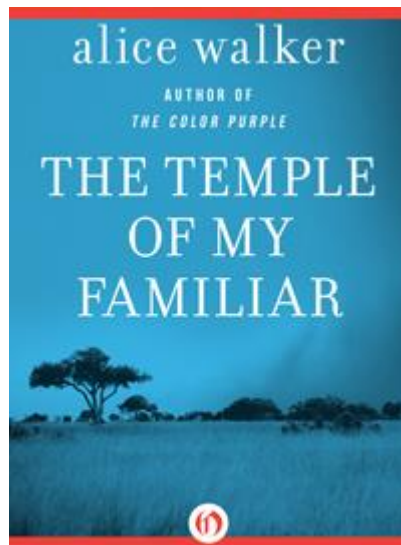


## Envisioning the Past and Venerating Ancestors in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*

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### Abstract

African American women writers are aware of the displacement and fragmentation that afflict African American individuals and so they turn to re-elaborate and reconstitute the influence of their African cultures. They use their imagination to reconstruct the omitted past. For African American artists, the past and the present are interdependent. Their works have the potential of healing any individual or collective identity through the remembrance of the ancestors. History should be reconstructed in such a way as to be a resource for the present. The works of African American women writers function as bridges between history and myth, because they join present experiences with those of the past, affirming cultural continuity and instructing new generations in survival techniques which are required for spiritual and moral growth and for the achievement of wholeness. Ancestors are a collective repository of wisdom that provides direction and inspiration to establish moral and ethical

standards as precedents of the race. This paper attempts to present the ways in which the author demonstrates the facts mentioned here in her unique way.

**Key words:** Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*, ancestors, heritage, spiritual conversion

## **Introduction**

To a writer, literature is the noblest and most dignified form of resistance. The writer is like a spiritual healer, a Shaman who resurrects the dead from their lifelessness. She redeems them from the “sin of omissions”, reinvigorates their existence and helps them ‘survive whole’ through the concept of memory. In her interview with Claudia Dreifus, Walker explains the New Age quality in her writing and her ideas:

What I’m doing is literarily trying to reconnect us to our ancestors. All of us. I’m really trying to do that because I see that ancient past as the future, that the connection that was original is a connection: if we can affirm it in the present, it will make a different future. Because it’s really fatal to see yourself as separate. You have to feel, I think, more or less equal and valid in order for the whole organism to feel healthy. (31)



**Alice Walker**

Courtesy: <http://deepsouthmag.com/2013/02/alice-walker-through-the-years/>

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In “Saving the Life That Is Our Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist’s Life,” Walker argues that “What is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life, is the larger perspective. Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass in one’s glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying theme through immerse diversity” (*In Search of My Mother’s Gardens* 5). One of the valuable gifts Walker gained in discovering her literary ancestors was a sense of continuity with the past, a thread that bound her to a community of black artisans.

### **Hurston’s Writing as Model**



**Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)**  
Courtesy: <http://zoranealehurston.com/>

As a writer, Walker discovered Zora Neale Hurston’s literary works and her efforts to preserve the cultural heritage that Hurston shared provided the model Walker had been searching for. Walker’s anger at being deprived of appropriate models during the years she was growing into her art made her discover the works of Hurston. She was largely denied the aid of black literary models. Through excavation of Hurston’s works, the link between the past and the present was accomplished, and that became the means of achieving continuity of time. In Hurston, Walker found a kindred spirit with whom she shared a concern for the survival of black people and their culture. Though Hurston’s genius was not recognized

during her lifetime, it nurtured the “racial health: a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings”. (*In Search of My Mother’s Gardens* 85)

### **Novel Functions as Spiritual Conversion**

Walker’s fiction functions as a spiritual conversion as it unearths hidden histories and continuities in African and Black cultural production, without limiting itself to notions of gender. Her fiction is about recovery of women, family, community, spirituality, stressing balance and aiming for collective and personal transformation. As a writer, activist and womanist, Walker has directed her energies to the exposure of the richness in the Black community, particularly in relation to its women; moreover, she has emphasized the necessity of understanding one’s past so as to be able to pass it on to future generations. All her belief about memory and one’s relationship to the past seem to converge in *The Temple of My Familiar*.

### ***The Temple of My Familiar* a Universal Novel**

*The Temple of My Familiar* cuts across race, gender, religion and nation because “becoming whole through recollection” is as inevitable as breath for men and women of all ethnicities throughout the world. Walker emphasizes the importance of the collective past for the individual. The plots are characterized “by a transcendence of time and space and place”. (Bates 175) The characters’ severance from their individual pasts prevents them from becoming whole. Their dissociation deprives them from becoming whole, because they have forgotten their kinship with the entire creation of animals, plants and humans. The protagonists of the novel are victims of amnesia, an infirmity that prevents them from a meaningful existence - “a survival whole.”

