

ANALYSIS

“To Hell with Dying” (1967)



Alice Walker

(1944-)

“To Hell with Dying” begins with an exclamation spaced apart from the first of twenty paragraphs like a text announced by a preacher. Then a testimonial of faith ensues, more artful than preaching: “‘To hell with dying,’ my father would say, ‘these children want Mr. Sweet!’”

The text is archetypal, giving the congregation of readers an opportunity to draw from common experience. Mr. Sweet Little, an old man recurrently near death who is revived through a traditional ritual by the love of children, himself revives the endangered capacities of the soul. Alice Walker has said: ‘I was the children, and the old man.’ The narrative is both ritualistic and “spontaneous,” the style both repetitive and original, at first in the manner of a revival meeting, then like a “sweet, sad, wonderful” song played by Mr. Sweet on his guitar. The implied shift from a masculine preaching style to inspired worship and song is in the tradition of nineteenth-century black women such as the spiritual leader Rebecca Jackson, who rebelled against male leadership. Walker’s first published story, “To Hell with Dying,” was selected for an anthology by Langston Hughes in 1967, the year he died. “One of the best acts of my entire life,” she later said, “was to take a sack of oranges to Langston Hughes when he had the flu, about two weeks before he died. *We must cherish our old men.*”

Old Sweet Little “had been ambitious as a boy...only to find that black men fare better if they are not,” as symbolized by his forsaken love of a woman living in Chicago or “De-Story, Michigan.” Instead of her, he “had to marry Miss Mary” when she got pregnant, even though he was not sure that her baby was also his baby. Giving up competition, he becomes so much a figure of the heart that he “would sometimes lose complete or nearly complete control of his head.” As the female narrator grows independent and gets ahead in a traditionally masculine way, Sweet becomes more feminine and even sheeplike with his “wooly hair.” Her revivals of Sweet whenever he seems near death evolve into a ritual described in terms of striving and “success.” As soon as his eyes were open he would begin to smile and that way I knew that I had already won.” She grows up to be ambitious in the mainstream of American life, representing what Mary Helen Washington has called “the second cycle of Walker’s personal construct of the history of black women.”

When the narrator was a child, some people said that she looked “like a baby monkey.” Her evolution is now in a liberating and competitive phase represented by doctoral study up North, associated in Southern writers such as Faulkner with the dissociated modern mind, but in black folklore with freedom. That the freedom gained by developing her head does in fact distance and separate her from her soul is implied by her calling herself a “lady,” by an educated formality of phrasing at times—“he lay expiring”—by a use of quotation marks around some colloquial expressions, by the abrupt jump in time from childhood to adulthood and from South to North in the fifteenth paragraph, and by the allegorical coincidence that just as she is about to attain her high degree, Mr. Sweet dies: “how could I believe that I had failed? that Mr. Sweet was really gone?”

As in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977), a novel full of sweet motifs, where the male protagonist attains a redemptive union down South with a woman named Sweet, Alice Walker’s protagonist has lost touch with her spiritual home: “I looked around at my parents and was surprised to see that my father and mother also looked old and frail.” She proves her capacity for atonement when she gives a higher priority to reviving Sweet down South than to meeting obligations to teachers up North. When she makes her archetypal return down home and the old man dies at last, she is rewarded with the inheritance of his guitar to revive what she can of sweetness. Head bows to heart as she hums and plucks, “Sweet Georgia Brown”—“that was what he called me sometimes”—implying that she may be able to revive his spirit in her modern mind: “The magic of Mr. Sweet lingered still in the cool steel box.”

