



# Alice Walker's Poetic Transcendence

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**Abstract:** Alice Walker is a renowned black female writer, she has written six poetry collections. Compared with her novels and essays, her poetry are created under adversity which she reconciled with and completed her life. The concern for unity and equality of all living things in her poetry reflects that Walker's thoughts have transcended gender and race. Through the sublimation of art, she instills the world with beauty and kindness.

**Keywords:** Alice Walker; Poetry; Transcendence

## 1. Introduction

"And it was then that I knew that the healing / of all our wounds/ is forgiveness/ that permits a promise/ of our return at the end." These are the concluding lines of Alice Walker's third book of poetry, *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning* (1979). Walker has written that at her father's funeral, she heard her mother's faithful whisper into her father's coffin. From this line, not only suggests a firm belief in the fluidity of experience and a dismissal of the permanence of the feelings of loss experienced when a loved one dies, but also set an optimistic tone of affirmation of life. It includes another feature of Alice Walker's poems—base on a personal experience.

Alice Walker is better known as novelist, essayist and short story writer, but to be honest, she started her literary career by writing poetry which impenetrate almost every aspect of her life. From 1968 to 2003, Walker wrote numerous poems of different life experiences and published seven poetry collections: *Once* (1968), *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* (1973), *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning*, *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful* (1984), *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: 1965-1990* (1991), *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth* (2003), and the newest collection *The World Will Follow Joy: Turing Madness into Flower* (2013). Perhaps because Walker throws limelight on concrete, precise images, everyday themes and personal tone which deviated from the contemporary black poetry upon rhetorical brilliance and formal experimentation, she received apathetic responses among critics. However, Walker doesn't seem to concern about it. For her, the meaning of composing poetry lies in the releasing and influence rather than reputation<sup>[1]</sup>.

In fact, Walker's first poetry collection originated from the experience in Sarah Lawrence College—unintended pregnancy and induced abortion, she attempted to commit suicide in great despair. Creating poems, nevertheless, is a way of confiding, of survive. "Since that time, it seems to me that all of my poems—and I write groups of poems rather than singles—are written when I have successfully pulled myself out of a completely numbing despair, and stand again in the sunlight. Writing poems is my way of celebrating with the world that I have not committed suicide the evening before" (O'Brien, 191). It is a psychological exploration of self, a mediating of the consciousness of one's very existence and an attending to the emotional determinants of that existence<sup>[2]</sup>.

## 2. The core spirit: Womanism

Unlike early black woman writer, notably Phillis Wheatley, Walker is confident with herself, expressing herself

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directly for she does not need to disguise her words or muffle her voice. More importantly, she had transcended individual experience. The surface simplicity, however, does not preclude sophistication. For instance, in “Remember?”, Remember me?/ I am the girl/ with the dark skin/ whose shoes are thin/ I am the girl/ with rotten teeth/ I am the dark/ rotten-toothed girl/ with the wounded eye/ and the melted ear. No longer is it the isolated experience of a dark wounded girl who Walker referred to herself. The poetic rendering of this episode implies the miserable destiny of blacks. They left Africa with chains, losing their freedom, and were sold like cattle. Suffering from the pain of heavy labor cruel beating and family separation but finally buried in a foreign land. The sacrifice of generations of black slaves has achieved the southern economic glory, but who cares about these slaves? And who remembers them?

Alice Walker first put forward and defined “Womanism” in her prose *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* (1983)<sup>3</sup>. She brought this term to American lexicon and this makes her perspective and experience different from that conducted by those feminist. “I don't choose womanism because it is ‘better’ than feminism... I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it; because I cherish the spirit of the women (like Sojourner) the world calls to mind.” Walker treasures the features of women does not mean that she is against men. To be honest, she is a universalist, believing man and woman are responsible for the wholeness of existence. Her poetry treats race and gender as subject, but her poetry is non-racial and non-gender in its form. She asks her reader to see the divided world through the eyes of the artist. The Walkerian poetry illuminates the wakeful period, then, the sublimation of true and ugly history into art. She meditates upon grotesque images through sublimation—the substance of aesthetic time—transforming gruesome into spiritual art, Walker releases them, grants them transcendence<sup>[3]</sup>.

