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The Vicious Cycle of Violence in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*

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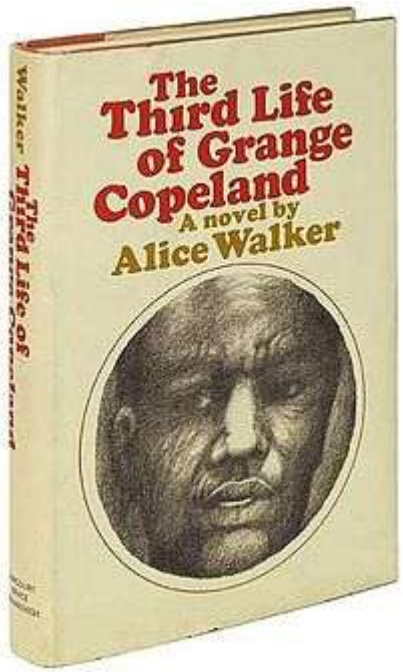

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Third_Life_of_Grange_Copeland

Abstract

The object of psychoanalytic literary criticism can be simply defined as the psychoanalysis of the author or a particularly interesting character in the novel. Existentialism, maintains that the individual is solely responsible for giving his or her own life meaning and for living that life passionately and sincerely, in spite of many existential obstacles and distractions including despair, anger, absurdity, alienation, and boredom. It also magnifies the importance of freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts.

Homi K. Bhabha argues that cultural identities cannot be credited to pre-given, irreducible, scripted, ahistorical cultural traits that define the conventions of ethnicity. Nor can "colonizer" and "colonized" be viewed as separate entities that define themselves independently. Bhabha argues that the "liminal" space is a "hybrid" site that leads to the production of a culture that may be mutual or has mutations. The concept of "otherness" is also integral to the comprehension of a person, as people construct roles for themselves in relation to an "other" as part of a process of reaction. It often involves the dehumanization of groups also. The character of Grange Copeland in Alice Walker's first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* lends us the space to study these theories, based on Walker's concept of womanism.

Introduction

Courtesy: http://www.nndb.com/people/577/000024505/

Literature is splitting into distinct and separate grouping because of the rise of identity politics in the United States and other parts of the world. Today African American literature has been accepted as an integral part of American Literature. Womanism is a symphonic elegy woven on the theme of the oppressed. Womanist theory exposes the quagmires of racism, sexism and classism in the lived experiences of the African American community. Walker's womanism holds well in its goal which believes in the educational, moral and spiritual progress of the African American community which in turn will improve the general standing of the entire community.

Identity and Womanism

This leads to first define man and woman and their relation to each other to understand these essential concepts that are being used to unravel the characters of Walker's novel *The*

Third Life of Grange Copeland. Identity plays a vital role to understand the concepts of psychoanalysis, hybridity, liminal and otherness. A person without an identity is considered a non-entity. To understand one's identity the supreme virtue of psychoanalysis is potential. It investigates the very aspects of the nature of men and women with which the great writers are preoccupied. A woman's identity as a female, a woman, and a heterosexual does not make life a complacent love affair with sexism. A woman needs respect and space from men. Womanism is a celebration of who a woman is as a person, and as an individual. It enhances a woman's cultural and social identity, diversity and inclusiveness of womanism. Yet, this same womanism includes men in its circle also, which certainly makes it uncompromisingly different from feminism.

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalytic literary criticism is based on the psychoanalysis or Freudian psychology, which is a body of ideas developed by the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud. It studies the human psychological functioning and behaviour, and according to many literary theorists and critics like Homi K. Bhabha can also be applied to societies also. It is a form of applied psychoanalysis, a science concerned with the mental process, specifically the interaction between the conscious and the unconscious and the laws of mental functioning. The psychoanalytic approach to literature not only rests on the theories of Freud; it may even be said to have begun with Freud, who was interested in writers, especially those who relied heavily on symbols. Such writers regularly cloak or mystify ideas in figures that make sense only when interpreted, much as the unconscious mind of a neurotic disguises secret thoughts in dream stories or bizarre actions that need to be interpreted by an analyst.

