

A SEMIOLOGICAL ANALYSES OF CHARACTERS' NAMES : ONOMASTICS AND CHARACTERS' IDENTITY IN ALICE WALKER'S FICTION : A CASE STUDY OF THE COLOR PURPLE, MERIDIAN AND THE THIRD LIFE OF GRANGE COPELAND

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Abstract : *The Color Purple, The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian* are didactic novels intended to teach or morally instruct the reader. For Walker, it is of paramount importance to convey values which can have sound impacts on the reader. Walker has deemed necessary to invest moral values in her characters as emissaries of the ideals she promotes, hoping them to become universal. In the novels, there is a sustained effort to spruce up the image of the characters although some are depicted as wicked. The ideals and promotions drawn out of Alice Walker's characters are perceptible in their names and qualifications. These qualifications stem from other characters' designations in reference with their deeds and achievements. Our purpose, in this research paper, is to demonstrate how the main characters are endowed with the largest number of qualifications. We will also explore their possible status as hero or heroin in the novels regarding the characters who receive the most vivid emotional qualifications. In the context of this study, we will base on the theory of Philippe Hamon, regarding distributional qualifications as criteria for determining the hero or the heroin in a narrative. We spot and trace every single naming, qualification with the final endgame to sort out the characters' specific identities. To better conduct our analysis, we base our study on the semiological theory of Hamon to show how consistency in characters' appearances in texts can help prove that they are the heroes or they are more heroic than other characters.

Key-words : character, hero, heroin, narrative, qualifications.

UNE ANALYSE SÉMIOLOGIQUE DES NOMS DES PERSONNAGES : ONOMASTIQUES ET IDENTITÉ DES PERSONNAGES DANS LA FICTION D'ALICE WALKER : UNE ÉTUDE DE CAS SUR LA COULEUR POURPRE, LE MÉRIDIDIEN ET LA TROISIÈME VIE DE GRANGE COPELAND

Résumé : *The Color Purple, The Third Life of Grange Copeland* et *Meridian* sont des romans didactiques destinés à enseigner ou à instruire moralement le lecteur. Pour Walker, il est d'une importance primordiale de transmettre des valeurs qui peuvent avoir un impact solide sur le lecteur. Walker a jugé nécessaire d'investir des valeurs morales dans ses personnages en tant qu'émissaires des idéaux qu'elle promet, en espérant qu'ils deviennent universels. Dans les romans, il y a un effort soutenu pour embellir l'image des personnages, bien que certains soient dépeints comme méchants. Les idéaux et les promotions tirés des personnages d'Alice Walker sont perceptibles dans leurs noms et leurs qualifications. Ces qualifications découlent des désignations d'autres personnages en référence à leurs actes et réalisations. L'objectif au cours de cette analyse, sera de démontrer comment les personnages principaux sont dotés du plus grand nombre de qualifications. Nous évaluerons la possibilité pour ces personnages d'être des héros ou héroïne qui reçoivent les qualifications émotionnelles les plus vives. Dans le cadre de cette étude, nous faisons usage de la théorie de Philippe Hamon, considérant les qualifications distributives comme critères de détermination du héros ou de l'héroïne dans un récit. Nous repérons et traçons chaque nommage, qualification avec la fin de partie finale pour trier les identités spécifiques des personnages. Pour mieux mener notre analyse, nous basons notre étude sur la théorie sémiologique de Hamon pour montrer comment la cohérence dans l'apparence des personnages dans les textes peut aider à prouver qu'ils sont les héros ou qu'ils sont plus héroïques que les autres personnages.

Mots-clés : Héros, héroïne, personnage, récit, qualifications

Introduction

For a character to be called a hero, he has to go through a literary process. It is not enough to say it, we must prove it. We will then try to determine it. We even want to compare Nettie, Meridian and Grange Copeland with the grid established by Philippe Hamon to define the characters. After this structuralist study, we look at Nettie, Meridian, and Grange Copeland names because they seem to be key to understand what makes them heroes. Finally, we will see how these three central characters are the most important of the three selected works. The heroic stance of our characters is to be proven by their names and actions. The impacts their words will have and the influence their actions will exert on the other characters lives. The study of heroism in the frame of our work ranges from the frequency of appearances in text and the brightness of the actions the characters carry out. The initiatives they take as leading characters.

