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Completing a Circle : Alice Walker's *Meridian*

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I

Meridian begins with an excerpt from *Black Elk Speaks* which serves as a fitting epigraph to the novel. It fuses the significant concepts of the novel, fragmentation and wholeness, since it presents the circle-like dream of wholeness destroyed: "A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream ... the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead."¹) As this quotation suggests, Walker uses the motif of "a broken hoop (or circle) without its center" to illuminate the major concepts of fragmentation and wholeness, death and rebirth, all of which are related not only to the protagonist's past and present, but also to the Civil Rights Movement.²) *Meridian* the protagonist struggles to complete the "nation's hoop" or the "people's dream" which Black Elk laments to have been irreparably broken. As an approach to interpret *Meridian*, I will analyze how the circular image, or attempting to become whole, permeates throughout the novel thematically as well as structurally. I will also consider why the "circle" is broken and how a new "circle" is completed in *Meridian* the protagonist.

II

Walker's presentation of the plot is crucially connected to the circular idea of the novel. Each person must pursue the quest for wholeness which is essentially related to the social change, the realization of the nation's complete "hoop." Such "circular" development of the protagonist is influenced by her social condi-

tions, her personal past and collective maternal history.

The novel is largely divided into three sections. In each section, the flow of events proceeds in a circular movement. The first section, "Meridian" travels from a time in the seventies backward to Meridian's personal history and then forward to the seventies. As in the first section, in the second section "Truman Held," the plot moves in a circle. It proceeds from a time outside the historical drama in the sixties and goes backward then forward to complete a circular movement within the section. The "circle" in which other characters' thought and action are told fills that part unknown to Meridian. Further the circular plot moves forward beyond the second section to a certain time in the book's beginning when Truman finds Meridian facing an army tank. A larger circle is developed. Walker fits the pieces together to construct a circle. The small circles in the first and second section eventually help to complete a larger circle. The last section "Ending" takes us back to the first chapter "The Last Return," and completes a circular plot movement that involves the whole novel. The following description of Meridian's room in the last section reminds us of Truman's former explanation of her room in "The Last Return":

There were two rooms. In one, a hot plate, a table and a battered chair . . . and in the other, where Meridian slept, only her sleeping bag on the floor, some toilet articles on a window-sill (*which Truman had overlooked before*) and a jar of dried wildflowers in a green wine bottle placed in a corner. (pp. 195-96, *my italics*)

The word "overlook" reveals the structure of the novel. As the plot evolves, the "overlooked" or "omitted" parts and insufficient information are complemented little by little, to become "whole," paralleling the development of the main character.

As the name "The Last Return" suggests, the beginning of the novel is also the end of the novel. The plot moves backward and

then forward to complete a circle. However, the end of the novel is not identical with the beginning. It is important to note that the last two chapters in the last section move forward beyond the book's beginning to the moment of Meridian's renewal. Barbara Christian has brilliantly expressed the circular plot movement in *Meridian* by using the word "revolution": "The sequence of events is itself a visual representation of the term *revolution*, the moving backward to move forward beyond the point at which you began."³) In order to move forward the protagonist must move backward, must know the "past." Meridian is able to achieve her quest for wholeness only after she understands her past as well as collective history.

There are also circular movements within the chapters. In the comparatively long chapters, the technique of flashback is used. Time flows smoothly back to the past and then naturally comes forward to the present, consequently forming a "circle" in such chapters. Walker fully displays her talent for story-telling in the form of flashbacks. By using flashbacks Walker interweaves anecdotes and legends: the stories of Wild Child, Louvinie, and Fast Mary, as well as the history of her maternal ancestors into the texture of *Meridian*. Since Meridian realizes the full significance of these anecdotes and legends, she is able to transform herself. In order to find her identity, Meridian must understand not only her personal past but also the collective history of black women. Walker has used flashbacks to illuminate the past.

