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Hist 115F: Women in the Civil Rights Movement

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Finding Eden:

Understanding *Meridian's* Religious Symbolism

The civil rights era was a time characterized by conflict. For many, the phrase “Civil Rights Movement” conjures images of white policemen attacking black protesters, using dogs, fire hoses, and billy-clubs to viscerally subdue the crowds. Other minds may recall pictures of fervent Klan members burning crosses, spreading waves of fear across the black community. Though prolific, neither of these scenes are nearly as iconic as those of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s “I have a dream” speech and his assassination. In his death, he attained martyrdom, inspiring thousands. Yet, this only accounts for the face of the movement that was popularized by the media – that of the charismatic, male leader. In *Meridian*, Alice Walker portrays a dominant female protagonist and explores a nearly forgotten side of the civil rights movement. Drawing heavily upon a rich pallet of religious symbolism, Walker paints her own solution to the plight of African-American women during this era. She employs the twin devices of The Sojourner and the Sacred Serpent to represent, respectively, the Tree of Knowledge and the biblical serpent of Eden. Together, these two symbols evoke the grander image of an Eden for black women which - as an interesting juxtaposition to the original story - is attained through the pursuit of knowledge. Also, Walker characterizes Meridian as a black, female Christ-figure, challenging the literary and historical tradition. In this light, Meridian's role as an activist is raised to that of a religious calling, and her work in Mississippi is the direct path for the salvation of African-Americans. These images demonstrate Walker's message that the combination of education and grassroots activism is essential for black people in the civil rights movement who wish to be able to transcend racial and gendered oppression and, one day, achieve equality.

Meridian's time at Saxon College served as the formative years for her later work in the civil rights movement, and this period of her life revolves around the central image of The Sojourner. "She *had* felt blessed her first year at Saxon. It was so beautiful! The tall red brick towers, the old courtyards, the giant trees – especially the greatest tree of them all, The Sojourner."ⁱ In this description, Walker immediately links the theme of religion to The Sojourner with her clever use of the word "blessed." The full ramifications of this connection are only clear after considering the history of the great tree, which dates back to before the civil war when Saxon was not a college but instead a plantation. One of the slaves, Louvinie, was an excellent storyteller, and all of the white children delighted in her tales. Unfortunately, one of the white children suffered from a weak heart (symbolizing an inborn cowardice among white males) and was literally scared to death by one of these stories. As punishment, Louvinie's tongue was removed, but she managed to salvage it and plant it under the sapling which would one day become The Sojourner. After this event, "other slaves believed it possessed magic. They claimed the tree could talk."ⁱⁱ The underlying thematic message is that The Sojourner grew from the knowledge of this storyteller, and that it contains a mystic, even spiritual, wisdom. When interpreted in a Christian frame of reference, this tree can be nothing other than the Tree of Knowledge from the garden of Eden. By using this image, Walker is referring to the circumstances surrounding The Sojourner as those approaching a paradisaical, ideal way of life as represented by Eden. This implicates the importance of the formal education represented by Saxon College, but there is also a second level of meaning within this symbolism. On the campus there is a tradition for "Any girl who had ever prayed for her period to come ... which was held in the guise of a slow May Day dance around the foot of The Sojourner."ⁱⁱⁱ Not only does this make the critical connection of Eden being a place where black women do not have to suffer the slavery of biological motherhood, but also, "It was the only time in all the many social activities at Saxon that every girl was considered equal."^{iv} Walker uses this metaphor to define equality as the ultimate goal of the civil rights movement, and also to show how her Eden can be attained through formal and sexual education (i.e.

family planning and birth-control). The Sojourner, a tree containing the cultural knowledge of a storyteller, encompassed by a college setting, serves as a source for both categories of information. Unfortunately, this Eden is destroyed by a higher, white authority as represented by Saxon (or, more accurately, *Anglo-Saxon*) College.^v Walker's dream of a black, female Eden does not die here. As revealed in the last section of the book, a small branch begins to grow anew from the stump of the great tree. Anne-Marion wrote to Meridian, sharing this joyous news: "Who would be happier than you that The Sojourner did not die?" continuing on to say, "perhaps me."^{vi} The tree's growth is a microcosmic representation of Meridian's work to further the goals of the movement, but Anne-Marion's confession, "perhaps me" is indicative of the ubiquity of the hope of a successful resolution to the civil rights movement as represented by The Sojourner.