### **Remember, Remember, Remember!**

Walker, in the year 1983 bought a Guatemalan shawl of many colours, which was an old piece of red and blue hand woven cotton cloth, very faded and with a number of holes but supple and strong. There were Spanish words printed over and over on this cloth--*Recuerda* which meant “Remember.” Walker started wondering about what she was to remember and soon realized that she had to remember the condition and fate of the people, of the women especially, who made the cloth. Then she began to learn Spanish, to remember more accurately, the women who produced the cloth. Similarly, Walker tries to convey in *The*

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*Temple of My Familiar* that every individual should remember their ancestors who made their history. However old and faded the past may be, the knowledge and acknowledgement of the past adds strength to one's present life.

As Silvia del Pilar Borrego says, "Remembrance is a textual acknowledgement of the spiritual history that African American women writers attempt to recover and reintegrate from what has been lost in the African American collective historical past". (11) Walker believes that one's personality is so much a product of the collective past that it combines diverse and contradicting elements. As heirs of our ancestors, we are connected to the collective plane of history. No part of the past should be excluded so that the complete knowledge should heal them completely. Barbara Christian points out, "Walker's poetry, fiction and essays always focus to some extent on the major characters' perceptions of their past as crucial to their personal transformation in the present and the possibility of change in the future". (72)

### **Overlapping Histories of Three Couples**

*The Temple of My Familiar* revolves around the overlapping histories and conversations of three couples. Walker depicts three main relationships: Carlotta, a Latin American woman who had to flee her country, and Arveyda, a rock star; Lissie, a goddess who has lived hundreds of lives and Hal, her life-long companion; and Fanny, the free-spirited African woman and Suwelo, a man who teaches American history. Throughout the narrative, these characters touch one another's lives, directly or indirectly. As David Nicholson's summarizes:

There are several couples: Carlotta (daughter of a widowed Latin American refugee) and Arveyda (a musician reminiscent of the rock star Prince); Hal and Lissie, two older people originally from the South Carolina Sea Islands and now living in Baltimore; and Suwelo (a professor of American history who has adopted an African name) and Fanny, his former wife, a woman in search of herself. (3)

### **The Loss and Restoration of the Past**

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Walker's characters in *The Temple of My Familiar* have lost important parts of their past and they struggle to restore the past in order to become whole. Walker emphasizes that the past should not be past but it must be passed from generation to generation because it is the key to transformation and the key that unlocks the mystery and the source of being whole. The experiences of their kinship in the past are the key to the metamorphosis which makes the individual realize his or her own self. It is the key to existence. "Remembrance is the key to redemption," (*The Temple of My Familiar* 334) the novel's epigraph, is an inscription on a World War II memorial and is the key note around which the characters are placed. The past is enormously important, for only by knowing the past one can have a meaningful present. Lillie P. Howard states, "To achieve wholeness, they each must journey back through the past to pick up (retrieve) those pieces of themselves that they have lost". (142)

### **Miss Lissie's Reincarnation**

The themes of racism, sexism and most importantly the history of black race are effectively conveyed through Miss Lissie's centuries of reincarnation in *The Temple of My Familiar*. The novel is divided into six parts with animal imagery as peacock, serpent, owl, turtle and the lion. It has at least one hundred embedded stories, most of them retold from the past. It moves from America, Europe, Africa and the primal worlds. The events are set around the globe and throughout human history – from Africa, both ancient and modern, to Latin America and the recent American past. The novel covers a 500,000 year period, transcending time, and space and place. Walker describes it as "a romance of the last 500,000 years". (*The Temple of My Familiar* Jacket Cover) Along the way, there are visits with whites, blacks, men, women and animals, retelling the stories of mankind. The characters achieve a potential for growth through their experiences of listening to others' stories that further on will re-connect them with other human beings and with their environment.

Walker creates the numerous-times re-incarnated Lissie, primary protagonist and resident of the African continent, who traces the history of oppression: the time she was raped and mutilated as a slave; the time she pleased old men as a harem resident; and the time she was burned at the stake as a witch. Miss Lissie's subsequent past lives include a pygmy, a lion and a white male exiled because of his white skin. "Conversations between characters focus on spiritual connections past and present and a plea for people of African heritage to rediscover a lost spirituality and recognize its value". (Bates 103)

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The novel opens with a description of how the white patriarchal urban world encroaches on the rural, matriarchal, native South American community where Carlotta's mother Zedé grew up. It also reveals how the community's culture had to withstand the dominant culture of the whites. Zedé's mother makes a living sewing feather capes and headdresses that are worn by participants in "traditional village festivals". (*The Temple of My Familiar* 3) When these festivals are forbidden, the elder Zedé makes the garments for a "cold, little gringo blonde". (4) Later, after the younger Zedé escapes to San Francisco, she continues to make the headdresses and capes, now for gays and artists of the 60's.

