Metaphors: The Key to Representing the Intersectional nature and Causes of Oppression

“Am I Blue?” is a personal essay written by Alice Walker in 1986. As a writer and social activist, she was very active and participated in the Civil Rights Movement. As a queer and African-American woman, Alice Walker is a minority in the United States. On the contrary, Walker also belongs to the class of oppressors as humans have authority over the fate of animals. The oppression of African-Americans spurred the Civil Rights Movements to fight for racial equality. However, the movement did not emphasize the need for equality for other marginalized groups such as women and the LGBTQ+ community. In the essay “Am I Blue?” Alice Walker addresses the intersectional nature of gender, racial, and animal oppression by claiming that the common cause of all oppression is the lack of empathy and communication of humans. As the oppressed and an oppressor, Walker utilizes ironic and extended metaphors as well as direct comparisons between the oppression of Blue (an animal that was exploited by a human to produce an offspring), racial, and gender oppression - on a personal and universal level. The metaphors are a powerful tool to portray this interconnectedness of multiple types of oppression as a few words can link and symbolize several types of oppression, similar to how these oppressions are related to a common cause: the lack of understanding of oppressors and the oppressed.

The author utilizes several ironic and extended metaphors in the essay to reveal the common cause of all oppression: the lack of communication and understanding of others. She also uses these metaphors to create a personal, yet global statement about oppression. For instance, the title “Am I Blue?” is an extended metaphor that represents Blue’s emotional state in the essay as well as connects Blue’s experiences to the narrator’s life. “Am I Blue?” is also the title of a Blues song sung by Billie Holiday. Because Blues songs are generally melancholy, one
can infer that the essay will also have a component of sadness. More specifically, Holiday’s song is about a woman’s heartbreak after her lover had left her. This connects to the plot of the essay since the horse, Blue, is also separated from his lover (Brown) after his lover gets pregnant. This connection portrays the common feeling of sadness due to lost love, regardless of whether the victim is human or nonhuman.

However, the metaphor not only connects the melancholy nature of the Blues to the horse’s feelings in the essay but also connects to the narrator’s African American heritage and comparisons in the essay. Since the Blues is a primarily African American art form, the title “Am I Blue?” also refers to the narrator’s African American history, suggesting her personal inquiry of how Blue’s story of oppression and sorrow is analogous to the story of oppression in her African American heritage. The bridge between Blue and racial rights in the title serves as a “bridge” to more specific connections between animal, racial, and women’s rights. For instance, Walker later directly connects the phrase “put with” in the sentence “Blue partner had been “put with him… (140)” to its original context: a slave becoming impregnated with her master’s child. In other words, Blue was forced to mate with Brown to produce offspring, which was taken away with its mother by another human. This situation is analogous to a slave being pregnant with her master’s child and then later being separated from her loved ones and children (Walker 140). By creating this extended metaphor, the narrator portrays the universal pain of all oppression: from animal to racial. The metaphor, therefore, is a powerful mechanism by which a simple phrase “Am I Blue” highlights the commonality of sadness and despair in all types of oppression. Walker chooses to do so in the title itself to establish the multidimensional purpose of the essay, one that discusses not only the oppression of animals but also African Americans. In the 1980s and even today, more than a century after the abolishment of slavery, the immorality of human
slavery is recognized by American society. However, the slavery and ill-treatment of animals are still not regarded as immoral to the same extent as human slavery. This is evident by modern evidence of human tyranny: factory farms where animals are “enslaved” to mate, provide dairy products, and slaughtered to be converted as meat. By connecting a commonly accepted immoral practice of human slavery with one that is not given the same level of importance – animal slavery – Walker sheds light on the commonality of oppression and the pain of enslaved animals.

Even naming the white horse as Blue serves as an ironic metaphor that accentuates societal tendency to look past understanding living beings’ emotional states and communicating with them, which leads to severe oppression of animals, other races, and genders. The author purposefully named the white horse as Blue since “Blue” represented the horse’s emotional state and its experiences, rather than merely its physical appearance. At the beginning of the essay, the author excitedly offers the horse some apples. However, she is shocked to see loneliness and boredom in his eyes, which she could sense because she established a nonverbal connection with Blue (Walker 139).

Moreover, she also mentions that she had forgotten “the depth of feeling [in] a horse’s eyes (Walker 139)” from when she was a child to show that children are born with love and the ability to understand one another. However, as the children become adults, they “forget” the skills of compassion and communication to fit societal standards. Walker makes this claim by directly comparing her personal experience of forgetting how to communicate with animals with white children who had maternal love for their mammies – African American women who worked in a white household and nursed their children. However, the same children forget their love and understanding between their mammies when they become adults and claim to never
understand African Americans. The author also connects the same phenomena of forgetting communication between others when describing some American men who married non-English speaking women. The men who fell in love with the women before they spoke English tend to claim their marriages as “falling apart” after their wives learn English (Walker 139). This example portrays that the men did not understand their wives fully before they could speak English, resulting in a dissociation between their “images” of their wives and their wives’ true feelings and characters.