Interpretation

The emotional and the unconscious are partly comprehended by one's behaviour. Literature shows that it is concerned with the non-rational forces that play an important role in determining our destiny and also one's very being and also tries to control and direct them. A critic or reader understands a novel's secret significance, and this is because of the reader's reaction which are often intuitive, fugitive and often non-verbal. They supply the key elements in the story. It helps a person to understand and interpret what we find in a literary work and our responses to it. Berger considers it 'an interpretive art', as it hunts for the meaning in the behaviour of people and the arts they create.

Constructive Criticism

This criticism can be applied to understand how the psychological works and learn how to interpret the hidden significance of what the characters in the various novels do. It contends that a literary text is like a dream that expresses the secret unconscious desires and anxieties not only of the author but also the characters in the literary work. The artist may also unknowingly express his/her own neuroses in the work. The characters may also be a projection of the author's psyche. One method of applying psychoanalytic theory is by appreciating how the psyche works and discovering the knowledge on how to interpret the hidden significance of what people and characters in fiction do. The symbols used by the authors stand for a mode of thought, an idea, a wish or many other things. Even heroes and heroines are often be symbolic and can be interpreted in terms of all the things they stand for. Hinsie and Campbell (1970) define symbolism in psychiatry as a 'defense mechanism'.

Forerunners

Like psychoanalysis, this critical effort tries to find evidence of unsolved emotions, psychological conflicts, guilt, ambivalences and community tensions also. The author's own family life, emotional disturbances, fixations and sexual conflicts may be reflected in the behaviour of different characters in their works. This method has, therefore, developed into a rich and heterogeneous interpretive tradition. Freud's disciples such as Carl Jung and Jacques Lacan were avid readers of literature and used literary examples as illustrations of important concepts of their work. Lacan remarks that "the unconscious is structured like a language". Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze claim that psychoanalysis has become the centre of power and that its confessional techniques resemble the Christian tradition. They also consider it as a sociological analysis. Though psychoanalysis has been denounced as patriarchal or phallocentric by some proponents of feminist theory, there are other feminist scholars who have argued that Freud has opened up the society to female sexuality, with French feminism based on psychoanalysis. Homi K. Bhabha has commended the practice of psychoanalytic literary criticism and recommends the use of it not only for the individual but also for the community (Huddart, 1, 2).

Hybridity

Hybridity is an explicative term that has recently become a useful device in forming an authentic discourse of racial mixing that arose during the end of the 18th century. The ending of the colonial mandate has led to significant social transformations, rising immigration and economic liberalization. This has led to the deeply altered use and understanding of the term

'hybridity'. Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Paul Gilroy are well known exponents of this concept. Bhabha's *Location of Culture* significantly studies the liminality of hybridity as a paradigm of colonial anxiety. Hybridity has become more concerned with challenging essentialism and has been applied to sociological theories of identity, multiculturalism and racism.

Postcolonial Context

Hybridity is considered as an invention of post colonial thought, an extreme substitute for hegemonic ideas of cultural identity like racial purity and nationality. Bhabha argues that cultural identities cannot be credited to pre-given, irreducible, scripted, ahistorical cultural traits that identify the conventions of ethnicity. Nor can "colonizer" and "colonized" be viewed as separate entities that define themselves independently. Instead, Bhabha recommends that the negotiation of cultural identity involves the continual interface and exchange of cultural performances that in turn produce a mutual and mutable recognition (or representation) of cultural difference. Bhabha contends that this "liminal" space is a "hybrid" site that witnesses the production--rather than just the reflection of cultural meaning.

Bhabha's Contention

Bhabha uses the symbol of the stairwell to describe the "liminal space". In the museum installment by African-American artist Renee Green, Bhabha describes the exhibit's postmodern stairwell as a liminal space, a kind of in-between, that evolves as a symbol of interaction, the link between the "upper and the lower, black and white". Bhabha has developed his concept of hybridity from literary and cultural theory to illustrate the creation of culture and identity within

conditions of colonial hostility and disproportion. (Bhabha 1994; Bhabha 1996) For Bhabha, hybridity is the process by which the colonial governing authority undertakes to transform the identity of the colonized (the Other) within a singular universal framework, but then fails producing something familiar but new. Bhabha contends that a new hybrid identity or subject-position emerges from the interweaving of elements of the colonizer and colonized challenging the validity and authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity. In postcolonial discourse, the notion that any culture or identity is pure or essential is disputable. (Ashcroft et al 1995) Bhabha posits hybridity as such a form of liminal or in-between space, where the 'cutting edge of translation and negotiation' (Bhabha 1996) occurs and which he terms the third space.