### **Artists as Messengers: Responsibility to Unite the World**

Arveyda is named after "a bar of soap from India". Arveyda is an ancient Indian system of health that is concerned with the type of spiritual balance pursued by the characters in the novel. Arveyda also seems to have a head-start over the other characters in his quest for enlightenment. His mother Katherine Degos, is a forceful, active woman, although she neglects him. Later, he receives guidance from a Jewish immigrant who helps nurture his love of music. Arveyda's power as a musician is undeniable: "Arveyda and his music were medicine, and seeing or hearing him, people knew it". (24) Although music has brought him physical comfort and personal fulfillment, Arveyda seems to be thrown off his path when he finds himself attracted to Carlotta's mother, Zedé. Arveyda is a sort of Shaman, whose music is "medicine". People "flock to him as once they might have to priests". (24) To heal others, and help them for their communion, he should be whole himself and should be knowledgeable and acclimatized to his past. Consequently, Arveyda meets his aunt to know about his mother. Arveyda reflects that though the aunt gives such deleterious remarks about his mother, "each of her words against my mother struck me as a blow, as if I myself were still a child. But, oddly enough, as she raved, I felt closer and closer to my mother". (392)

### **Carlotta**

Carlotta is a young and self-conscious woman, married to Arveyda, the singer. She finds that her husband has betrayed her. When Arveyda admits his affair with Zedé, Carlotta feels "emptied [. . .] of knowledge. Once again, as when she was a small child, she felt she knew nothing" (*The Temple of My Familiar* 27). She takes up teaching women's literature to support herself and her two children. She suffers disillusionment and hates men, but her anger does not nourish her. Through Arveyda, she eventually learns about her mother's past—the

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identity of her father, the culture she is born into and the events that led them to be brought to America. Like the other characters in *The Temple of My Familiar*, Carlotta needs to know about her past—her mother and father’s past, to counter the imbalance in her life. Before this, she has to forgive both Arveyda and her mother. As long as she thinks they were disloyal to her, forgiveness is impossible. Only after forgiving Arveyda, and indeed all of mankind, could she begin to be at peace with herself.

Arveyda and Zedé, Carlotta’s mother and Arveyda journey to South America to find Zedé’s past. Eventually, Zedé stays on and becomes a priestess, but Arveyda knows he must return, not to help raise his children, but to help bridge the gap between mother and daughter. He does this by singing about Carlotta’s birthplace, her childhood and eventually, her mother’s feelings of love and guilt. He realizes that “artists [...] were merely messengers. On them fell the responsibility for uniting the world”. (*The Temple of My Familiar* 124) Walker tries to emphasize that interdependency, growth and the realization of the self of the individual are possible when the bond between the mother and daughter is healthy. Walker clearly points out that her own ambitions and responsibility as a writer is “fostering stronger positive bonds between all mothers and daughters and between members of the larger community of women”. (Worsham 118)

Meanwhile, Carlotta too subdues her emotions, composes herself, and has an affair with Suwelo, Fanny’s husband. She appears too feminine, wears “three-inch heels . . . and “sweaters that followed every curve of her luscious body...short skirts. Make up, Earrings, False eyelashes sometimes”. (*The Temple of My Familiar* 246) For him, she is “just a body” (249). Carlotta feels too humiliated to share her pain of betrayal. But Suwelo drops Carlotta when Fanny, his wife comes back from Africa. Carlotta’s wound caused by Arveyda is lacerated more by Suwelo. She feels, “He was an episode in my life . . . and he did drop me - I was so destroyed, I was angry enough to kill”. (381)

After hearing Arveyda’s song, Carlotta wears a necklace made from the red parrot feather earring her mother had given her, the red parrot feather which her father had in his ears which was passed on to Zedé for Carlotta, along with the three pigeon-egg-size stones her father protected. “It was after she began wearing the new necklace that she started, for the first time in years, to dream”. (200) Carlotta has rediscovered her creative roots. Through

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Arveyda, Carlotta comes to know about her father, who as an Indian slave was called as “Jesus.” He protected three stones sacred to the village which he believed should be “kept”. (72) “He fully believed that if the stones were not kept, his people, the Krapokechuan or ‘human beings’ would remain dispersed forever, and never again find a home. Because where the stones were was their home”. (72) The guards murdered him in a ghastly manner when they found him making love with Zedé and shut her in a hut along with the dead body of Jesus. She spent countless days and nights in the hut with the body of the man whom she slept with, screaming for help. One night the tribesmen of Jesus rescued her and she eventually fled to a school run by “gringos”. She escaped later to the United States along with Carlotta with the help of a rich girl, Mary Ann Haverstock.

