

A Look into How Alice Walker Demonstrates her Progression from Disempowered, to Empowered, in
her Poems, “Remember Me” and “Each One, Pull One”

The product of oppression takes many forms from race to gender to sexuality. As for Alice Walker, an African-American female poet, the concept of oppression was no stranger to her. Through reading her poems, “Remember me” and “Each One, Pull One”, it posed the question of 'To what extent does Alice Walker impact the reader through the use of linguistic devices and structure to communicate her progression from disempowered to empowered?'. Alice Walker, born into a family where her father was a farmer and her mother, a maid- the notion of affluence was essentially unknown to her. Servility, poverty, anxiety and insecurity all culminated to what Walker believed was her identity. However, throughout her life, she ascended from these conceptions, with her journey being reflected through some of her poems. By utilizing emotive language, asyndetic listing and metaphors, she aims to reflect her own journey from the difficulties she faced due to her race and her gender, to self-assurance. In doing so, it can be inferred that she hopes to empower and encourage the readers to do so themselves, and to even confront the perpetrators responsible for the degree of oppression felt by many.

In her poem, “Remember me”, its first half encompasses the theme of denigration. Walker integrates her experiences through the perspective of an oppressed young girl to reflect the repercussions of malignant subjugation. This can be seen when the narrator is describing herself, through the use of the phrase, “shoes are thin”. We wear shoes to protect our feet, and our feet are what provide us with support. Looking back at the adjective, “thin”, it creates connotations of instability and transience, which comes to suggest that the young girl too, maybe lacking security in her life. This could also symbolize her economic instability which embeds great ties to the history of African-Americans and their perpetual incapacitation by white supremacists, and racists, in terms of monetary, mental and social aspects. Moving on to the phrases, “rotted teeth”, “wounded eye”, and “melted ear”. The emotive adjectives preceding the nouns may symbolize the metaphorical repercussions of the ceaseless oppression she’s experienced, as these adjectives all describe her as being injured and dilapidated. Considering that the nouns all listed are body parts, it also implies a sense of vulnerability which was most probably created, once again, through the incessant injustice towards her. What’s more is that these body parts all link to the fundamental senses that we depend on, such as sight and hearing, this only emphasizes the extent of her disempowerment. As a result, the reader would most likely feel enraged by the extent of damage caused to the speaker, and Alice Walker for her to end up in such a destitute state.

However, in the latter stanzas of the poem, we can see how thorough the use of metaphors and personification, does Walker demonstrate her passage to confidence. For example, the phrase, “I am the woman offering two flowers whose roots are twin Justice and Hope”. What’s stark about this stanza is that she has now used the noun, “woman” to describe herself, as opposed to “girl”, which was used in the beginning. This is because the noun, “girl” encompasses the themes of naivety and vulnerability, whereas “woman” consists of confidence and tenacity. What’s also critical is how “roots” are the structures that provide an immense amount of support for the plant. This system is what helps keep plants upright and unwavering, much in contrast to the beginning where Walker stated that her “shoes” were “thin”. This in turn may have a greater impact on the reader as it demonstrates her progression from feeling insecure to assured. What’s more, is that her confidence can also be exhibited through the capitalization of ‘J’ and ‘H’ when stating “Justice and Hope”, following the verb “offered”. This verb only emphasizes her security within herself as it portrays how she feels so empowered to the point where she has the ability to provide that for others as well. And by her capitalizing the letters of the nouns following, she almost personifies them, aiding in fortifying their importance to have in order to become emphatic, whilst simultaneously displaying her own confidence as she is now able to provide consummated encouragement to the readers as well. Therefore, with the readers witnessing her profound progression, they themselves may feel emboldened by this, wanting to reflect Walker’s furtherance.

Moving on to her other poem, titled “Each One, Pull One”, where she confronts the heinous actions taken upon by the oppressor, described from the prospect of the suppressed. This is done so through the use of emotive language, first seen by “They will chew up Our fingers in the night”. This entire phrase gives the impression that it is essentially, the speaker’s acute fears towards the individuals responsible for her disempowered, and oppressed state due to the use of the emotive verb (within this context), of “chew” to describe the action towards a body part, a “finger”. As mentioned in the poem, she and her community are immersed within the realms of creativity and the arts. Considering that the arts most typically revolve around painting, drawing, or playing an instrument- where one’s fingers are immensely crucial, the action of ‘chewing them up’, in turn, is considerably horrific. This is because a vivid image is created in the mind of the reader of a group of individuals who engross themselves in the activities that make up their identity, only to have this integral part of their being, brutally stripped away from them. Not to mention, the use of “night”, creates an ominous tone due to the constant affiliation between this time of day, and the imminent dangers that lurk here, emphasizing the heinous actions taken upon by the oppressor. The use of nouns and verbs, all

with negative connotations also illustrates increments of her weariness of the oppressors, demonstrating how she almost feels disempowered in front of them.

As the reader approaches the latter stanzas of the poem, it becomes prominent how Alice Walker now, illustrates her anger towards the oppressors. She utilizes asyndetic listing and enjambment to portray her exasperation in regards to the the perpetual acrimony towards her and her community. This can first be seen through the use of anaphora through the phrase, “We do not worship them”. The repetition of this phrase alone almost reflects her trying to enforce the contempt she holds for the oppressors. It also works to convince the readers of her journey to confidence, as they repeatedly read this phrase filled with tenacity and certainty. The utilization of negative modal auxiliary verb, ‘do not’ may also exhibit hints of her confidence surfacing as she’s now demonstrating her willingness to stand up those responsible for her, essentially, vilifying her into her oppressed state, whilst also indicating her assurance in herself as she is now able to uphold herself. Walker also goes on to state, “In short, we who write, paint, sculpt, dance or sing”, employing asyndetic listing in order to reiterate her confidence in her identity now, as she’s listing all the activities which embody her culture, therefore embracing them. She also makes use of enjambment here to emulate her exasperation towards the oppressors, as she no longer fears them, and instead, is now angered. The portrayal of her emotions here echoes her verification in self-assurance. Moreover, the verb worship is used to describe the inventions or even traits that the oppressors perceive as being superior or prodigious in a sense, such as “cars” or the trait of, “blonde” hair. These ideas beset the theme of white supremacy which has been the root of the perpetual defamation of the author, and her community. Consequently, the fact that she maintains her stature against this, only affirms her advancement to empowerment.

Alice Walker makes use of a variety of different language and structural techniques, ranging from metaphors to asyndetic listing in her poems, whilst illustrating an empowering journey in spite of all the adversities thrown at her in the forms of oppression, denigration and belittlement. In both poems, she virtually evolves from carrying a weakened semblance to a tenacious one. Respectively. she starts of her poems with a disparaged stature, but what makes each of them incredibly impactful, is how she portrays a message to the readers, explicitly outlining the possibilities of maturing to a state where one is capacitated. And by assimilating her own experiences, it may even make the reader feel more so emboldened and encouraged as Walker demonstrates the overcoming of her hardships herself, to finally reach a position of empowerment.