Liminal Space

Psychologists call \"liminal space,\" a place where boundaries dissolve a little and we stand there, on the threshold, getting ourselves ready to move across the limits of what we were into what we are to be. Building on Mircea Eliade's concept of division of human experience in sacred and the profane, Victor Turner introduced the concept of \'liminal space\': a space of transformation between phases of separation and reincorporation. It represents a period of ambiguity, of marginal and transitional state. Similarly, does Arnold van Gennep, while describing rituals of transition. For Gennep, the liminal or the threshold world is a space between the world of status that the person is leaving and the world of status into which the person is being inducted. In post-colonial studies, for Edward Said, but especially for Homi Bhabha, the liminality is important as a category strongly related to the concept of cultural hybridity. For Bhabha, liminal as an interstitial passage between fixed identifications represents a possibility

for a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. The concept of liminality as a quality of "in-between" space and/or state is of the outmost importance in describing some of the most interesting and highly specific social and cultural phenomena: the transcultural space, the transgeographical space, the transgender space etc. The liminal is often found in particular social spaces, but also marks the constant process of creating new identities. Hybridity and Liminality do not refer only to space, but also to time.

Otherness

Otherness is a western philosophical concept that post colonial theory has sought to critique and repudiate. In recent times the concept of otherness which was so far silent and obliterated has now been voiced and not only claims to speak but also speak back, disturbing the sphere of politics in radical ways. The 'other' is very much fundamental to our contemporary apprehensions. Who is the 'other' historically and symbolically? How is the 'other' known? Is knowledge of the 'other' a form of colonization, domination, violence or can it be pursued as a disinterested truth? Can the 'other' know or speak for itself? The concepts of hybridity, liminality, and otherness occupy important positions in the post colonial discourse and in African American women literature.

Gender and Race

Gender and race are considered as intersecting, rather than discrete aspects of identity. Race moulds the experience of being a woman. In contrast to most social – psychological treatments of identity, some feminist writers like hooks and Spelman have affirmed that race and

gender intersect to form experience. A black woman's perception of discrimination can be qualitatively different from that of a white woman or that of a black man. Alice Walker's definition of womanism and the novels of Alice Walker have the rare quality of bringing out these views of the women of colour not only in Africa and America, but also in every continent and nation where women of colour exist.

The *Other*

A person's definition of the "other" is part of what defines or constitutes the self – the psychology, philosophy and the self concept and other phenomena and cultural units. Even Simone de Beauvoir calls the "other' the minority, the least favoured one and often a woman when compared to a man. Nevertheless, Walker's womanism includes men also in this category. Existentialism maintains that the individual is solely responsible for giving his or her own life meaning and for living that life passionately and sincerely, in spite of many existential obstacles and distractions including despair, anger, absurdity, alienation, and boredom. It also magnifies the importance of freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts.

Copeland – A Man

Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is her debut novel and considered by many as an autobiographical one. The Copeland family can be considered as a microcosm of their community and the American society. They belong to a community that has been for long time marginalized, devalued and demeaned. In her novel, Walker tells the story of Grange Copeland, a man who lives a life full of degradation and oppression, and accepts it as a natural

state. However, because of some extraordinary changes he made in his life, he is able to break out of the rut of socially and personally accepted oppression, and changes his life for the better.

Grange - The Other

The existential problem is reflected in the story from the beginning. Communities are divided by some aspects of identity and cannot create a sense of collective purpose or meaning. In the family circle, Grange Copeland permits the overwhelming pressure of oppression to divide them. The story begins in rural Georgia during the 1920's. Grange is a Black share cropper, living in destitution with his wife, and son, Brownfield. From the outset, it is plain that they live miserable lives. Grange works all day in an atmosphere of oppression. He is expected to act as though he is the social inferior of his employer, the man drives the truck, Mr. Shipley. Grange feels totally dehumanized. He sees himself as a "stone", a "robot" and a "cipher". These symbolic images are incapable of autonomous decision making or self determination. His own concept of his "otherness" is revealed here. This "otherness" also comes as a result of the social construction of oppression and subjugation due to racism prevailing in the society.