Some researchers have dealt before about the issue of heroism. Pidabi Gnanbana, a togolese lecturer has debated the question of heroism in his research paper "*Le héros littéraire : entre bravoure et déviance*" published in 2021, in the *Journal pour la critique littéraire*, clearly indicates that success makes the hero dream while failure has a moralising function. While Pidabi speaks of dream and moral, Attabi Gérard, in his doctoral thesis *Phénoménologie et geste héroïque du blanc au noir dans l'œuvre de John Updike* defended in 2017, repeatedly asserts that heroism is not just courage and strength but it is reflexion, mindset and wisdom. We are set to suggest all of these and in our analysis and go far beyond to demonstrate that heroism is also a status which cannot be acquired overnight. Our heroes under study are democratic since they are instituted by the other characters. We will also determine the qualities that make them similar to heroes. "A character is said to be the most important in a work when he carries out actions of brightness are not enough to give him the name of hero" (Hamon, 1977, p.144), we seek to define the descriptive characteristics of the characters.

Thanks to his study, it is achievable today to define a protagonist as the hero of the novel. He asserts in *Pour un statut sémiologique du personnage, In Poétique du Récit* : "the character who receives the most vivid emotional taint is called the hero" (Philippe Hamon, p.45). This study reports on the narrative specificities of a character using seven more criteria. However, one will be the subject of our study: differential qualifications. We will look at three different cases that are Nettie, Meridian and Grange Copeland of the three respective works in order to make the critical review of the concept of the hero.

1. Pointing out the characters' appearances in texts

Nettie's first appearances accompanied by her sister Celie are still dull and the two sisters are still filled with fear and hesitation. Nettie and Celie appear on two different stances on the reason that Celie has for long been subjugated while Nettie has been the representation of the women who resist male oppression. The first comparison is between Celie and her enemy: the man said to be her father, also known as the Pa (the familiar name of the word father). He acts as an institution for domination to subjugate Celie and Nettie. He deems his physical strength which he always makes do with to prevail over Nettie and Celie body as seems it. He finally has a blessing granted by a phallogocentric system that validates his action and bestows permission in the planning and the conduct of its stock. The two sisters have assets they can rely on: their desire for justice they take to God. The first letters from Celie to Nettie are addressed to God, and prefer the vertical relationship that will return in the form of incentive for the benefit of the two sisters. This divine inspiration that will build the horizontal relationship between the two sisters will be a vital contribution to their quest for reconstruction.

"Dear God, Dear God, Dear God / Dear Nettie, Dear Nettie, Dear Nettie» (*The Color Purple*, 1982, pp. 3 ;5 ;15,55) Celie and Nettie, characters, are a source of mutual inspiration. Although younger than her sister, Nettie has much more courage and guts. It is one that, by far, with the help of Shug, Celie inspires her air of rebellion and insubordination to Mr. Albert. In *Meridian*, there is a character with gargantuan traits. It is an institution which is both racist and sexist. This institution is not named, but it works as a character. Its effects are visible in the daily lives of all the characters. Meridian has against her a society with racist and sexist contours embodied briefly by opposing characters: the tank and Lynne. She has however aiding characters and a serving function adjuvant technee helping him in his task.

The white oppressor undertakes to confine Grange in a very stable situation to the point where he eventually arrogates to himself the services of another enemy: hatred. This hatred turns into an occupation force and takes him to push Benedict to suicide. The situation of poverty he experiences pushed him to flee his homeland to join the North. This North where he gets helps to get rid of this hatred. The character is now loving sympathy and antipathy to his white oppressor. Grange returned transformed, reconstructs in the south South and reasserts his personality and identity. The North has therefore something that could turn things in his favor. As the needle pointing toward the South, the North allows him to move and find his way.

Moreover, he is an aiding character like his granddaughter Ruth. She is positioned as an aiding character because she is all that is left to Grange. Character to whom he has moral obligation, Ruth will help him to awareness and a psychological stability for the future with a lot more than hope. While their oppressors embark on a quest for materialism: frantic gain of money, power, plantations and regions increasingly larger, Grange Copeland, is seeking moral stability, because to be "much richer would be a prerequisite for more happiness and bring dreams into reality"(TTL, 205). We offer a scale of values on the three main characters. Compared to his opponents, the characters ascend to some heights.