I have analyzed how the circular plot movement evolves in the chapters, sections, and throughout the entire novel. The circles are reconstructed by putting the fragmented pieces together. The small circles are parts that form a whole. Walker has deeply impressed the circular image on our mind, because the circles in the structure of the novel are closely connected with the idea of circle in the theme of the novel.

III

The recurrent circular images in the structure reinforce the concept of wholeness in the theme of the novel. I will now concentrate the analysis on the theme: how the protagonist completes wholeness as a human being. The opening chapter, "The Last Return," tightly compresses the thematic concerns of the novel. It reveals the motifs of fragmentation and wholeness within the issues of racism and sexism. In a small Georgia town, Meridian confronts an army tank as she leads a group of poor black children to see a white mummified woman, Marilene O'Shay. Although black people have acquired equal rights after the Civil Rights Movement, they actually cannot look at this absurd mummified woman except on their day, Thursday. Meridian challenges this racial tradition by leading black children to the circus wagon on a day not authorized by the local government. Such racial discrimination is symbolized in the contrast between "black" and "white." On one side of the square, along the line of "bright" stores, stands a "growing" crowd of "white" people. On the opposite side, along the line of "shabby" stores, stands a "still-as-death" crowd of "black" people. These opposing epithets illuminate the bitter reality of the separation between white and black people.

While challenging discriminating racial tradition, Meridian simultaneously defies the traditional images of women. She appears in striking contrast to the mummified woman, Marilene. Marilene represents society's ideal woman. The side of the circus wagon is covered with gaudily painted words: "Obedient Daughter," "Devoted Wife," and "Adoring Mother" (p.5). The circus bill written by her husband says she has been an "ideal woman," or a "goddess," who has been given everything she wanted: "a washing machine, furs, her own car and a full-time housekeeper-cook" (p. 6). The images of women as passive, obedient, and devoted are

characteristics equivalent to psychic death. Meridian actively challenges these clichés. She is not an obedient daughter. Her mother grieves in her letters that Meridian has “failed to honor not just her parents, but anyone” (p.9). Meridian’s room in the absence of material goods is like a “cell.” She owns no furniture, no clothing, all she has is her sleeping bag. Her physical features resemble those of a male. Since most of her hair has fallen out, she wears a visored railroad cap. She is also dressed in dungarees. Her railroad cap and dungarees are “emblems of her rejection of conventional images and expectations of womanhood.”⁴⁾ Not only does Meridian look like a male, but she also acts like one. Although the policemen point their rifles towards Meridian to defend the circus wagon, she bravely marches on to face the muzzle of the tank aimed at her chest. The contrast of the two women serves to underline the image of Meridian, the new woman (not necessarily the new black woman).

The contrast between “black” and “white” reveals the persistent racism in the South, the segregation society constructs between white and black people. The comparison between Meridian the new woman and Marilene O’Shay the society’s ideal woman demonstrates sexism, the gap between men and women. Such “fragmentation” parallels that of the novel’s plot.

Meridian’s ambivalent attitude is manifested in the first chapter. Meridian has the courage to face the army tank. On the other hand, she is in a death-like state, which is assumed to be the nature of the white mummified woman. Meridian falls down after she leads black children to the circus wagon. She is carried home as if she were a “corpse” in a “coffin.” Truman precisely summarizes Meridian’s ambivalence: “I’ve never understood your illness, the paralysis, the breaking down . . . the way you can face a tank with absolute calm one minute and the next be unable to move. I always think of you as so strong, but look at you” (p.19). Karen F. Stein, who analyzes *Meridian* as a work which rejects the basic

social tenets that deny the selfhood of women, emphasizes the significance of such opposing characteristics in *Meridian* :

Because the two views of *Meridian* are radically opposed, Walker implies that living persons transcend the narrowness of stereotypes or definitions . . . *Meridian* is a complex fusion of opposites: She is both powerful and powerless, crazy and supremely sane. Living beings are continually in flux; they will not stay fixed within the definitions ascribed to them. Because *Meridian* resists the imposition of definitions, she remains alive.⁵⁾