Another image within the novel that plays upon the religious iconography, specifically within the story of the garden of Eden, is that of the Sacred Serpent. Like The Sojourner, the Sacred Serpent is a place that holds the wisdom of generations ago regardless of the fact that the Sacred Serpent is a Native American burial ground in lieu of a black tongue's "grave." The Sacred Serpent has been in Meridian's family for generations, and is a place where both Meridian and her great-grandmother, Feather Mae, find enlightenment:

When [Feather Mae] stood in the center of the pit, with the sun blazing down directly over her, something extraordinary happened to her. She felt as if she had stepped into another world, into a different kind of air. The green walls began to spin, and her feelings rose to such a high pitch the next thing she knew she was getting up off the ground... She felt renewed, as if from some strange spiritual intoxication.^{vii}

Walker portrays this encounter with the Serpent as a moment of pure, religious revelation, awakening a spiritual energy in Feather Mae. Returning to the running metaphor of the story of Eden, this serpent represents the snake that tempted Eve to sample the apples containing knowledge. In its traditional interpretation, this serpent is viewed as an agent of evil, but there are many important distinctions between Walker's story and that of the *Bible*. As discussed with The Sojourner, the prevailing power

responsible for the near destruction of the aforementioned Eden was that of a unified, *white* authority. In this sense, the Sacred Serpent represents a danger to the status quo upheld by the white majority and is, therefore, mis-characterized as “evil.” In accordance with this theory of an unjust power, after her experience with the Sacred Serpent, “Feather Mae renounced all religion not based on the experience of physical ecstasy.”^{viii} Feather Mae's action also relates to one of the more prominent themes in *Meridian*, namely that of the sexual repression of women. Throughout the novel, Meridian has several sexual encounters, but in all of these liaisons she experiences no physical pleasure. Feather Mae's maxim suggests the idea of mutual enjoyment of sex that would, perhaps, make it less exploitive of women, and this is the knowledge she gains from the Sacred Serpent. As an interesting subtext to Walker's representations of Eden, only women are able to experience the knowledge of The Sojourner and the Sacred Serpent. This is paralleled in the biblical Eden when Adam and Eve attempt to internalize the knowledge contained in the apple. Though Eve does so without any difficulties, Adam chokes, and his portion of the apple becomes lodged in his neck – giving rise to the term “Adam's apple.” Walker capitalizes upon this reference in forming her exclusively female Edens, reinforcing her idea that education is essential for progress. When Meridian enters the serpent's tail, “it seemed to her that it was a way the living sought to expand the consciousness of being alive,”^{ix} suggesting that the Sacred Serpent is the path to a third genre of knowledge – moral and social knowledge. The white authority in the form of the government also ruins this Eden by exercising its power of eminent domain to purchase the Sacred Serpent and create a whites only park. Even once the park is opened to blacks, the magic is gone. Walker's Eden only exists for black women. “Others stood glumly by, attempting to study the meaning of what had already and forever been lost.”^x Through these two representations of Eden in *The Sojourner* and the Sacred Serpent, Walker is arguing the importance of education for black women to rise above their problems and seek equality.

Alice Walker also uses religious imagery to portray Meridian as a black, female Christ figure, stressing the importance of Meridian's work through this comparison. This allusion is crafted through