> 'When the truck came[Grange's] face froze into an unnaturally bland mask…A grim stillness settled over his eyes and he became an object…Some of the workers laughed and joked with the man who drove the truck, but they looked at his shoes…never into his eyes.'(9)

This passage shows just what kind of racial tension Grange and the others have to live under. To his boss, he truly is an object, and he knows this, 'he worked for a cracker and…the cracker owned him' (5). His reaction, to freeze, is one of fear and rage. The fear was Shipley's

superior air, which Brownfield described, made him seem like something alien, 'the man was a man, but entirely different from [Grange],' (10). The rage is over that fear, and the feelings of inadequacy that come with it.

Grange's Feelings and Acts

Margaret and Brownfield are forced to play the submissive role to make up for Grange's feelings of lack of manhood around Shipley, and the whites in general. Brownfield states, 'his mother was like their dog in some ways. She didn't have a thing to say that did not…show her submission to his father,' (6). Grange, at regular intervals, 'would come home lurching drunk, threatening to kill his wife and Brownfield, stumbling and shooting off his shotgun' (15). It is a way to gain some feeling of power through his feelings of subjugation. He needs to seem powerful to someone. Grange is physically, verbally and psychologically abusive towards his wife, and his son, Brownfield, as the mechanisms of oppression have dehumanized him. The family is unable to connect in a shared optimism for a better future and in their search for an assertion of identity. The Copelands and their community are entities in an existential crisis.

Escape

At the end of each drunken tirade Grange would roll out of the door and into the yard, crying like a child in big wrenching sobs (15). His weeping is his only release. In the end it is too much for him, and he flees north, to New York. In the North, Grange is overcome by his first change. To the Southern Blacks, the North represents some kind of Promised Land. "He had come North expecting those streets paved with gold," (206), but soon receives a rude awakening. Where the South looked contemptuously down on him, in the North "to the people that he met

and passed daily he was not even in existence," (206). From this hostile setting came the catalyst for moral change.

The Revelation

While begging in Central Park in the dead of winter, during his third year in New York, he comes upon a pregnant woman, a White. He watches her, and is soon joined by her lover, a soldier. They speak, and exchange "chaste kisses…as befitted soon-to-be parents," (299). This is a kind of human intimacy that he had not experienced while in the city, and naturally it touches him. After such a long period of isolation in the North, this closeness between the woman and the soldier opens his mind to new ideas.

The woman, at this point in the story, comes to symbolize to Grange a kind of unselfish, pure high emotion. She represents exactly how Grange believes, through his oppressive experiences, that Whites behave, in a way higher than blacks. "Grange had watched the scene deteriorate from the peak of happiness to the bottom of despair. It was honestly the first human episode he had witnessed between white folks," (210).

Because it is the first time, the woman becomes symbolic, and her actions influence his views on Whites as a whole. Her transition from a symbol of pure love into something horrible and human destroys Grange's early misconception that Whites were somehow more than human, and forces him to reevaluate his life. It mirrors the aggressive patterns that have characterized his entire life. Grange Copeland is no longer afraid of oppression and he has now turned the tools of the oppressors against them in order to wrest meaning from their hands. The death of the woman liberated him. He wants to live again. This drives him back to his home again in the South to

reclaim his life and take all efforts to create possibilities for his granddaughter, Ruth, to make it possible for her to dream of defining the meaning of her own life, free from the influence of institutionalized oppression.

According to existential philosophy, all people want to make meaning out of their own lives. This is often thwarted by social conditions, where one's free will is robbed; thereby creating an environment that is conducive to create a vicious cycle of violence. At this point, the life changing epiphany takes place. The pregnant woman had symbolized to Grange all that was good in the Whites. Her contemptuous actions towards him destroyed all of that, making her, and all Whites symbols of corruption. Her symbolic transformation and death represents his loss of fear, and of love, "her contempt for him had been the last straw; never again would he care what happened to any of them," (217).

Homeward Journey

Grange is now in his second life, his fear of the Whites has disappeared, his rage, intensified but different. After the Central Park incident, he spends weeks fighting with any white he sees. He now blames them for the evils he did to his family, 'every white face he cracked, he cracked in his sweet wife's name,' (221). He is a different man from the poor sharecropper. With his newfound philosophy, he returns home to Georgia. Brownfield has married, and has fallen into the same trap of oppression and domination that Grange did; setting into a more violent, but otherwise identical, pattern to his father's a few years before. Grange marries a woman Josie, with money, and buys an isolated farm, self-sufficient and free of Whites, free in his hatred and isolation.