Mr. Sweet is one in a long line of redeemers in American literature whose differences from the most influential savior in western history define the visions of their creators: Pearl, Phoebe, Priscilla, and others in Hawthorne; Pierre, Pip, Queequeg, and others in Melville; Nigger Jim in Twain; Santiago in Hemingway; Dilsey, Sam Fathers, and others in Faulkner. Often black, a face which emphasizes the status of spiritual values in American society, these predecessors bequeath to Mr. Sweet Little a power that makes his family name ironic and his frailty comic: “Sometimes he would cry and that was an indication that he was about to die again.” Walker has said of Christ that “it is only by his continual, repeated dying—touching one’s own life in a direct, searing way—that the meaning of that original loss is pressed into the heart of the individual.” Mr. Sweet has “grace,” is related to the tradition of blind seers (“constantly on the verge of being blind drunk”), and has a comic version of the double consciousness traditionally associated with mystics: “His ability to be drunk and sober at the same time made him an ideal playmate.” Like his creator he sets an independent yet generous example, “for he brewed his own liquor and was not in the least a stingy sort of man.” Transcendence of race and culture is also implied by comparison of Sweet to “an old Chinese opium-user” and to “china.”

The redemptive figure gives allegorical significance to his relationships with other characters throughout the story. That he is married to Miss Mary and has a son who may not be his by analogy also makes Sweet a woebegone Joseph. That the son is shiftless and selfish implies a contrast with Christ, and the story as a whole displaces Christianity with a “womanist” version of evolution in which the Christian tradition is redeemed from patriarchy by the feminization of the Christ-evoking man and his succession by a sweet woman, an idea perhaps suggested by Rebecca Jackson, who believed that Christ was, as Walker puts it in her essay on Jackson, “essentially a female spirit.” Sweet is also the narrator’s “first love”—the last words of the story—a figure that Jungians would relate to the animus, the masculine principle idealized in the female. In her struggle to get ahead and on top, developing her own masculine side, the ambitious woman experiences the ideal male as self-sacrificial: “Even when he had trouble breathing he would not ask me to get down” off his chest. Her older brother pretended “that he was a young version of Mr. Sweet”: while she was earning her doctorate, “he was in the war in Asia.” Her father, after commanding attention at the outset, must yield to the children and specifically to her, who succeeds him in spiritual authority redeemed from the patriarchal by sweetness, through art.

The novelist David Bradley has observed that “Black men in Alice Walker’s fiction and poetry seem capable of goodness only when they become old like Grange Copeland, or paralyzed and feminized, like Truman Held.” In “To Hell with Dying,” just as the narrator subordinates her ambition—albeit briefly—to the need for reviving Mr. Sweet, the “womanist” allegory is subordinated to “universalist” values that transcend gender, as expressed by a proliferation of unifying pastoral motifs: an effusion of flowers, smells,

laughter, music, tears, intoxication, kissing, bed and children. Hair, another pastoral motif, is described in eleven paragraphs of the story, and is the subject of paragraph five, where the narrator is dismayed when the old man gets a haircut. Sweet becomes a comic Samson then, with soul power, and the sweet woman wants him hirsute. Her hair is bushy too, identifying her with him: "When he began to smile I could tickle him in earnest for I was sure that nothing would get in the way of his laughter, although once he began to cough so hard that he almost threw me off his stomach, but that was when I was very small, little more than a baby, and my bushy hair had gotten in his nose."

The tone of the prose here and throughout is loving and warm, compelling by its generosity of spirit. The independence and high achievement of the educated young lady are understated, while attention is focused and love is lavished on the dying old man. The heroine is saved by love as is traditional in popular romance, and justified by the character of the loved one, but Walker parodies the values of popular romance by making the hero poor, old, alcoholic, and diabetic. Sweet is the most vulnerable of men, always crying and dying.

At dramatic peaks in the story—the embracing and tickling revivals in paragraphs one, seven, ten, eleven, twelve and eighteen—the pace accelerates in emotive run-on sentences with minimal punctuation and a rising pitch that evoke the laughter and the tickling, ending on a downbeat of objectivity that conveys both the narrator as a child and the educated lady she became: "at a signal from Father they would come crowding around the bed and throw themselves on the covers and whoever was the smallest at the time would kiss him all over his wrinkled brown face and begin to tickle him so that he would laugh all down his stomach, and his moustache which was long and sort of straggly, would shake like Spanish moss and was also that color."

