

## Review

### Social Commentary and Internal Conflict: A Review of Alice Walker's *Meridian*

#### Abstract

Alice Walker's *Meridian* provides insight into the civil rights movement and social politics through an in-depth study of the sacrifices that are required to enact change. Through manipulation of narrative structure and a depiction of the conflict between the personal and political, *Meridian* serves as a fundamental novel in understanding how fighting for social justice can take its toll on a person.

Alice Walker's second novel, *Meridian*, provides an in-depth analysis of the civil rights era and the sacrifices that were required to enact social change. Walker offers a pointed commentary on the multi-faceted and complex nature of America during the civil rights movement.

Meridian Hill's journey of self-discovery works on two levels. Firstly, Meridian's journey of self - from the repression of childhood into the freedom of womanhood - provides a strong, character-driven novel with many emotive moments. Secondly, Meridian's journey allegorically reflects the journey of America as a nation during the transition of the civil rights era. Thus, this novel provides a sharp, pointed insight into the transient nature of America during the civil rights era. Although *Meridian* is very much about Meridian Hill's journey, it is also about the journey of many men and women in Meridian's position at the time in America.

*Meridian's* narrative structure is like a patchwork; it is one that pieces together different events throughout Meridian's life to create a narrative mosaic. This layering or patching together of key moments challenges literary traditions as it resists relying on a chronological structure. Walker's resistance in this aspect mirrors the resistance shown throughout the novel by Meridian and, thus, the structure conveys some of the novel's main themes such as resistance and rejection of social norms. However, though the narrative style of *Meridian* is a large part of its literary success, there are also a few problems presented by Walker's approach. Due to the disrupted chronology, the novel has been described as unclear by some reviewers, and it could be argued that the novel becomes a little disjointed and occasionally lacks cohesion.

An exception to this criticism is present in the chapter 'Gold'. The chapter takes the form of a flashback and uses the anecdotal style to great effect. This chapter weaves Meridian's past and present together seamlessly. In addition, the flashback helps to develop Meridian's character but also to emphasise the wider social contexts of the time that the novel was set. Walker succeeds in conveying the dysfunctional relationship between Meridian and her mother whilst simultaneously depicting the varying views on civil rights at the time. Arguably, the 'gold' in the chapter is an allegory for civil rights activism. Whilst Meridian wants the gold she rejects it due to the scepticism of her mother. The anecdote provides the first evidence of Meridian repressing her own desires and needs in favour of her mother - an act which reoccurs throughout the novel.

One major strength of the novel is the depiction of the interiority of Meridian herself. The internal conflict she displays throughout the text causes the reader to be emotionally invested in Meridian. As the novel progresses, at each juncture Meridian faces a dilemma between what she wants to do and what she's forced to do. Every time this is presented Meridian represses her desires. Thus, Meridian's rejection of 'traditional' life carries great emotional weight as it is something that she has fought for her whole life. However, what is most literarily and socially significant is the symbolic breaking down and repairing of Meridian's body. This is important because it doesn't just speak to the sacrifices that Meridian had to make for the civil rights movement to progress, but to the sacrifices that need to be made on a larger social scale in order to enact social change. Meridian Hill is a microcosm of the necessary actions society must undertake to enact social justice.

A further element of the novel was its depiction of relationships, in particular, Meridian and Truman. Throughout the novel, their relationship is extremely complicated and complex. Yet, this relationship remains peripheral. Perhaps this was due to the novel's primary focus being that of the civil rights movement and not romance. Though a foregrounded romance narrative may have engaged a wider readership, it may have actually obfuscated the message about social justice. Furthermore, this may have reduced the novel's message and resulted in it becoming less socially impactful.

*Meridian* is a highly influential and important novel with myriad layers. It is especially significant because it is an eye-opening portrayal of the lives of people who enacted social change. It is original in its approach to social issues and narrative structure and Walker's writing exudes style and flare. Walker has produced a novel that is grounded, relatable and extremely socially conscious. For this reason, I believe that *Meridian* is a must-read as it is an illuminating novel that tackles crucial issues.

Bibliography

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