They list all the traits that qualify Nettie and its forms of events (positive or negative). Indeed, this "character is used to support a number of qualifications that are not, or have to a lesser degree, the other characters in the work" (Hamon, p. 86). It should be noted that the focus does Celie its purpose as it continues to apply to God to embark on a unilateral and virtual communion with Nettie. Nettie is known under the same name during almost all of the story but it changes parts of qualifications. A number of qualifications will be brought to her credit because unlike Celie, she was much more difficult to bend to the wishes of Mr. Albert. She constantly rebelled. Celie addressed her to this effect a series of descriptive qualifiers to the gesture of the latter:

"The Bold / the reckless (XXXII) The unsubdued / the rebellious (XVII)

Witty / clever (IX)" (*The Color Purple*, 1982, p. 69). These attributes, must be added according to Celie placing Nettie to the spotlight. Celie views Nettie as "recalcitrant and little resolved to be intimidated" (*The Color Purple*, 1982, p.75). She is also: "Shy (LVI) The red - tie girl (VI)" (*The Color Purple*, 1982, p. 80). Nettie is an anthropomorphic character who has a well-defined genealogy. Sisterhood is also a common point of Nettie and Celie; both have the same biology and ancestry but separated however during adolescence by Mr. Albert. Having lost their parents, Nettie is the family that remains to Celie. She will entrust that Nettie is: My sister (LII) My family (XII)

Shug has proved to be of the same family as Nettie, who was very close to Celie, and who was, at a given time in the novel, the lover of Mr. Albert. She talks later to the latter, saying: "Celie is my daughter, you should not treat her that way" (*The Color Purple*, 1982, p. 169). Mr. Albert was probably unaware of this detail. He repeatedly rapes Celie and therefore stole her virginity just to show his muscles and point out his superiority over the female characters. Shug, another female character is some sort of umbrella and a shield against male brutality and oppression. She is not limited to the mere parenthood to Celie and Nettie, but she is eager to set the pattern for resistance and unity in the face of unjustified hatred

and lust for power and domination. Nettie, it must be said, has carried this name throughout the story. She brought this name and had no surname. Her father's name was never revealed as she has no past and cannot oriente herself. Her mother's identity was not revealed as well, although she made a few appearances in the text. At the same time that Shug turns out being in fact aunt to Celie and Nettie, she stands as a spiritual mother to the two sisters.

2. Webbing characters' deeds and profiling their status.

Some of the characters are remarkable for the peculiarity of the deeds or great actions they take. These deeds on their part is raising respect and obedience from their fellow characters. These deeds are also valued in reference with the benefits and positives repercussions they have on the different communities. Albert Bruce a literary analyst, in *American Association for the advancement of science*, has deemed necessary to comment on Alice Walker characterization and said it to be "A masterpiece and patient way in turning each character to his duty for constructing a better world" (Bruce, 1880, p. 132). These characters organise and collide their actions so that they can have more impacts on other characters' lives. The hero who initiates and carries out the action is not, contrary to the traditional hero, the beneficiary of his deeds. The only nature of their heroic actions will determine their profile.

Meridian is the central figure in *Meridian* because of her presence in almost all of the chapters. Her appearances are consistent. She has a large number of qualifications. They like to enlighten the reader on the gesture of the heroic character before even his appearance in text, are revealed to us in the preface of the work. Meridian is considered at a time in the novel the character who makes fair and good decisions. She endeavours to mind other people opinions. She sets forward democratic stance in her modus operandi for solving societal problems. She has displayed courage that no other male character showed. She could challenge even the most highest state symbol like the mayor just for the sake of rehabilitating the black community in its rights. For this reason, she received a variety of qualifications and names on the part of the other characters who admire her actions: "Midday, the south, the day, the highest point of power, prosperity, and splendor. The apex of health. The apparent highest point reached by a heavenly body in its race" (Meridian, 1976, p. 102). In astronomy, an imaginary great circle of the celestial sphere passing through the poles of the heavens and the Zenith of the nadir. Meridian, through these different qualifications, turns out to be a character of universal dimensions. She is protean and is involved in almost all areas of science. Her sphere of competence and operative mode are

