

Meridian: activism in literature



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Activism is crucial in advocating or impeding social constructs, ultimately resulting in transforming and redefining the nation. It has been present throughout history, playing a major role in ending slavery, opposing racism, defending worker rights, and many other global concerns (Martin). Literature can be recognized as a highly influential form of activism, as it is fundamental in terms of imagining diverging realities and also serves as a platform for critical thinking. In her novel, *Meridian*, Alice Walker depicts a dichotomous world in which she harmoniously combines personal and political issues through her portrayal of the civil rights movement. By emphasizing the concepts of idealism, the interdependence between past and present, as well as individual transformation, Walker is successful in justifying literature as a form of social advocacy. Literary activism is central in the text, as it attempts to rectify the ruptures within racial stigmatization and reconstruct an alternative black perspective, thus establishing a significant defense in African American freedom.

Activist and author Alice Walker is known for expressing her opinions regarding racial inequality, and often enacts these concerns through her writing. As explicitly outlined in her text, *Meridian*, Walker focuses on specific themes, each deterring from the segregation that, for years, overshadowed the lives of African Americans. The novel can also, in some aspects, substitute as an autobiography, as Walker uses *Meridian* to mirror some of her own life occurrences (raised in Georgia, young pregnancy, etc.) and furthermore, *Meridian*'s family to voice her desire to stop racial oppression (Stein). Within the text, she establishes a correlation between the past and present, strategically exposing the unethicity and illegitimacies behind

discrimination. Effectively depicted through the beliefs of Meridian's father, it is evident that Walker admires and respects African American people and furthermore, recognizes the prejudices with which they were faced. She therefore constructs and frames activism throughout her text, implementing an influential defense against oppression.

In her text, *Fiction as Restriction: Self-binding in New Ethical Theories of the Novel*, literary ethicist, Dorothy Hale, argued that reading evokes a consideration of different perspectives within the reader, thus leading to more objective decision-making in reality (Cosgrove). Not only is reading fundamental in terms of imagining diverging realities, but it can also serve as a platform for critical thinking – a vital element in the foundations of activism.

By exposing the reader to the living conditions forced upon African Americans in the 1960s, Walker is not only educating her readers historically, but she is also sharing the experiences known to those suppressed by cultural differences. Through emphasizing themes such as violence, oppression and stigmatization, she reveals past concerns that plagued our nation. The reader, often aware of such facts, leaves with an understanding and sense of empathy towards African Americans (Cook-Lynn). By successfully evoking an emotional response within the reader, Walker continues to effectively exhibit activism throughout her writing.

Meridian conveys the lives of a younger generation striving to end racial oppression by challenging institutional stigmatization that dominated the 1960s. Through protests, sit-ins and other revolt techniques, Meridian and

other activists looked to elicit an attitude adjustment among segregationist conventions that governed the lives of African Americans. As many of their goals and values were shared with those of the civil rights movement, they ultimately found gratification in supporting it. Many of these young activists shared the common goal in shaping a more positive outlook on cultural diversity and are therefore recognized as the protagonists of the novel. Walker emphasizes their desire for equality; further persuading her readers to want the same.

Within the text, activists aimed to challenge idealism and shatter stigmatization, ultimately putting an end to racial discrimination. Walker establishes interdependence between past and present, often transferring the reader's focus between the two. This is used as an approach to investigate the lives and perspectives of those from the past, as they constructed the present. For example, the serpent mound is a historical symbol within the novel that doubles as an integral affiliation between Meridian, her father and their ancestors. It exemplifies African American experience and serves as a reminder to appreciate and furthermore, learn from the past:

“ They've been a part of it, we've been a part of it, everybody's been a part of it for a long time” (Walker).

Walker emphasizes the concept of human experience and hinders at the idea of racial diversity, suggesting that society shares a common history, whether that may be of freedom or of suffering. The interconnection between past and present is crucial in the success of promoting activism within her writing,

as she is attempting to elicit critical thinking within her readers. Walker emphasizes a need for change, suggesting that our beliefs and values within the present time can ultimately affect the lives of future generations:

“ And so it was that one day in the middle of April in 1960 Meridian Hill became aware of the past and present of the larger world” (Walker).

