographical elements in the early fiction of the contemporary African American author, Alice Walker, namely in her first two novels *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian*; in her first collection of short stories *In Love and Trouble*; and in her short story “The Abortion” published in a collection *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*. The sources of information about Walker's life were her essays, early collections of poems, interviews, and her biography by Evelyn C. White.

## Resumé

Cieľom tejto bakalárskej práca je nájsť a zosumarizovať paralely medzi životom americkej autorky Alice Walker a životom postáv v jej dielach. Práca uvádza príklady autobiografických prvkov v jej ranej beletrii, konkrétne v jej prvých dvoch románoch *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) a *Meridian* (1976); v poviedkach z jej prvej zbierky *In Love and Trouble* (1973) a v jej poviedke „The Abortion“ zo zbierky *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981). Ako zdroj informácií o autorkinom živote poslúžil jej životopis *Alice Walker: A Life* (2004) od Evelyn C. White, rôzne rozhovory s Alice Walker, zbierky esejí od samotnej autorky ako *In Search for Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) alebo *Living by the World* (1988). Užitočné boli aj jej prvé zbierky básní *Once* (1968), *Revolutionary Petunias & Other Poems* (1973) a *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning* (1979).

Alice Malsenior Walker je spisovateľka afroamerického pôvodu. Je autorkou mnohých románov, poviedok, esejí a aj poézie, v ktorých často a verne spracováva problematiku rasovej nerovnosti a diskriminácie, postavenia žien, násilia v rodinách, alebo aj problémov v rámci afroamerickej komunity. Walker bola aktívna aj v Afroamerickom hnutí za občianske práva, ku ktorému prispela aj svojou tvorbou. Jej najznámejší román *The Color Purple* získal v roku 1983 Pulitzerovu cenu ako aj National Book Award.

Alice Walker sa narodila v meste Eatonton 9. februára 1944. Ako dieťa bola aktívna, priateľská taktiež vyspelá na svoj vek. Keď mala osem rokov, pri hre s bratmi nešťastnou náhodou na jedno oko oslepla, navyše jej po úraze ostala aj jazva. Walker sa v dôsledku toho stala hanblivou a nespoločenskou až kým v štrnástich nepodstúpila operáciu, ktorou jej jazvu odstránili a ona znovunadobudla sebadôveru. V sedemnástich nastúpila na vysokú školu Spelman College a po dvoch rokoch prestúpila na Sarah Lawrence. Jej štúdijné výsledky boli vynikajúce. Môžeme tu vidieť aj začiatky jej spisovateľskej kariéry. Walker v tom čase taktiež prvýkrát navštívila Afriku, odkiaľ sa vrátila tehotná. Rozhodla sa pre interrupciu, ktorá bola v tom čase nelegálna. Walker počas tehotenstva bojovala s depresiou, avšak toto obdobie jej neskôr poslúžilo ako inšpirácia pre viaceré jej diela, hlavne básne. Walker bola aktívna v Afroamerickom hnutí za občianske práva, v ktorom sa spoznala s Melvynom Leventhalom, ktorý sa neskôr stal jej manželom. Boli spolu deväť rokov a mali jednu dcéru. Po rozvode sa odsťahovala do Kalifornie, kde žije doteraz.

Autobiografické prvky, ktoré nájdeme v jej dielach patria väčšinou do jednej z dvoch oblastí. Prvou je autorkine detstvo a rodinné zázemie. Tieto spojitosti sa vyskytujú hlavne v jej prvom románe *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, ktorý opisuje život troch generácií,

of Grangea Copelanda, cez jeho syna Brownfielda, až po jeho vnučku Ruth. Grange svoju ženu podvádza a bije a svojho syna ignoruje. Nakoniec svoju rodinu opustí. Brownfield si prisahá, že sa nikdy nestane človekom, akým bol jeho otec, ale ťažké životné podmienky z neho vytvoria vernú kópiu jeho otca. Vyrcholí to tým, že brutálne zavraždí svoju ženu a kým je vo väzení, Grange, ktorý sa vrátil ako zmenený človek, preberie do starostlivosti jeho dcéru Ruth. Príbeh románu sa autorkinmu životu podobá hlavne vo vzťahoch medzi jednotlivými členmi rodiny, správaním a vývojom mužských postáv alebo v niektorých skúsenostiach, ktoré Walker zdieľa s Ruth.