not just terrestrial. We see it spread from North to South or vice versa. Her parents will tell her: "Skills and gifts are taking you to the final victory" (*Meridian*, 1976, p. 198). These nicknames and other qualifications available in Meridian are not of her earthly being. The much more terrestrial gesture is Heavenly. So, there to Meridian, the concern to a "Holy" spirit before returning to Earth and do his duty. Hegel, in *Phenomenologie de l'Esprit*, called "care of the spirit". For him "The mind governs the physics which itself «dictate the way forward".

In her novels, Alice Walker mentions her characters' genealogy. This is intended to show how even within the family sphere she did not have the blessing of her parents to carry out her actions. As the main character she can be considered a what Philippe Hamon calls a "hero victim or the hero in quest" (Hamon, 1977, p.157). This is set forward by Kate Byer in her critical book, *Alice Walker, an Annotated Biography*, in which she recalls Alice Walker's "undeniable determination to pursue their mission much to the happiness not only of the Blacks but also those of the entire community" (Byer, 1989, p. 66). Her quest won't therefore be an easy task. She has a mother who constantly obstructed her action, not only by not giving her the means of her action, but also by denying her the ability to carry out her duty or to pursue her action. The latter therefore arises in active opposing character. She assists him in his daily tasks and demanded in return that she informed her of all actions envisaged before any initiative. She decides for this purpose to rehabilitate her and consider her a goddaughter. It will bring up several times the name of "goddaughter" when it wants to refer to Meridian (*Meridian*, 1976, p. 92). He rebaptizes Meridian by changing her name by calling her "his goddaughter" (*Meridian*, 1976, p 128). Meridian has been acting under her father's guidance. Although she doesn't have her mother's bliss, she has full her father's full support. She does not have her mother's support and she thinks her battle to fail since the mother, a woman is symbol of fertility. She is born out of a woman and being denied her blessing could have led to her failure in her mission. However, the advice from the father and the compensating help from the father has added the missing brick to the wall of Meridian's mission. She would be called "The goddaughter" (*Meridian*, 1976, p 197) her father would call her. We would expect her to be rebaptised in order to grant him a new identity. It is not only a new identity she wants, but also a new vision that she suggests. It presents a reflection of getting bare a society in *Meridian*, but also a critique of society based on money. A deeply unjust society, where work, industry, the interests of the bourgeois and the machines crush man.

However, Truman won't do it completely. No more as he's at the end of its action by supporting Meridian just through some advice for him: "proved to be a social blueprint to a

society being stripped of its values" (Meridian, 201). It will help more than what it is and it will not go beyond advice. It is therefore a passive adjuvant, remaining far from the field of action of Meridian. As Nettie, Meridian has a past, but it also has a dual filiation: biological and spiritual.

Grange Copeland led a life that one would call circular. This denotes that there is a search for identity and assertiveness. This circular shape is a symbol of life. He circled his life, in his way to think, act and live. Its traceability reveals a leak first, then transformation and finally a return to 'sources'. He leads three different lives worthy of an identity quest.

The three lives he leads are different both from the social and economic point of view. While Grange is in quest for social recognition, he is at the same time in need of bettering his economic conditions. His first life rife with misery, sufferings in the south where he was born and bred. He then moved to the north where he was intended to improve his life and take the elevator. As moving from the south to the north will describe an ascension, Grange thought he would have been climbing the social scales and better his life. He was disillusioned to the point of realising that moving to the north did not come up to be a good idea. He then had to go back to his homeland and re-unite with his folks and roots. Things turned out to be as if Grange has to make do with the place where he was born. He is entitled to prosper nowhere else but on his homeland. He could have figured out that inner happiness and prosperity could not be linked only to money. Grange's renunciation to committing suicide stems from his resolution and understanding that genuine happiness and prosperity can only be made by himself. The names which also refer to this character varies from one life to the next. Before he pushes Margaret to commit suicide, she attributed a number of qualifiers on the brutal nature of that moral and physical treatment he inflicted her. Some shades for the main characters are revealed to us through comments, monologues or soliloquies by the other characters. Margaret is so eager to reveal some names which are also nicknames: "Mr. Tough / (XXVII) M... / M... (XL) Copilan" (*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, 1970, p. 105).