### **Shaman’s Role**

Arveyda fulfills his function as a Shaman by restoring the love between the mother and the daughter, reconciling and reconnecting them and making Carlotta whole. Through his influence, she swathes herself with her past rather than ignoring it. Forgiveness redeems and the past makes her revival whole. When she hears the story of her grandmother’s pipe and chimes, she decides to become a bell chime player. In Arveyda’s studio, she shows Suwelo her instruments - wind chimes of all shapes, sizes, colors and descriptions from all over the world, which she plays with a hardwood stick. She lives in Arveyda’s guest house, down a path and across a ravine from the main house, and she is as happy as she has ever been.

Carlotta and Arveyda have to return to the way of life of their ancestors, a way of life in which neither sex seeks domination over the other and one in which neither sex must surrender its spirituality to the other. The couple chooses to live apart and free, in order to live in harmony. At the end of the novel, Carlotta and Arveyda are still married, yet maintaining separate residences.

### **Remembrance and Re-memory of the Past**

Miss Lissie is willing to remember and “remembers everything.” Re-memory brings the stories of her past. She is able to dream, imagine, remember or construct the past. For Walker, these memories and dream memory are implements to voice to the world about history, as remembered and lived in African American experiences. Her incarnations in different bodies and times have helped her to understand the existence of past, present and

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future, as she herself declares connectedness “to all three planes – past, present, future – of life”. (*The Temple of My Familiar* 196) “Miss Lissie’s memory allows her to recount the multiple stories of her successive pasts as white or black women or men that extend in a revisionary fashion through the whole history of mankind. Miss Lissie’s ever-present ancestor’s voice and memory extend to a distant past, where humans and animals lived in harmony as familiars”. (Gallo and Durán 118)

### **Remembering the Collective Past**

Miss Lissie, the ancestral storyteller emphasizes the importance of the past to the reconstruction of repressed cultural identity. Miss Lissie suffers from her own brand of racism. She boasts of the fact that in every one of her incarnations, she has been fortunate enough to have been a black woman.

Looking back over her collective past, Miss Lissie realizes that she can recall a few times when she was at peace. One such time was when she was a pygmy in Africa’s ancient past. As a pygmy, she viewed the apes in the jungle as her cousins. The peace-loving and gentle apes are superior to their rather loud and contentious human counterparts. Family unity was an important element of simian life, while men and women were grouped and segregated in the human community. Miss Lissie remembers, “In those days of which I am speaking, people met other animals in much the same way people today meet each other. You were sharing the same neighbourhood, after all. You used the same water, You ate the same food, You sometimes found yourself peering out of the same cave waiting for a downpour to stop”. (*The Temple of My Familiar* 361) Santosh Kumari expounds upon Miss Lissie’s ancient society: “Human society along with the animals, their familiars, constituted a sense of mutual trust. Fraternity and earnestness permeated all of their life, and harmony prevailed in the common coexistence. All were amicable and enjoyed solidarity and rejuvenation”. (18) Miss Lissie is disillusioned with the change that has come over the present society with its sexual and racial discrimination and the avaricious men with their patriarchal system.

Miss Lissie remembers and recalls breaking with her tribe and taking up permanent residence among the apes because she and her mate chose to live together and as a couple, raise their children, a sort of cohabitation unheard of among human beings during this era, but one that gradually came into vogue for a time, as Miss Lissie explains to Suwelo: “It was **Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 14:10 October 2014  
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this way of living that gradually took hold in all the groups of people living in the forest, at least for a very long time, until the idea of ownership. . . came into human arrangements”.  
(*The Temple of My Familiar* 86)

### **Pattern of Freedom**

The pattern of freedom which Walker recommends is a system of living separately and not living together. When a man and woman live together, the man always wishes to own women and children. Men were stronger and women were weak from childbearing. Consequently, men wish to dominate women and children and always have an urge to prove their control over them. Walker’s history of the world as traced through both early African and South American characters of the novel records a pattern of living with freedom. She distinguishes the times when men and women could and did live together in harmony and the times when they lived apart to maintain harmony. When men and women live together man needs to dominate woman and this recurs periodically in history whereas the two sexes enter a period of uneasy cohabitation.

### **Effect of the Loss of Ownership**

Walker believes that the loss of ownership was the consequence of an early period when men and women had tried to live together. Walker holds the view that men and women should only visit each other and not live together. In her novel, *The Color Purple*, at the end she makes Albert and Celie live as friends and not as man and wife tied by the bond of marriage. Similarly, in this novel, Walker wants the couple Fanny and Suwelo to return to the old way of visiting and not living together. Men will not have the urge to prove their control when women live separately.