Ruth

Ruth finds a place in Grange's heart. Ruth's story is existential in outlook. Her story is a flight from twentieth century forms of Southern bondage. She does not grow up in the kind of spiritual and emotional vacuum which blighted Brownfield's life. Ruth is raised by a mother. She considers her as a "saint" who makes heroic efforts to meet her human needs (126). Mem literally gives up her life opposing Brownfield's acceptance of his "place" in Southern society. After Mem is murdered literally by Brownfield and symbolically by the Southern society, Grange Copeland comes to love Ruth, his granddaughter. He takes care of her and becomes her surrogate father. Grange sees Ruth as a unique and beautiful person in the midst of a harsh and ugly environment which did not nourish him. Grange nourishes her mind and soul (Butler, 93-94). Like the pregnant woman in the past, Ruth is the catalyst of Grange's transition into his third life, a transition that leads him to an opposite conclusion to his previous one. Ruth is young and new to the world; she has no set ways or bigotries, unlike the white pregnant woman. Where the woman inspires hate, Ruth inspires love. He treats her the way he wished he had Brownfield. She is his second chance, and he attempts to make up for his mistakes, and begins to change again.

Transformation

Grange's meaning of life begins to change, 'the older Grange got the more serene and flatly sure of his mission he became. His one duty in life was to prepare Ruth for some great and herculean task…some harsh and foreboding reality' (279). He begins to doubt his hate philosophy. Words and intelligence and not raw violence have power to transform the world experience by creating understanding and control over life. Grange connects Ruth to the life

giving tradition of the Black folk art of the South. Folk art and the Holy Ghost give her vital access to an imaginatively rich, emotional potent world, which the psychologically under developed Brownfield never becomes aware of. Grange helps her achieve independence from her father and the Southern life in general (Butler, 94- 95). Towards the end of the novel, he says to Ruth, 'I know the danger of putting al the blame on somebody else for the mess you make out of your life. I fell into the trap myself!'(288)His admission of this shows a metamorphosis of thought and leads him close to a third life of selflessness. He continues, 'he gits…the feeling of doing nothing yourself….and begins to destroy everybody around you, and you blameit on the crackers,' (288).

Oppression = Violence

The varied fates of the Grange family members and other characters in the novel demonstrate how the very dynamics of oppression turns into a vicious cycle of violence. The oppressed characters go through their lives desperately and mechanically. Margaret chooses a violent end and chooses to kill herself – not as an act of free will and thoughtful choice but simply to escape the unbearable conditions, abandoning the fifteen year old Brownfield, who imitates the behavior of his parents. The wheel goes turning round and round. Mem marries Brownfield though she knows that he is ignorant, no-good and illiterate. She teaches him how to write his name. Hope falls to the ground in the rural South. Twenty years later, the pernicious system that claimed Grange Copeland claims his son also:

> He thought of suicide and never forgot it, even in Mem's arms. He prayed for help, for a caring President, for a listening Jesus. He prayed for a decent job in

> Mem's arms. But like all prayers sent up from there, it turned into another mouth to feed, another body to enslave to pay his debts. He felt himself destined to become no more than an overseer, on the white man's plantation, of his own children (46).

Brownfield - A Victim

In time, like his father, Brownfield also becomes a victim of the system and he vents his rage against a black woman who comprehends and endeavors to calm his pain. The worse he treated her, the more she was compelled to save him. He blamed Mem for his failures and his inability to produce a crop at the end of the farming season. He beat her. He did not fear her as he did the white men whose power choked him and refused him his manhood and who gave him dried potatoes and sickly hogs at the end of the year. Brownfield had to hit back at something, and his mission was to pull his wife down 'beneath him so his foot could rest easy on her neck'.

Brownfield complained about her refined speech: 'Why don't you talk like the rest of us poor *niggers*?'…Why do you have to always be so damn proper? Whether I says 'is' or 'ain't' ain't, no damn humping off your butt' (482). His trampled ego and pride makes him pull down Mem also from being a school teacher to his level. His rage could and did blame everything, everything, on her' (55). He advises his friends that the only way to keep a black woman down is to beat her. He tells his friends, 'Give this old black snake to her…and then I beats her ass. Only way to treat a *nigger* woman' (56). Mem took his ill treatment and fell down on her knees, grew ugly, gave birth to her babies in cold damp rooms all alone because, more often Brownfield would be too evil and drunk to get a midwife for her.