Such fluidity of personality is necessary because it leads to growth, completeness of being. The circular plot movement of the novel suggests that the protagonist eventually achieves wholeness as a human being. The circular whole is symbolized in one of the definitions of her name *Meridian*. In astronomy, "meridian" is an imaginary great "circle" of the celestial sphere passing through the "poles" of the heavens. If the "wholeness" *Meridian* is in search of can be compared to a "circle," the "poles" through which the circle passes imply her ambivalence. *Meridian* actually passes such "poles" in order to find her identity. She travels from the South to the North and back to the South again. Her journey parallels "a heavenly body's orbit."⁶⁾ *Meridian* herself symbolizes a heavenly body, the sun. Truman feels that *Meridian*'s love springs out and flows over him "like a special *sun*, like grace" (p. 223, my italics). Symbolically then, she stands at the "center" when Truman and Lynne are present. She is situated between them and helps them whenever they need her.

Meridian's spiritual unhealthiness is reflected in her bodily decline. Her physical features in the opening chapter are closely related to "death." Her hands are "bony" and "ice-cold," and her eyes are "glassy and yellow." Moreover, she has "practically no hair" (p. 11), which reveals the extremity of agony close to death. Her baldness parallels the severed magnolia tree, Sojourner,

which is “chopped and sawed down, level to the ground” (p. 38) by the students of Saxon College. As the fragmentation of the novel’s plot suggests the mental breakdown of the protagonist, so too does Meridian’s bodily state reveal her illness, her spiritual “fragmentation.” The main reason for such fragmentation is a sense of guilt.

Meridian feels guilty because she has given away her own child. Her guilt comes from the fact that she cannot live up to the standard of motherhood. In expiation of her sin, she attempts to become a mother of all children. Meridian makes nonviolent resistance to assert black children’s rights. It is Meridian who leads the people in anger and grief to the mayor’s office, holding in her arms the bloated body of the five-year-old boy who lay drowned in the sewer for two days. Although the child’s body is beginning to decompose, the people who follow Meridian think she carries “a large bouquet of long-stemmed roses” (p. 195), and the sweet fragrance is emitted. Meridian, with serene expression on her face, carries in her arms the sweet-smelling roses, or the most precious treasure of society. Symbolically, Meridian is a mother of every black child. She is even worshipped as she stands at the head of the long line of black people. It is true that by “enlarging the concept of motherhood”⁷⁾ Meridian is able to absolve her guilt of being unable to live up to the standard of motherhood. But more than absolving guilt, she finds her role as a mother of all children and thus realizes the positive meaning of her life. Meridian is no more in a “fragmentary” state.

The history of Meridian’s maternal ancestors is based on the stories of sacrifice black mothers had to make for their children. To know such history makes Meridian feel guilty. Paradoxically, it is history that precipitates her quest for “wholeness.” Meridian feels herself to be “held by something in the past” (p. 14). Walker writes in her essay that “we understand we are who we are largely because of who we have been.”⁸⁾ Meridian must know the

past in order to find her identity. Walker interposes Meridian's past, the history of her maternal ancestors, and legends of black women by using flashbacks. The legend of a slave storyteller Louvinie, or the story of the tree Sojourner, contains the heritage of suffering as well as resistance. Sitting beneath Sojourner, Meridian feels she is not alone; she is sustained by her ancestors. Though it seems painful to accept the history of her ancestors, it gives her courage. Gathering up the historical threads of lives her ancestors led, Meridian acquires the strength to persist in her pilgrimage for wholeness.