Miss Lissie is an embodiment of wisdom and knowledge of human history. Miss Lissie is probably the most memorable character possessing the unique power to incarnate successively, lifetime after lifetime. In Miss Lissie’s memory most of the past events are quite vivid, but some belonged to times so long past that she calls them “dream memories”. In such a dream memory, she was not a woman, but a lion, a woman’s familiar. Then man’s jealousy and his need for dominion changes the pattern of freedom. The animals shared their warmth of the nightly fire with the women. They grew up together and shared the favourite spots in the forest. But this way of life was rapidly ending when she grew into a fully grown

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big lion and when the men's camp and women's had merged. Then they both lost their freedom. Then women were told what should and what should not be done and became emotionally dependent on the individual man "by whom man's law now decreed they must have all their children, lost their wildness, that quality of homey ease on the earth that they shared with the rest of the animals. . . .In the merger, the men asserted themselves, alone, as the familiars of women". (*The Temple of My Familiar* 367)

Miss Lissie regrets the loss of the friendship that she, as a lion, had with women, pitying the poor women left alone with no fellow creatures but men. Still, she admits that she was relieved to escape the "eternity of strife" that men and women merged were fated to undergo. "In consorting with man, as he had become, woman was bound to lose her dignity, her integrity. It was a tragedy. But it was a fate lions were not prepared to share". (*The Temple of My Familiar* 368)

### **Hiding the Feline Past**

Miss Lissie has kept this part of her past a secret from her husband Hal, because he has an irrational but debilitating fear of cats. Her many past lives were captured on film by a photographer. She appeared to be a different woman in every picture that he took, even to her height and skin colour. She destroyed a photograph which would reveal the truth she was trying to hide from Hal. In contrast, Miss Lissie never had to hide any part of herself or herself from Suwelo's uncle Rafe. She says, "He loved the total me. None of my selves was hidden from him, and he feared none of them". She concludes, "So, loving Rafe and being loved by Rafe was the experience of many a lifetime and very... loved me whole heartedly, as a goddess which I was". (*The Temple of My Familiar* 372)

Rafe precedes Hal in death, and at her own death Miss Lissie leaves for Hal a clue to her hidden feline past in the form of five pictures of lions that she has painted. It remains for Suwelo to reveal to Hal the entirety of the woman who was Miss Lissie. Hal weeps to learn that Miss Lissie never felt she could be her whole self with him. He is almost blind by that time. The marriage between Miss Lissie and Hal, in all of its unorthodoxy, is presented as the closest to a fulfilling marriage that exists in the novel. What sustains their love is Hal's unwillingness to destroy in Miss Lissie the wildness of the lioness that he never knew, his understanding that she can never be emotionally dependent on any one man. As he watches

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the suffering she endures bearing their daughter, Lulu, he knows that never again would he cause her such pain. He is there to deliver each of her other children, but he does not father them. After Lulu's birth he never again makes love to Miss Lissie. Theirs is a union of spirit, however, so complete that bodily union becomes insignificant. When each gives Suwelo a self-portrait, the artists' signatures reveal that Hal has painted Miss Lissie's self-portrait and she, his. Such is the closeness of their souls. Walker expounds androgyny through the self-portraits.

### **Suwelo: From Spiritually Void to Valid**

Suwelo is a professor of American history who has never read a book by a woman; and although the first words from him are an admission that “[h]is generation of men had failed women”, (*The Temple of My Familiar* 28), he seems unable and uninterested in doing anything to rectify that situation. “He is also cut off from his personal history, even to the extent that he is uncomfortable bringing a cart to the grocery store, because it reminds him of his mother and grandmother”. (165)

Suwelo goes to Baltimore to sell off the house his great uncle left him. During his stay, he meets his uncle's friends Hal and Lissie. His lessons come from Hal, but even more so from Miss Lissie. “As an academic, a skeptic and a financially stable but spiritually vacant man, Suwelo is a sort of stand-in for the critical reader”. (Sol 396) Gradually, as he hears the stories that revise his personal history, as well as that of the world, Suwelo comes to a new understanding. First, interested in learning more about his Uncle Rafe, Suwelo quickly finds himself listening to stories from Lissie and her husband Hal about their own collective pasts and then to stories from Lissie about history - back to the beginning of human history and about the domination of women by men and of Africans by Europeans. Miss Lissie's posthumous letter to Suwelo tries to make him realize that he is one of the “terribly damaged human beings”. (*The Temple of My Familiar* 354) Miss Lissie awakes him to open the door which he has closed against memory, against the pain. She regrets not having encouraged him to speak to her about his parents. She asks him to recognize whatever he remembers about the father and mother, ‘Marcia and Louis’, how they lived and died, about the accident that orphaned him, the car, the style of the car and so on. Miss Lissie writes, “For really, Suwelo, if our parents are not present in us, consciously present, there is much, very much about ourselves we can never know . . . . And more important, the doors into the ancient past, the

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ancient self, the pre-ancient current of life, remain closed”. (355) Miss Lissie is a spiritual mother who is concerned about the growth of Suwelo and is keen to make him understand that such empathy for the fellow woman and the other women is essential for his own personal growth.