calculated diction, close parallels between Meridian's actions and those of Jesus Christ as set forth in the *Bible*, and her inner struggle around the concept of martyrdom. Beginning with her choice of name, Walker deifies Meridian, likening her to a "heavenly body," but Walker also maintains the key differences between Meridian and Jesus, using a more arcane meaning of the word ("southern") to remind readers from the onset of Meridian's historical and physical setting.^{xi} Continuing into the actual text, Meridian is first introduced as a god, though in a sarcastic manner. An old sweeper tells Truman that "she thinks *she's* God."^{xii} This skepticism of Meridian's godliness in the first few pages primes readers for the gradual transition through the course of the book as other characters eventually concede that Meridian's apparent divinity as she becomes more involved in the movement. For example, when Meridian first volunteers to work in the civil rights movement, the worker that greets her remarks, "Look what the good Lord done gone and sent us."^{xiii} While this reads in a rather conversational manner, the fact that this occurs in the chapter strategically titled "Awakening" suggests the interpretation of this quote as a comment on how Meridian was sent to the civil rights movement in the same way that Christ was sent to earth. (As for the titles of other chapters, many contain similar allusions to the story of Christ, for example, "Travel," "Pilgrimage," "Atonement," and "Release" all read as Christian "buzz-words.") Other characters who become gradually convinced of Meridian's holiness are her "friends" Anne-Marion and Lynne who express anger, perhaps jealousy, at this realization. "Ah shit!" [Anne-Marion] said, stamping her foot, annoyed that she'd thought of Meridian in a religious context."^{xiv} Lynne reacts in a similar manner. "It ain't easy not to hate the omnipresent honky woman," said Lynne."^{xv} Lynne's vocalization contains an interesting sentiment in that it suggests that she is annoyed not merely by Meridian's "omnipresence" but more so because she is an omnipresent *black woman*. This speaks to the originality of Walker's conceptualization of a black, female Christ figure.

Further evidence for the parallel between Meridian and Jesus Christ comes from the strong actions Meridian takes to help the community at her own expense. As with the case of Jesus, all of

Meridian's efforts are those of a grassroots activist who lives among the people she helps. Meridian's work is completely non-profit; thus, each time Truman visits Meridian, she has fewer possessions.^{xvi} This signifies that she is relinquishing her worldly goods as if in preparation for ascension to a higher plane. Additionally, Meridian begins to gather apostles near the end of the novel. Her first apostle is unquestionably Truman who follows Meridian as she attempts to register voters. The second such follower is converted when she gives food to a dying woman and her husband. The husband refers to her as an angel several times, solidifying the biblical theme. Once the wife dies, the husband signs Meridian's yellow pad, officially signifying his resolve to follow Meridian's teachings.^{xvii} In this example Meridian stretches her thin resources to feed the hungry, and although it is less dramatic than offering her body and blood to fill the table, her dedication to helping those in need is saintly. The third apostle is a sixty-nine year-old woman, living with her sister, who is convinced that she is pregnant. Meridian takes this woman to a doctor who explains that she is not pregnant, and then the woman signs Meridian's yellow notepad.^{xviii} This woman is initially blinded by her ignorance of basic medical facts, but Meridian insures that she receives proper sexual education so that she can clearly see the facts of her life. In this respect, Meridian preforms the miracle of curing the woman's sexual blindness, earning her third apostle. This method of civil rights progress attained through education corresponds to the themes expressed in the earlier religious examples of Eden. Also, after Meridian carries a dead child to the mayor of a city, an an effective act of protest, the city's black people offer to reward her in any way they could. "Instead she made them promise they would learn."^{xix} Meridian uses the social power she gains from her grassroots activism to promote education among rural black communities. Thus, Meridian uses her position as a Christ figure to improve the living conditions of blacks by encouraging education as a method for overcoming the social and racial disparities at the heart of the civil rights movement.

In dealing with Meridian as a Christ figure, it is essential to address her inner debate over the concept of martyrdom. Near the onset of the novel, Meridian's symbolic crucifixion seems set in