Grange seems to be erased by the other white characters but the narration is tracing his action, he seems to be a central character, important for the remainder of the narration. He has to play a key role in the success of the story and his opponents have hard time setting him aside. Phillippe Hamon has these words about that: "If you remove or kick a young boy or a young girl out of a narration, and the narration still tells about him or her, this is tantamount to saying that the boy or the girl is the hero or the heroin in the plot" (Hamon, 1977, p. 157)

Grange (XXXI)... The names "Copeland" and "Grange Copeland", one sees well, dominate the series of names that refer to the identity of the character. This, to remind and imply the attachment of Grange Copeland to the Earth. Grange has a text feature inherent in a quest for identity: the South. It is in the South of the United States. The South of the United States, again, was agricultural. Its economy is based on agricultural production. Failure at school and the lack of school education systematically forced a return to Earth. To the South of the United States, the agricultural tradition resulted in a systematic transmission of agrarian techniques from one generation to the other. Barn is an offspring of farmers. He lives in advanced promiscuity. His parents have certainly seen the same oppressions and exploitation of the white man. Farming is not the only thing that he inherited. He also inherited a life of misery that will begin the moral structure of his family and causes little by little its decrepitude. He has a good genealogy refined and defined by the narration: "Grange is himself son and grandson to a sharecropper"(TTL, 95). Barn, during his second life, in what we call the New World, to refer to the arrival of black immigrants in the North of the United States after the industrial crisis affecting South at the end of the 1920s, sees his name almost not pronounced by the rest of the characters who he interacts with. The goal is, indeed, to ignore his arrival in the North where the pursuit of profit, the market economy and the exchange value are the leitmotiv.

Although present in the story and mentioned by the narration, Grange seems invisible so far. His invisibility is perceived in its complaints for a long time after the incident in which he was hit in the back and shoulder by a white man, well until he found his balance at the end of the first shock: "Seem I was not seen by all those people, all them clean, well off, not heeding me through a gaze. Bumping and going as if no. one was there to be cared for" (*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, 1970, p. 204). The blows both in the back and shoulder are symbols of a life lived too casually by Grange. His arrival in the North is made purposely. He is in search of better living conditions. However, he tended to spend most of his time watching and strolling. The blows he received are a wake-up call to awareness and work, a call for a change, and awakening. Grange led a literally idle life in the North. He received no help, assistance and a name which he came with from the South. Only the narrative at this stage of the diegetic frame emphasizes his surname and first name, no doubt to signify that its reconstruction can be performed and take form on his native land.

The reconstruction which will be surely isn't on his name. In other words, it's a reconstruction that will leave the base, that is, the identity transformation will be first by a radical change in his personality. This moral and psychological changes begin the quest for

identity. In the North, it will only be one name: Grange Copeland (XLVIII) he has completed the bulk of his reconstruction before he return to the South. In New York, he will remember Ruth, his granddaughter who he refused to assist during complications during her birth, as for him last the life to which she is entitled within the family. It ignores his bearings at the same time and seeks its brands. He lives an identity crisis at this time.

Conclusion

Nettie, Meridian and Grange Copeland have attributes that allow them to make their desire join with the object of the quest. They are endowed with will-do, but their skills are not up to the too titanic crisis situation that offers them the sociotexte. They are the main characters of the respective works because they "have the largest number of appearances in text and can be then called the heros" (Hamon, 1977, 163) ; and they are also heroic figures because they dominate opponents and adjuvants in terms of appearance in the text. "They receive the most vivid emotional taints" (Hamon, 1977, 154) and are granted many more brands. They are the ones who initiate actions and want the original shortfall. Their presence in text, although discontinuous initially, is more stable and steady, first in middle and permanent end of diegesis. The stories are organized around them and the other characters come in support. Their entry is even more remarkable and they are even the subject of comments from some of the other characters. As heroic characters and no heroes, they do not hesitate to pull up the other characters. They have this features much more necessary to their various quests during which they will need to begin their new reconstructions.

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