In his affair with Carlotta, Suwelo is in all likelihood, a shallow person. Carlotta describes him as a mere figment of her imagination and Suwelo describes her as a being of ‘no substance.’ But for Fanny, Carlotta’s very substance is pain. Fanny tells Suwelo, “I don’t know what had happened in her life. I sometimes wondered whether you knew anything about her life at all. But each time I worked on her, I was amazed to feel the pain, like waves of ice meeting my hands, the pain of a body recently and repeatedly struck. A body cringing”. (*The Temple of My Familiar* 321) Fanny tells Suwelo that men should have mercy on women and that they should not exploit them as objects. It is his declaration of the power of words, “talking is the very afro-disiac of love”, (322) that brings him to a partial reconciliation with Fanny.

Miss Lissie, however, makes him realize that he must ask Carlotta’s forgiveness, for “it is a sin to behave as if a person whose body you use is a being without substance. ‘Sin’ being denial of another’s reality of who and what she or she actually is. You can still go to her, as you must, for your own growth and ask her forgiveness”. (355) Walker believes that forgiveness redeems. Miss Lissie traces much of Suwelo’s own pain to the fact that he is a fragmented being, in spite of the fact that his name is the same as the “rune for wholeness”. Suwelo has tried to close the doors to his past, close them against memory and pain. In his case, his parents wait behind that closed door. Miss Lissie tells him that it is the memory of his mother’s “abandoned and suffering face” (355) that has made him scared of knowing too much of women’s pain. She further tells that “blocking off what hurts us” (355) does not wall ourselves from pain. Instead the wall prevents growth, which “hurts us more than the pain . . . Walls remain. They grow moss. They are difficult barriers to cross, to get to others, to get to closed-down parts of ourselves”. (355)

Pain deprives Suwelo of words, and he is unable to tell his own stories until the end of the novel. Finally, only with constant support and pressure from Lissie and Hal, Suwelo begins talking about his affair with Carlotta, the breaking of his marriage, and finally the terrible relationship of his parents and the horror of their death in a car accident. By coming

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to terms at last with whom his parents were and by ultimately forgiving their faults, as well as by understanding his own mistakes and misconceptions, Suwelo realizes “one of his functions in assisting Creation in this life” (413) and finally returns some of the help he has received from Hal and Lissie. He even leaves his teaching job to take up carpentry. He is spiritually void and so he needs to hear the stories from the entire past. Miss Lissie’s stories prepare him to accept his imperfections and realize his personal history, that of his parents, his ancestors, that of Uncle Rafe. His redemption is gradual. When Suwelo goes in search of Carlotta for forgiveness, he finds that the female impersonator is most definitely gone. Carlotta knows about her past, forgives her mother and husband, knows her own self and hence is redeemed as well. Her hair is now that of a concentration camp survivor. Gone are her sexy clothes and even her voluptuous curves. Suwelo tells her that she doesn’t even look like a woman any more. “Obviously,” she retorts, “that is how a woman looks”. (398)

### **Rejoining with Greater Intimacy**

At the end of the novel, Suwelo and Carlotta rejoin with an intimacy they never experienced when they approached each other merely as “blind flesh.” Theirs is now an intimacy of the spirit, and Suwelo undergoes a symbolic spiritual rebirth. As Carlotta, her disguises gone, discusses her mother Zedé, he feels that the doors that had barred his own mother from his memory opening a crack. When he is able to talk to Carlotta about his parents, his mother finally walks through that door. Suddenly, he recalls the incident he has shut out of his memory, the incident that has made him long to use woman’s bodies without having to confront the reality of women’s pain. He remembers looking down at the bodies of his parents as they lay in the funeral home after being killed in a car wreck, or as Suwelo calls it, a “people wreck”. (401) Suwelo recalls being in the car time after time, with his drunken father speeding down the road and his mother begging him to let her and her son out. He recalls hating his mother for not trying to get out of their miserable marriage, but as he looks at her lifeless hands with their bloodied and broken nails, he realizes that this last time she at least tried to get out of the car and that his father crashed the car into a tree while trying to stop her.

The image of his father that has always loomed large in Suwelo’s memory is of a man who had been a World War II soldier and had returned having lost “half of one arm and all of his mind”. (403) But after Suwelo tries to think about his parents, the image that is trying to

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get in to the doorway is that of a younger man, one who is not old or drunk, but a handsome young man with two arms. He tells his son, “My name was once Suwelo, too”. (404) Seeing his father young and whole once again allows Suwelo to collect some of the fragments of his own reality and let the door of his past swing open. In consequence, he steps towards ‘surviving whole.’