Mem's weakness is representative of a steady stream of suffering throughout Walker's fiction. She carries the burden of guilt and it is a heavy and cumbersome load on her back (483). Mem wants Brownfield to 'quit wailing like a seedy jackass' (59). Mem understands that it is the white racists who are responsible for Brownfield's degradation, but she rejects it as an excuse for his transgressions against his family. Walker writes that Brownfield did not have the courage to imagine life without the existence of white people as a prop' (4). Brownfield is beyond reach. Bitter and self consumed by self-hatred, he chooses to punish his father than assume responsibility for his life and family. He chooses sorrow over joy, and revenge over responsibility (Wades-Gayles, 307). Once she took advantage of his drunken state, and tried to overturn her weakness, placed the shotgun to his head, and reminded him:

> I put myself to the trouble of having all these babies for you…To think I let you drag me around from one corncrib to another just cause I didn't want to hurt your feelings…And just think of how many times I done got my head beat by you so you could feel a little bit like a man…And just think how much like an old no-count dog you done treated me for nine years…(125-127)

Mem – Liberation

Mem's liberation is short–lived. She does not understand what is evil and all the sunshine, comfort and cleanliness that she brought into the house is destroyed. Brownfield plans for her destruction. He takes her back to his shack, where she has to abide by her rules. Her role is clearly defined. She is a woman. He is lord. She must please him. He is free to please only

himself. His cruelty seems too harsh to believe. But Walker knows men like him. They exist and there is no way to avoid them.

Grange's woman, Josie is also a victim of sexist culture that causes Margaret's suicide. Disowned and humiliated by her father, she vows never again to be dependent on any man for anything. 'like a phoenix who rises from the ashes with unfurled wings, she soars above male control to become the richest and most powerful black person, male, female, in the community. Her liberation from male control does not put her in touch with her personhood. As a prosperous prostitute, she is still confined to a role that requires woman's service to man (Wade-Gayles, 304).

Bettye asks a few interesting questions. Mem had an identity as a school teacher and why did she accept such violent treatment against her body and the 'violent expressions that chiseled away at her soul? What kind of lethargy was it that allowed her to take beatings, even the threat of them, time after time? How many bitches could she be?'(483) The women in *Third Life of Grange Copeland* are brutally victimized and they go about silently exposing their humiliation and indignity to themselves and their world. Mem and Margaret seem to love the others but not themselves. The impact of unemployment on the African American family, and particularly on the black male, is the least understood of all. There is little analysis because there has been almost no inquiry.

Women and the White Employer

The women seem to understand their husband's predicament in the hands of the White employers and silently bear the humiliation. They fail to stand up against the violence and allow their men to have their space in their own home, which is revealed only through violence. They

don't want to victimize the men. Frustration and violent pent up anger could be directed only towards the people who knew them and on whom they could exert some power. It is not only the women who suffer, but also the children. Walker and many African American women writers depict how slavery and subsequent racist social structures have stripped black men of paternal authority and ensured that they have not a proud cultural heritage but an unresolved and often inarticulable history of trauma and suffering to pass on (Read, 527).

End - The Message

Walker's message shown through the progression of Grange's thoughts is that it is possible to lift themselves out of their constraints, to make a change so drastic that they become seemingly different people. The possibility of reclaiming one's agency, autonomy, and decision making power is possible though not an easy one. The simple binaries that made up imperial and post-colonial studies have in some way become redundant with regard to literature. Copeland embraces his hybridized position "not as a badge of failure or denigration, but as a part of the contestational weave of culture."

Robert Young comments on the negativity that is associated to the term "hybridity". On the other hand Ashcroft focuses on the hybrid nature of post-colonial culture as strength rather than a weakness and the same is true in Grange Copeland's life. It is proof that even when a person is caught in the vicious cycle of violence that is a product of racism, he can come out of it and survive and become an integral part of the new formations which arise. This what Bhabha refers to as "liminal" space. Ashcroft also mentions that hybridity is a means of evading the

replications of the binary categories of the past and develop a new hybrid identity as Copeland's transformation shows in his third life.

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