IV

When Meridian attends a church memorial service for a young Civil Rights activist, her quest for wholeness reaches a climax. In other words, to quote from one of the definitions of the word "meridian," the protagonist Meridian, who can be compared to the sun, attains her "zenith," or "the highest apparent point reached by a heavenly body in its course" (p. xi). Meridian discovers the function of the ceremony. The people gathered at the church determined not to forget one of their sons who has struggled for their collective freedom. The death of the young activist should not be in vain. His death is not an individual one, after all. His life belongs to black people as a whole. In comprehending such communal spirit among the people, Meridian realizes that her identity is essentially united to black people. She is a part of a much larger community. Perceiving that her life as well as the martyr's is connected to the black community, Meridian now sees the necessity to kill for the revolution. In this way, Meridian finds new strength to kill, the capacity that was missing in her before. However, she vacillates in her decision to kill. It is not until she has acknowledged the necessity and capacity in herself to kill for the collective freedom that she finds a more congenial role for the revolution. It is not her role to be the

“killer.” Instead, she will be the “singer” of the old songs that support and encourage the radical revolutionaries :

... perhaps it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries—those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black and therefore go right ahead—and when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experience of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul. If I can only do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all. (pp. 205-206)

Meridian realizes the significance of her role to inherit the legacy of the past. She takes the responsibility of transmitting the old songs which come from the voices of oral history to posterity. Her role is to complement the “missing part” in the revolution which is indispensable for social change. She is now a “part” of a larger circle, the revolution.

Meridian has found her identity. She has finally achieved wholeness as a human being. Her self-realization not only liberates her from the feeling of inadequacy as a revolutionary but also gives her the strength for renewal. The new birth of self is indicated by “the soft wool of her newly grown hair” (p.227). Her new hair parallels the growth of a tiny branch from the gigantic tree stump, Sojourner. Metaphorically speaking, Meridian is the tiny sprout from the trunk of Sojourner, her roots. Meridian’s realization of self influences other characters such as Truman. At the end of the novel, Meridian passes on the idea of quest for wholeness to Truman. After Meridian leaves and goes back to the rural blacks to help them register to vote, Truman climbs into her sleeping bag, puts on her cap she has discarded, and begins to live in her cell-like room, being ready to undertake the quest for self

which Meridian has been struggling with. Fitting himself into Meridian's sleeping bag in her former room, Truman imagines that the process of self-discovery extending to other people around him: "He had a vision of Anne-Marion herself arriving, lost, someday, at the door, which would remain open" (p. 228). Though it is only a vision at the moment, if he discovers himself at some time in the future, his quest for wholeness might prompt other's, just as Meridian's quest has inspired his. If his quest is completed, he will be willing to pass on the sleeping bag and the "cell," properties identified with Meridian or symbolizing "loneliness," to the person in search of one's identity. The sleeping bag can be interpreted as a "cocoon," a stage of development. Thus the novel ends with Truman replacing Meridian. He takes over Meridian's quest for wholeness. By making the end of the novel the beginning of another such quest, the text implies another cyclical pattern which integrally corresponds with the overall circular movement of the novel.

Meridian's completion of self then, has prompted other characters such as Truman to take up the quest for wholeness. Meridian takes on the definition of "magnetic meridian." She is "a carefully located meridian from which secondary or guide meridians may be constructed" (p. xi). The greater "circle" in Meridian incites the completion of smaller "circles" within other characters. Moreover, one of these smaller "circles" she influences may become the "magnetic meridian" and induce more "circles." It is symbolized in Truman who sees the vision of Anne-Marion visiting him to begin her pilgrimage for wholeness or to complete her "circle."

Alice Walker has characterized Meridian as a complex fusion of opposites. Meridian is both strong and weak. She understands the importance of nonviolence as well as violence. She has no consistent definition. Walker attempts to break the narrow stereotyped images applied to black women. There are two sepa-

rate labels black women are stuck with: one is too idealistic, and the other is too negative. She maintains that black women writers including herself do not depict black women of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating any kind of hardship, never having fears, weaknesses and insecurities.⁹ Meridian herself says that she is not “Superwoman.” Sometimes the personality of black women is totally disregarded. Most black men who participated in the Civil Rights Movement did not regard the black women co-workers as equals. The black women activists rarely left their names on the history of black liberation. Therefore, Walker attempts to replace a “superwoman” with extreme strength by a true revolutionary with flaws, who is powerful as well as powerless. She also tries to bring to light a black woman revolutionary whose personality and existence have been ignored in black literature and black history. Walker thinks that the truth about any problem will be revealed only after considering it synthetically :

I believe that the truth about any subject only comes when all the sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the *missing parts* of the other writer's story. And the *whole* story is what I'm after. (my italics)¹⁰

Walker recognizes that it is her role to write a story that complements the “missing parts.” She is always searching for “wholeness,” the complete “circle.”