Where Suwelo’s affair with Carlotta is flawed by their tendency to view one another as “blind flesh,” his relationship with his wife, Fanny, is disrupted by her disturbing habit of falling in love with spirits. Her spirit lover of the moment could be an Indian chief dead for a century, or a spirit that does not even know why or what it is. When Suwelo tries to explain his problem to an impassive Jewish psychiatrist, he stops short of adding that Fanny’s lover does not even have to be a human: “He thought he’d save Fanny’s attachment to trees and whales until he could see further”. (184) When Fanny and Suwelo make love, he is never quite sure who is there. “I’m certainly not, as far as she’s concerned, though she claims otherwise “. (185) Fanny’s distractedness helps him to justify himself when he is unfaithful. When Suwelo compares Fanny with Miss Lissie, he tells Miss Lissie, “You are a spirit that has had many bodies, and you travel through time and space that way . . . Fanny is a body with many spirits shooting off to different realms everyday”. (243) Like Suwelo, Fanny needs to open the locked doors inside her.

### **Fanny and Arveyda**

At the beginning of the novel, Fanny is trapped in an unsatisfying marriage but has access to spiritual nourishment through women in her life. Fanny has access to the spirit world and she describes her meeting with the spirits that “open doors inside me [...] I begin to feel the stirring in myself, the humming of the room and my heart starts to expand with the absolute feeling of bravery, or love, or audacity or commitment.[...] I radiate this expanded light, Happiness”. (185-186)

Fanny is the character who struggles most with racism. She suffers from nightmares where she tries to kill white people and seeks a therapist’s help to find a solution. “It had become like a scale or a web over her eyes. Everywhere she looked, she saw it. Racism turned her thoughts to violence. Violence made her sick”. (294) She tells her therapist about the shining, gold-handled sword that is constantly not in her hand, but in her look and about

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her visions of blond heads rolling into the gutter. Out of fear of the murderer who exists within her, Fanny withdraws as far as possible from human contact, preferring the safer company of her spirit lovers. When Fanny gives a massage to Carlotta, Fanny explains that she left academia to become a masseuse because she needed to touch the bodies of other people, people she might not like, in order to force herself to confront their bodily reality and also their pain. "Otherwise", she says, "I am afraid I might start murdering them". (283) Fanny's anger is not individualized, nor is it directed toward people of colour. Just like Fanny, many characters go through the stage in life when they are traumatized by racism and later try to exclude white people from their lives or suppress the memories. Through a line from "The Gospel According to Shug", a booklet that gives answers to all the characters, the author says: "HELPED are those who strive to give up their anger; their reward will be that in any confrontation their first thoughts will never be of violence or of war". (288)

### **Knowledge of the Past Appeases Fanny's Agitation**

When Fanny's mother, Olivia, thinks that Fanny's anger goes beyond control, she takes the agitated Fanny to Africa to meet the father that she has never known. The father, Ola, knows what it is to take white lives - he has done so in the name of revolution. So he knows firsthand that killing the oppressors does not free one psychologically. His advice to his daughter is, rather, to harmonize her own heart. He knows that she alone can find the means of doing that, and she does so when she is unable to deny the body any longer, but rather to let spirit and flesh come together in a mutually nourishing way. As Sol argues, "[Fanny's] experiences and conversations with her father and also with her half-sister Nzinga connect Fanny to her personal history and culture and allows her to return home with a renewed sense of herself and her spiritual center". (397) Her anger against the whites is subdued and the stories harmonize her relationship with Suwelo. An inner peace pervades her and she chooses to be a masseuse. She attains her wholeness when Arveyda comes face to face with her and her self.

Early in the novel, Suwelo plans to take Fanny to one of Arveyda's concerts, because she listens to his music endlessly, moved by it to a state of ecstasy. At the last moment, Fanny finds herself suddenly paralyzed with fear at the prospect of meeting in the flesh a man, "who created the beauty that was so much what her soul hungered for it made her weep.... 'Isn't Arveyda old?' She asked hopefully. 'I'll wait until he dies or until I do, and

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then.... I will see him”. (*The Temple of My Familiar* 129) Only at the end, when she finally meets Arveyda, Fanny understands her habit of falling in love with people whom she will never meet. She is giving him one of her famous massages when she looks down at his naked back and thinks, “ Is this how people create gods,... she thinks she has always been walking just behind a hundred to a thousand years behind, the people she has found to love and that she has been very careful that their backs were turned. “What would she do if one of them turned around?” (406)

When Arveyda does turn around, aroused by the motion of her hands on his body, their union with one another is a perfect blend of flesh and spirit. Fanny has learned not to deny flesh out of fear of what her anger might lead her to do, but rather to harmonize her own heart and thus to achieve through the union of body and soul psychological wholeness that her thoughts of killing her oppressors would never bring. Arveyda is a fitting partner for her in that he, like the born-again Suwelo, is one of those rare men capable of understanding women’s pain. Thus, Fanny is cured and redeemed from her fear and anger against her oppressors.