By directly tying several types of prejudice together to one source: forgetting the ability to empathize, Walker establishes a universal element to all prejudices through her personal experience and direct comparison to broader groups of oppressors. She also ties these connections back to the symbol of naming the white horse as “Blue,” when her friend exclaims that the white horse is representative of freedom and independence. In this instance, her friend is very similar to the white people who cannot “understand” African Americans and the men who could not “understand their non-English speaking wives. This is because the friend only sees an “image” of freedom and independence in Blue because of his physical color: white (Walker 140). She fails to even attempt to understand the horse’s pain and sorrow due to oppression by humans, which is the opposite of the friend’s symbol for Blue: independence and freedom.

By ironizing her friend’s remarks in this situation, Walker creates an extended metaphor of the meaning behind the name “Blue.” Due to the inability to empathize with other beings, people like her friend create “images” of freedom and independence of the animals that are oppressed and consumed to justify societal wrongs like packing the animals in factory farms and slaughtering them. Moreover, Walker explains through this analogy that the same disability creates people who cannot “understand” other races and genders, causing oppression. Thus,
Walker’s metaphor of Blue’s name and the direct comparisons that support the reason of the metaphor strengthen Walker’s claim that acts such as falsely calling Blue as “free” and not being able to “understand” other races are due to lack of empathy, which leads to prejudice. Walker, thus, utilizes the irony of “Blue” to destabilize the false “images” and standards in society for the oppressed – animals, women, and African Americans – and reveal the lack of empathy of dominant groups (the white children who had mammies, white men who married non-English speaking women, and humans that cannot understand the pain of animals) towards those that are marginalized.

Walker also utilizes the children that associate with Blue as a metaphor or direct example of those who were born with the ability to empathize, but later forget the skill. First, Walker explains her gradual inability to communicate with animals by stating “people like me who have forgotten… all that animals try to tell us (140).” She recounts her pleasant experience with her horse Nan from her childhood and harnesses her “forgotten” skill of understanding animal thoughts and emotions when she felt loneliness and sorrow in Blue’s eyes (Walker 139). This personal experience is then connected to white children who forget their maternal connection with their mammies and claim that African Americans are difficult to understand, portraying the loss of the capability to empathize when one gets older. Because the experience is personal, her realization of forgetting how to communicate with animals seems individualistic yet touching.

However, Walker also shows this loss through the ambiguous children that played with Blue at the beginning of the essay. The narrator observes some children “ride furiously” on Blue and then “not be seen again for a month or so (Walker 138).” First, the ambiguous diction of simply calling the children as “children,” a “stocky teenager” or a “younger girl” creates a generalization of almost all children forgetting communication with animals, not just the
narrator. Moreover, when the children only ride on Blue for a short period of time and disappear, the author portrays the children’s lack of effort to spend time to understand Blue like a friend or feed him as the author does. Rather, the children simply ride on Blue and forget about him for a long period of time.

Furthermore, the children had explained to the narrator later in the essay that Blue was “put with” Brown (Walker 140). This illustrates the process of “unlearning” compassion and empathy when the children are exposed to ruthless societal norms. Like Walker’s example of children who casually see and talk about their mammies being sold like commodities, the children, in this case, are witnessing animal exploitation and suffering by humans. Like the white children that turn racist and do not “understand” African Americans due to social actions that justify insensitivity and lack of empathy, like selling their own mammies, the children that know Blue are also exposed to human tyranny. Being exposed to humans that force animals to mate and take away their loved ones is analogous to separating a slave’s family, showing that both instances normalize causing pain to the oppressed. In a sense, the end result of repeated exposure to such cruel acts can be represented by the narrator’s friend, when she claims Blue to be the epitome of freedom without using empathy to realize that he is actually the model for the complete opposite: the oppressed. So, the author shows the process of losing empathy as a child and becoming ignorant of the cruelty towards the oppressed through these ambiguous children, showing that this desensitizing process is universal and starts from childhood, across generations.

Therefore, Walker embeds direct comparisons between different types of prejudices under major extended metaphors like the title, Blue’s name, and the children that play with Blue to portray the clear intersectional cause of all prejudice: the lack of empathy. The title can be seen as a metaphor that ties together several types of oppression as the topic of the essay, rather
than a literal discussion about a horse named Blue and the name Blue itself serves to reject societal standards that allow for prejudice and highlights the lack of understanding that causes discrimination against marginalized groups. She not only uses her personal experiences and actions but also utilizes others’ actions towards Blue’s unfortunate situation to highlight that almost everyone undergoes the same process of “unlearning” empathy and compassion from a young age, which causes major acts of racism and animal oppression.
Works Cited