In her famous poem “Revolutionary Petunias”, Walker successfully create a woman named Sammy Lou of Rue who killed the man murdered her husband. People respected and admired her, but she just “laughed fit to kill in disbelief at the angry, militant pictures of herself.” “A blackwoods woman/ her house was papered with/ funeral home calendars and/ faces appropriate for a Mississippi/ Sunday School. She Raised a George, a Martha, a Jackie and a Kennedy./ Also a John Wesley Junior./ Always respect of the word of God.” (Walker, 39) Such an ordinary black woman, the wife of a sharecropper, the mother of five children, what circumstances forced her to kill a man? Country to the horrible scene, Walker ended the line with breath of life. On her way to the electric chair, Sammy Lou's last words is “Don't yall forget to water/my purple petunias<sup>[4]</sup>.” (Nowak, 184)

Here emerges a distinct image—purple petunia. Flowers, especially purple petunias, have always been of special significance to Walker. In her mind, It is the symbol of black women, common, but vigorous. As her another poem goes “The Nature of This Flower Is to Bloom”: “And for ourselves, the intrinsic/ ‘Purpose’ is to remember,/ and to declare our commitment to all/ the living, without deceit, and without/ fear, and without reservation. We do/ what we can. (Walker, 79) And by doing it, we keep/ ourselves trusting.” Sammy Lou of Rue is such a persistent petunia. She loves life and enjoys beauty without any scruples. She never feels ashamed of her skin color or thinks she is unworthy of everything because of poverty. Sammy here has transcended gender and race reflecting Walker's meditation for human beings “a revolutionary without love for the everyday is not a whole person” (Nowak, 184).

If an author is preoccupied with her political and social identity as she writes then she might obstruct the flood of objective information that might arrive spontaneously and in an instant. Walker makes no illusions about a separate racially prescribed intelligence for blacks and whites. Rather she says—using the example of herself—we must lose our socialized identities in order for intelligence to reach us. And intelligence knows no race or gender, religion or class:

“I have not labeled myself yet. I would like to call myself revolutionary, for I am always changing, and growing, it is hoped for the good of more black things, especially since I believe one's work rather than one's appearance adequately labels one. I used to call myself a poet, but I've come to have doubts about that. The truest and most enduring impulse I have is simply to write. It seems necessary for me to forget all the titles, all the labels, and all the hours of talk and to concentrate on the mountain of work I find before me” (133)<sup>[5]</sup>.

### 3. The poetic transcendence

Walker is a tortured soul, a frustrated author who stands panicked on the dangerous ledge contemplating life and death. In the preface of her collection *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth*, she found the reason of our children

addicting to drugs and alcohol is “to allay their fears about what begins to look like a severely compromised future, one filled with hatred and with war”, moreover, to find a religious and spiritual experience. This lack of mental break, Walker realizes, is detrimental. She starts to concern about the mental condition of human beings, about the world, transcending race and nation, believing that love and forgiveness rob us off lunacy and violence. Walker herself also receives numerous oriental philosophies<sup>[6]</sup>.

Through her journey introvert and extrovert, she came to know Maria Sabina, a shaman therapist in Mexico. Sabina lives in the misty mountains of Mexico, treating and curing people every day. Until now, she is still a miracle in Mexico, revered and loved deeply for the contribution her life to people's health and happiness. Walker wrote a poem for her “Bring Me the Heart of Maria Sabina”: “Bring me the heart/ Of Maria Sabina/ A heart inexplicable/ In its generosity/ Its lovingkindness/ & its grace./ It is the heart/ That is ours if we/ Dare to claim it./ Americans of all/ The Americans/ Both Mother/ & Father/ Grandmother/ & Grandfather/ Guidling Spirit/ Of this/ Peace.” Here implies Walker's wisdom, her appeal to equality of everything on earth, harmonious coexistence, and happiness for all<sup>[7]</sup>.

Walker has always been meditating and searching for a spirit, the spirit of goodness to construct a beautiful world. She hopes that the spirit can lead us to the right path: “When we let Spirit/ Lead us/ It is impossible/ To know/ Where/ We are being led./ All we know/ All we can believe/ All we can hope/ Is that/ We are going/ Home/ That wherever/ Spirit/ Takes us/ Is where/ We/ Live”(151). As an enlightener for a new era, Walker believes the world is an integral part of the harmonious universe. And love—the essence of our new century, purifies anger, fear, prejudice and hatred. When one learns to love himself and to love others, the idea of a beautiful world is to be realized.

Walker's poetry reveals the transcendental beauty and kindness of humankind, directly engaging with grand personality and self-contained spiritual way of existence. These have jointly constructed the main frame of Alice Walker's spiritual development —whether men or women, the integrity and harmony of their personality are the key factors for survival and positive development. At the same time, Through her poetry, we can also feel Alice Walker's concern for the survival of all mankind, even the whole universe, and her beautiful vision for the equality and unity of all living things.

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