### **Insistence on Remembering the Oppressive Past**

Walker insists that the characters should remember the oppressive pasts of their foremothers, for instance, how they were raped and made prostitutes by their slave-holding father or lover. She suggests that by remembering history and the legacy of slavery, connections must be made between the past and the contemporary moment, but only those usable elements of the past must be retained and remembered to ensure the wellness of the present and also the future. And it suffices not if the characters acknowledge their past, but they have to retell their stories to make their redemption complete. The exploring of the past, of their families, of their tribes, of their cultures is important for the individual. The revelation of the past brings the characters to a new understanding of the world and their place in it. Each character has to go through reconciliation with the past, be it painful childhood memories, or their own regrettable mistakes of the past, the betrayal of the loved ones, or the discrimination they faced. Adam Sol observes,

Fanny, Carlotta, Suwelo and Arveyda all need to come to terms with the stories of their parents; they seem to be adrift until they learn where their roots are. But more

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important, they need to retell those stories: Fanny to Suwelo in letters from Africa as well as to her therapist, Suwelo to Hal and Lissie, Carlotta to Fanny and Arveyda, and Arveyda in his music. (396)

### **The Benefits of Remembering**

Walker's characters that are able to recall their past not only help the other characters heal and redeem, but also the readers. The characters are emotionally and spiritually healed, because they understand better the relationship between the past and the present. The characters in *The Temple of My Familiar* are artists in some way and this is an important means for spiritual development. She the elder is a bell chemist and a sewing magician. Zedé sews feather capes and goods. Arveyda is a Shaman musician and Hal a painter. Miss Lissie is a painter and story-teller, Ola is a playwright, Nzinga's mother makes murals in the hut, while Fanny is a masseuse, Suwelo a carpenter, Carlotta like Zedé, a bell chemist.

Zedé, Carlotta's mother, creates art out of pain. In America, she makes and sells intricate traditional feathered capes and jewelry to the bohemians of San Francisco. Carlotta meets her future husband, the rock star Arveyda, through the purchase of one of these capes. When he later has an affair with Zedé, Carlotta turns her pain and passion to music made of chimes and bells. One of the art forms comes from culture, and the other from pain.

Hal is a painter. When he was a child, his father prevented him from creating anything artistic from fear of his son being thought of as a homosexual. He starts painting constantly after his father's decease, perhaps from his past pain. Miss Lissie is photographed in almost every period of her life and the most striking images are those of her with an expression of suffering in her eyes. Finally, Fanny falls in love with Arveyda's music, having never heard him. But, when Suwelo wishes to take to her to the concert, she refuses to go because she fears meeting people, instead she thinks about waiting for Arveyda to die and become a spirit. His art gives her a complex feeling of both pain and pleasure.

Zedé remembers her experiences in a South American Indian village and redeems her youth, family and the stories which inspire her son-in-law and lover, Arveyda, to create music. Carlotta, remembers the tribal stones and sacred red parrot feathers which redeem her from her University post and enable her to assume her grandmother's occupation of crafting the bells and music which speaks her story.

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Alice Walker's characters become resilient, healthy and whole once they acknowledge their ancestors' voice. Recognizing one's past is recurrent in Walker's works. In *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Walker illustrates the prominence of ancestry and heritage to her work and life. She excavates the deliberately omitted works of Zora Neale Hurston and recognizes her as her literary foremother. Revealing a very personal account of her exciting view of ancestral presence, Walker depicts:

I gathered up the historical and psychological threads of the life my ancestors lived, and in the writing of it I felt joy and strength and my own continuity . . . that wonderful feeling writers get sometimes, not very often, of being with a great many people, ancient spirits, all very happy to see me consulting and acknowledging them and eager to let me know, through the joy of their presence, that indeed, I am not alone. (453)

## Conclusion

Bonnie Braedlin remarks that *The Temple of My Familiar* was applauded for its development of ideas and themes which were introduced in her fiction and essays - "its castigation of white and male oppression, its valorization of African American and female identity, and its emphasis on the importance of community and female friendship". (47) He further remarks:

Her retelling of the past exposes the dark underbelly of white colonial history—the privileged and privileging narrative that scapegoats Others. Through horrific recollections of slavery in Zedé's tales of her youth in South America and through Miss Lissie's stories of the African slave trade and the diaspora, Temple offers eyewitness accounts of the deliberate and relentless enslavement and extermination of peoples of Color. (54)

*The Temple of My Familiar* establishes that recovery of the past, remembrance of the ancestors, reminisces of one's predecessors, reconstructing the neglected matriarchal values, recovering origins, making connections to the past and present, knowing their ways of survival, and excavating the repressed history and tradition, are ways to redemption that help the black people to learn about their origin and establish a new community of renewed freedom.

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