Walker has written four novels. Though each novel complements the part that is “missing” in other novels, the four novels have something in common with each other. Most of the main characters become “whole” as a human being like Meridian: Celie in *The Color Purple*, Lissie, Fanny, Carlotta, Arveyda, and Suwelo in *The Temple of My Familiar*. Some characters do not achieve completeness of being but at least attempt to complete “circular” wholeness: Grange and Ruth in *The Third Life of*

Grange Copeland. The harmonious relationships between black men and women can also be compared to "circles": Celie reconciles with her husband, and they even become good friends. The two married couples in *The Temple of My Familiar* find a new way for husband and wife to live together. The circular image recurrent in *Meridian* permeates other novels. It might be said that *Meridian* provides an archetypal circle that can be applied to other works of Walker.

V

The circular plot movement in *Meridian* is intergrally connected to the circular development of the protagonist Meridian. Just as the plot of the novel moves backward in order to move forward, so too does the protagonist understand that she is part of the past as an individual as well as part of a group. Meridian's past, the history of her maternal ancestors, and legends of black women are interwoven in the text in the form of flashbacks. Meridian becomes "whole," or finds her identity not only because she perceives the significance of the past but also because she discovers her roles in society. Meridian's self-realization inspires other characters to undertake their quest for wholeness. The "circle" completed in Meridian creates more "circles" around her. Her influence is not only limited to her close friends. Meridian also has a great influence on the people in her community. People influenced by Meridian transform themselves. Each person struggles to find one's role in society, to become "whole" as a human being. Thus many "circles" are constructed around Meridian who stands at the "center" of her community. But it is also true that "anywhere is the center of the world,"¹¹ as Black Elk comments. One of the "circles" around Meridian that is to be completed by Truman may possibly incite another "circle," which testifies to his possibility of standing at the "center." The accumulation of "circles" around Meridian will eventually transform society. It

will complete the “nation’s hoop” which Black Elk laments to have been broken and realize the black “people’s dream,” because each “circle” is one of many “circles” that complete a “whole circle.” Meridian, who parallels the sacred tree Sojourner, a shelter and a symbol of oral and musical black tradition, stands at the “center” of the “whole hoop.” Black Elk concisely describes Meridian and the novel with :

Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. . . . I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle . . . and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children.¹²⁾

NOTES

- 1) Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks* (1932 ; rpt., New York : Pocket Book, 1972), p. 230, quoted in Alice Walker, *Meridian* (New York : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. x. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- 2) John F. Callahan explains, “Walker uses Black Elk’s words to announce the political and spiritual desolation that must be overcome in the lives of individuals and society.” See John F. Callahan, *In the African-American Grain : The Pursuit of Voice in Twentieth Century Black Fiction* (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 217.
- 3) Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists : The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (Westport : Greenwood Press, 1980), p. 207.
- 4) Deborah E. McDowell, “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism,” *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London : Virago Press, 1986), p. 194.
- 5) Karen F. Stein, “*Meridian* : Alice Walker’s Critique of Revolution,” *Black American Literature Forum* 20 (Spring-Summer 1986), 132.
- 6) Melvin Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness : Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 103.
- 7) Christian, p.221.

- 8) Alice Walker, *Living by the Word* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), p. 63.
- 9) Walker says, "I've been hacking away at that stereotype for years, and so have a good many other black women writers," with *Meridian* in mind. See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. 324.
- 10) Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, p. 49.
- 11) Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 38, quoted in Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 187.
- 12) Quoted in Campbell, p. 187.