stone. Even Meridian is convinced of this fact. “She dreamed she was a character in a novel and that her existence presented an insoluble problem, one that would be solved only by her death at the end.”^{xx} For emphasis, this sentence is repeated four times at the beginning of the chapter “The Recurring Dream.” This quote implies that Meridian's decision to become a martyr is guided by an underlying question that she has been asked countless times; it is an extension of her answer to the question “Would you kill for the sake of the movement?” In processing this choice, her subconscious turns the question inwards and instead asks her if she is willing to be killed for the movement. Once she articulates her answer to this question, the possibility of martyrdom is removed from the discussion. As she tells Truman, “Revolution would not begin with an act of murder – wars might begin that way – but with an act of teaching.”^{xxi} This is a subtle reference to the reactions to the assassinations of King, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy, and others. Their deaths were marked by blazing riots and somber funerals, but they accomplished nothing. The civil rights movement had more than its fair share of martyrs; what it needed were teachers that lived through the struggle. As Meridian thinks, “The only new thing now would be the refusal of Christ to accept the crucifixion. King should have refused. Malcolm, too, should have refused. All those characters in all those novels that require death to end the book should refuse. All saints should walk away. Do their bit, then – just walk away.”^{xxii} This philosophical stance sets Meridian at odds with Christ, but this is a device that Walker employs to clarify her message that the solution to the civil rights movement is through the continuation of the grassroots work and education that Meridian began – not through her death. Despite this disparity, Walker skilfully maintains her allegory until the final pages of the novel. Symbolically, Meridian dies after the protest in the opening scene of the novel which corresponds chronologically to the end of the book. When Meridian collapses, she is carried home as though deceased by men accustomed to the task of carrying corpses. The next day, Truman is startled to see that she left while he was sleeping. “His first thought was of Lazarus, but then he tried to recall someone less passive, who had raised himself without help.”^{xxiii} Lazarus was the man who Jesus raised from the dead, but Truman realizes

that Meridian did not need assistance. She was able to raise herself just as Jesus did. In parting, Meridian bestows her divine love and forgiveness upon Truman in her poem. “Whatever you have done, my brother,” she writes, “know i[*sic*] wish to forgive you... love you.”^{xxiv} By leaving Truman's world, she absolves Truman (and by proxy, the entire black community) of all his sins and expresses her unconditional love. In this act, she accomplishes all that Jesus did through martyrdom - without the unfortunate side-effect of actually dying. Also, Meridian passes on the torch of grassroots activism to her first apostle, Truman, who, in the final scene, dons her trademark cap and all the responsibilities associated with it.^{xxv} Truman, in turn, becomes the rock on which the church of Meridian is built, insuring the continuation of her goals and methods. Thus, by choosing to avoid martyrdom, Meridian instead focuses the grassroots efforts on education – not retaliation.

In conclusion, Walker uses religious symbolism to articulate her vision for the path to racial and gender equality. She symbolizes this ideal with modern-day representations of Eden in the examples of The Sojourner and the Sacred Serpent. Together, these two places explore the possibility of a “paradise” in which all black women are equal. Walker argues that this ideal can only be reached through formal, sexual, and moral education. Furthermore, Walker lays out a method by which this change may be accomplished – through the dedicated work of grassroots activists focused on these goals, freeing black women from societal oppression. In particular, Walker uses religious imagery to create the ideal black, female activist, Meridian. By portraying Meridian as a Christ figure, Walker establishes Meridian as a powerful and iconic grassroots activist who believes strongly in the importance of education. *Meridian* tells a story that is not ingrained in the cultural consciousness; it is the often forgotten personal struggles of the individuals in the civil rights movement. Walker attacks the simple media-driven story of the movement that began and ended with King, replacing it with a broader, truer interpretation of what actually happened. Though fiction, it slices through the accepted fiction of the easy civil rights movement, educating readers while emphasizing the importance of education. Still, the traditional images of iconic men engaged in bloody scenes permeate America's

recollection of the movement, but now, there is a place for black women. This place is Walker's Eden..

i Walker, *Meridian*, 92.

ii Ibid., 34.

iii Ibid., 35.

iv Ibid.

v Ibid., 39.

vi Ibid., 239

vii Ibid., 51.

viii Ibid.

ix Ibid., 53.

x Ibid., 54.

xi Ibid., np.

xii Ibid., 7.

xiii Ibid., 77.

xiv Ibid., 124.

xv Ibid., 192.

xvi Ibid., 19.

xvii Ibid., 226.

xviii Ibid., 232.

xix Ibid., 209.

xx Ibid., 121.

xxi Ibid., 205.

xxii Ibid., 162.

xxiii Ibid., 241.

xxiv Ibid., 242.

xxv Ibid.