The mound’s symbolic significance drastically shifts when it is taken over by the government and made into a park that bans African Americans from entering. This vital tie to the past is quickly severed, as the symbol’s historical importance becomes seemingly irrelevant. Such irony is used to evoke a sense of compassion within the reader, forcing them to re-evaluate traditional stigmatization and understand the importance of cultural ancestry. Meridian can therefore be read as an effort to mend the breaks within racial oppression by re-contextualizing the past, in hopes of shaping a new outlook on cultural diversity.

Meridian Hill longed for a sense of direction and therefore set out on a quest for personal transformation by turning to the civil rights movement. Walker utilizes this journey for self-discovery as a method of symbolizing the political activity of the 1960s, especially those emulating existing power structures:

“ The novel points out that the Civil Rights Movement often reflected the oppressiveness of patriarchal capitalism. Activists merely turned political rhetoric to their own ends while continuing to repress spontaneous individuality. To overcome this destructiveness, Walker reaches for a new

definition of revolution. Her hope for a just society inheres not merely in political change, but in personal transformation” (Stein).

Upon joining the revolution, Meridian must take an oath, swearing to both die and kill for the cause. Hesitant towards such extensive dedication, the group became inimical towards Meridian and ultimately, rejected her. It is arguable that, here, Walker is mirroring the exact power systems that these rebels are trying to eliminate and is therefore contradicting her goal of putting an end to discrimination (Martin). However, she is instead enforcing a non-violent approach to do so:

“ He...wondered if Meridian knew that the sentence of bearing the conflict in her own soul which she had imposed on herself—and lived through—must now be borne in terror by all the rest of them” (Walker).

Working and living among indigent communities, Meridian emerges as a capable and determined young woman. This can be greatly accredited to the struggles she was forced to overcome along her journey to self-awareness. She finds strength within her courage and realizes that big changes can start within the self. Throughout Meridian, Walker reconstructs her views towards activism and replaces the notion of innovation with the more positive theme of transformation. Readers can appreciate the non-violent form of advocacy that Walker promotes throughout her text and furthermore, admire her for it.

Despite the premise of eliciting an emotional response within the reader, the text must also be seen as an ethical fabrication created and strategically used to promote Walker’s anti-oppressive beliefs. Writers make conscious decisions regarding the contents of their work, and are therefore responsible

for what sorts of realities they portray throughout their writing. In his review, *Teaching James and the Ethics of Fiction: A Conversation on The Spoils of Poynton*, literary ethicist, James Phelan, argues, “ the ethics of reading involves some dialogic relation between the reader’s values and those of the text” (Phelan). Most literature subjects the reader to some degree of moral engagement, however, one has the choice to either support or oppose the actions and attitudes within the novel. Discrepancies are not uncommon between a reader’s values as well as those depicted within a novel. For example, readers might not necessarily agree with the lack of commitment Meridian demonstrated when she was incapable of killing for the revolution. However, this can, on the other hand, be acknowledged as a commendable quality.

By altering between the past and present, Walker extends multiple perspectives regarding the concerns of racial segregation. It is ultimately the reader who determines whether or not they will allow themselves to emotionally engage with the text:

“...to open a novel is to open oneself to a type of decision-making that is itself inherently ethical. For the new ethicists, the novel demands of each reader a decision about her own relation to the imaginative experience offered by novels: Will I submit to the alterity that the novel allows? An affirmative answer launches the novel reader into a transactional relation with another agent, an agent defined by its Otherness from the reader” (Hale).

If the reader comes away understanding and agreeing with Walker's activist opinions, they are submitting themselves to a viewpoint other than that of their own, thus confirming her success in advocating and effectively promoting her beliefs. By using literature as a form of activism to voice the inconsistencies within our society, Walker is forming an alternate black perspective.

Meridian, one of many pieces in activist literature, ratifies a critical defense in African American freedom. The text acts as a catalyst for public recognition, introducing them to a widespread of global issues. Walker installs a strong sense of ambivalence concerning traditional stigmatization, crushing the sort of hierarchy system that governed the 1960s.

Literary activism is fundamental in Walker's novel, as it derives on the recognition that, internal thinking is connected to external change. Literature can be recognized as an instrument used to promote activism. Walker skilfully combines personal and political concerns in her text, chronicling a young woman's journey to self-discovery. Through stressing the concepts of idealism, the correlation between past and present, as well as personal transformation, Walker is successful in justifying literature as a form of social advocacy. The text solidifies the ongoing moral that, true change relies on individual growth. As Anne Frank once said, "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world." Although the novel is targeted on the 1960s, the messages enforced throughout the text are of ethics, love and loss, making Walker's text a timeless one.

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