Stylistically the story is in the mainstream oral tradition of pastoral writers such as Mark Twain, Sherwood Anderson and, most specifically, Zora Neale Hurston, who developed the technique of sustaining a tension between two voices—a "narrative strategy of self-division," as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., explains it, "the literary analogue of the hyphen in 'Afro-American,' the famous twoness W. E. B. DuBois said was characteristic of the black experience." Ultimately in "To Hell with Dying," as the educated lady redeems herself from loss of soul by giving her highest priority to Sweet, the tension between the two voices is resolved through a synthesis in which values associated with modern civilization, formality, ambition, North, head, cool, and male are subordinated to values associated with pastoral nature, informality, love, South, heart, warm, and female—as conveyed by allegory, rhetoric, and the name Sweet Georgia Brown.

Turning upsidedown the hierarchy of values prevailing in society has been in the mainstream of American literature since Thoreau, Melville and Twain, while the inclusion of gender as an essential factor and the spiritual elevation of female above male recalls nineteenth-century white women's fiction and the sweet fair ladies of Hawthorne, generating ironies that derive from the two-voices narrative strategy, as the voices of white and black literature harmonize in Sweet Georgia Brown. "What is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life, is the larger perspective," Walker has written. "Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before...black writers and white writers seem to me to be writing one immense story—the same story, for the most part—with different parts of this immense story coming from a multitude of different perspectives."

At its deepest reaches, "To Hell with Dying" derives emotional power from universalist values, archetypal imagery, and recurrent rhythms. "Part of our tradition as black women is that we are universalists." Walker's ritual of human revival is reaffirmed by repetition and reinforced by recurrence in the style, as when a stressed word from one sentence or clause reappears in the next: "the whole family would stop whatever they were doing to sit around him and listen to him play. He liked to play." Musically, the words "die," "dying," "death," and "dead" recur as a bass, while the melody is strummed in chords of words such as "love" and "laugh" and "kiss" and "tickle." The song is "sweet" (the word occurs forty-five times) and becomes at the end "Sweet Georgia Brown," suggesting of Alice Walker what she has written of Zora Neale Hurston—that "thank our saints...she was never a lady"—and that she also belongs in the tradition of black women singers such as Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith. "To Hell with Dying" revives the soul, humming sweetly.

Michael Hollister
"Tradition in Alice Walker's 'To Hell with Dying'"
Studies in Short Fiction XXVI, 1
(Winter 1989) 90-94

WORKS CITED

1. Alice Walker, "To Hell with Dying," in *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers: An Anthology from 1899 to the Present*, ed. Langston Hughes (Little, Brown 1967) 490.
2. Walker, "From an Interview," *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (Harcourt/Harvest 1984) 249.
3. See Walker, "Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson," *In Search*, 71-82.
4. Walker, "The Unglamorous but Worthwhile Duties of the Black Revolutionary Artist, or of the Black Writer Who Simply Works and Writes," *In Search*, 135.
5. "An Essay on Alice Walker," *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*, ed. Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, Beverly Guy-Sheftall (Doubleday/Anchor 1979) 143.
6. See, for example, "Ralph Ellison," *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, second series (Viking 1963) 326.
7. Walker, "Beyond the Peacock," *In Search*, 55.
8. Walker defines "Womanist": "...In charge...prefers women's culture.... Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female.... Traditionally universalist," *In Search*, xi.
9. Walker, "Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson," *In Search*, 75.
10. "Novelist Alice Walker Telling the Black Woman's Story," *The New York Times Magazine* (8 January 1984) 34.
11. "A Negro Way of Saying," *The New York Times Book Review* (21 April 1984) 45.
12. The name recalls Sweetie Mae Carr, a character in Wallace Thurman's novel *Infants of the Spring* who "is allegedly based on Zora Neale Hurston" (Walker, "From an Interview," *In Search*, 261).
13. Walker, "Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life," *In Search*, 88.
14. Quoted in Bradley, 36.
15. Walker, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View," *In Search*, 88.
16. See Walker, "Zora Neale Hurston," *In Search*, 91.