

Notes for *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* by Denise

*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is the debut novel of American Author Alice Walker. Published in 1970, it is set in rural Georgia. It tells the story of Grange, his wife, their son Brownfield, and granddaughter Ruth.

Like many first novels this is a disguised autobiography as Brownfield and Mem's circumstances resemble those of Alice Walker's parents and their daughter herself. (Alice was the eighth and youngest child of Minnie Tallulah and Willie Lee, poor sharecroppers in Georgia). Alice grew up in an environment of racism and poverty, which, along with a passion for gender issues, remains a large part of her narratives, especially in this her first novel.

In the 1960s Blacks in America were finding their identity and fighting for their civil rights. Walker has spent her life as an activist for equal rights in America

In this story Alice Walker crafts a carefully constructed conceptualisation of the meaning of one man's life. In his third life Grange finally begins to understand the forces that have constrained him and have influenced his behaviour towards others, in turn limiting their own possibilities.

Themes: Choices, free will violence and redemption. Alice Walker in this and subsequent novels explores the theme of oppression, and its dynamics. In this book oppression is a force. The people who are oppressed cope with the frustrations of their condition by appropriating the same tools of oppression that are used against them by turning them upon other people who are even more vulnerable than they are... Consequently it becomes exponentially more difficult for characters to forge an authentic, untainted identity or to determine a direction and purpose for their lives. Grange, subject to the demands and desires of others in positions of power, has nothing left of himself to give to his family, or to himself.

Scholarship on *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* has mainly focused on gender issues and in particular on her male characters after publication of *The Color Purple* there was much criticism of her overly brutal male characters. Critic Minrose Gwin notes that "Walkers writing has turned upon the axis of black women's lives" and "her insistence that black men, despite their own victimization, must take responsibility for their treatment of black women" This is pivotal to an understanding of this novel as it was not overly criticised for having negative portrayals, but *The Color Purple*, years later, was seen as employing brutal male characters, weak and not masculine

Walker has, in both novels, deconstructed the notion of black family romance, and shows us how dangerous the sphere of the family entity can be for black women. The very notion of the potent black patriarch has been questioned.

In *The Third Life* Walker demonstrates how families can be so deeply adversely affected by the culture in which they live, and are often refusing to confront the ruthless and violent treatment of family members. The author argues the impact of economical and racial oppression on the development of manhood and interpersonal relationships. Her writing also heavily suggests these oppressions create such social inequality that there cannot be an acceptable family life.

The author demonstrates relationships between a father and his son. Brownfield is a victim of the lack of love, especially by his father, and metaphorically blind because he is unable to love. Grange's coldness and violent words towards Brownfield cycle the violence. Brownfield's father never looked at him, so Brownfield never develops a sense of self-worth. Grange – "I ought to throw you down the goddam well"

Manhood is a persuasive theme. In the first scene between father and son after Brownfield's release from prison, Grange articulates a definition of manhood that stresses responsibility for one's actions. He regrets he used Jose to assert his manhood, and had abandoned his wife. He defines manliness as devotion to wife and children and fulfilling responsibilities in spite of racial oppression. An oversimplification. At key points in the novel the author points out that white racists control the institutions and prevent blacks from having power or privilege.

In discussing her novel Walker has been clear to articulate that she did not intend to demean the black male image, but rather to remove the blinders from the eyes of history so that the "real" stories of black women's strengths and weaknesses reveal themselves.