Jej druhý román, *Meridian*, rozpráva príbeh dospievania rovnomennej hrdinky, ktorá opustila rodinu aby mohla študovať a pridala sa do Afroamerického hnutia za občianske práva. Rovnako ako Walker sa aj Meridian stala aktivistkou za občianske práva a podstúpila interrupciu počas štúdia na univerzite. Kniha sa zameriava na život Meridian a iných aktivistov a ich skúsenosti v hnutí pripomínajú tie autorkine. Dalo by sa povedať, že Meridian zachytáva autobiografické prvky autorkinho dospievania a pôsobenia v hnutí za občianske práva, čo je druhá veľká skupina autobiografických prvkov nájdených v jej dielach. Navyše, okrem toho, že bol tento román do istej miery inšpirovaný autorkiným životom, taktiež ovplyvnil samotný život autorky a pomohol jej vyrovať sa s istými osobnými problémami.

Poviedky v *In Love and Trouble* sú taktiež istým spôsobom inšpirované autorkiným životom. Napríklad poviedka „The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff,“ ktorá je založená na príbehu autorkinej matky, alebo poviedka „To Hell with Dying“ (1967), v ktorej je hlavná postava inšpirovaná rodinným priateľom. V „The Flowers“ môžeme nájsť príbeh, ktorý obrazne pripomína autorkinu nehodu s okom. Taktiež sestry v poviedke „Everyday Use“ zdieľajú charakteristiky s Walker a jednou s jej sestier. Poviedka „The Child Who Favored Daughter“ zasa preskúmava vzťah otca a dcéry, ktorý sa podobá vzťahu autorkinho otca s a jej sestry. Niektoré poviedky ako „Roselily“ (1972) a „The Diary of an African Nun“ (1968) sa odohrávajú v Mississippi a Ugande, ktoré boli autorke dobre známe. V ostatných poviedkach môžeme vidieť, že autorka píše o veciach, ktoré ju zaujímali, mala k nim osobný vzťah, alebo ich aj sama robila, napríklad štúdium francúzštiny v „We Drink the Wine in France.“ V jej poviedke „The Abortion“ spracúva tému interrupcie, ktorú môžeme vidieť aj v jej románe *Meridian*. Táto poviedka je silno ovplyvnená autorkinou vlastnou skúsenosťou. Walker aj hlavná postava poviedky dvakrát neplánovane otehotneli a rozhodli sa pre umelé ukončenie tehotenstva. V oboch prípadoch ich k tomu viedli rovnaké okolnosti a taktiež po zákroku zdieľali rovnaké pocity.

Celkovo sa dá povedať, že tvorba Alice Walker je na niektorých miestach inšpirovaná jej životom a to predovšetkým detstvom, rodinným zázemím a rodinnou dynamikou, vysokoškolským životom a jej zaangažovanosťou v Afroamerickom hnutí za občianske práva. Častý je aj motív interrupcie, ktorú samotná autorka podstúpila dvakrát. Taktiež tento vplyv medzi životom a dielom autorky nepôsobí iba jedným smerom, písanie jej druhého románu ovplyvnilo autorkine zmýšľanie o samej sebe. Mnoho spojitostí medzi životom autorky a jej postáv pramení z toho, že autorka písala o témach, ktoré pre ňu boli dôležité, s ktorými mala osobné skúsenosti, a s ktorými sa inšpirovala pri svojej tvorbe.



## **Annotation**

Number of pages: 35

Number of characters: 54 765

Number of sources: 21

Key words: Alice Walker, autobiographical elements, *In Love and Trouble*, “The Abortion,” abortion, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Meridian*, the Civil Rights Movement

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