

## Interpretation of Dialogism in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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Supported by Beijing Higher Education Young Elite Teacher Project (YETP0735).

Received 27 September 2015; accepted 13 November 2015  
Published online 26 December 2015

### Abstract

On the basis of Bakhtin's dialogic theory, this paper discusses the phenomenon of double-voicedness in Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, in terms of its language (dialect and standard English), narration (two narrators and the relationship between narrators, characters and the reader) and reporting speech representation. After careful analysis of the discourse in the novel, the author thus draws the conclusion that the novel is dialogic and that different voices interact, contend and influence on one another, resulting in a multi-voiced effect in the novel. By means of using a linguistic theory to interpret a novel, the author tries to offer a new perspective to the understanding and interpretation of literary works.

**Key words:** Bakhtin; Dialogic theory; Double-voicedness; Alice Walker; *The Color Purple*

Peng, X. M. (2015). Interpretation of Dialogism in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 11(6), 60-65. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/8028>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8028>

### INTRODUCTION

The term "dialogism", according to Bakhtin, means "double-voicedness", rather than "relating to dialogue". Bakhtin's discussion of the term "dialogism" is ambiguous, because for him, it is both linguistic and novelistic. He uses it to "refer to particular instances of

language, perceptible in novels and popular speech; and also refers to a defining quality of language itself, and its most fundamental sense-making capacities" (Sue, 1997, p.45). When referring to the former, dialogism means the presence of two distinctive voices in one utterance; while meaning the latter, dialogism refers to 'the mixing of intentions of speaker and listener, the creation of meaning out of past utterance, and 'the constant need for utterances to position themselves in relation to one another' (Ibid.). Furthermore, there is a third possibility of the using of dialogism which may mean the intersection of two or more contexts in an utterance, that is, 'the interaction of the social and historical contexts of heteroglossia'<sup>1</sup> (Ibid.). Therefore, in a wider sense, we can understand that Bakhtin thought of language itself as dialogic. It has been suggested that Bakhtin's use of the term 'dialogism' may be divided into three subcategories: First, in his theory of genre and style, Bakhtin proposes an 'intertextual dialogic relation', which indicates that the intersecting voices are those of different texts, and response and anticipation takes place within 'the chain of culture' as a whole (Ibid., p.46). Second, "in the concept of addressivity and the alien word Bakhtin anticipates the reader's response in dialogic understanding" (Ibid.). Third, in the analysis of the interaction between author and hero, Bakhtin discusses specifically "intratextual dialogic relations", that is, intersection within the text itself (Ibid.). As far as the novel *The Color Purple* is concerned, we can detect trace of both the second category and the third category of dialogism. And this point will be founding detail in the coming analysis.

Dialogism describes the way the languages of heteroglossia are arranged in a text, as Bakhtin says: All the languages of heteroglossia, including narratorial

<sup>1</sup> Heteroglossia means "differentiated speech". It takes two general forms: first, "social languages" within a single national language; and second, "different national languages within the same culture" (Bakhtin *Discourse in the Novel*: 275. Cited from Sue Vice, 1997, p.19)

and characters' discourse, permit "a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and their interrelationship (always more or less dialogized)" (Bakhtin, 1997, p.263; Cited from Sue, 1997, p.50) to enter the novel. And, Bakhtin also emphasizes the fact that dialogism is "a struggle among socio-linguistic point of view, not an intra-language struggle between individual will or logical contradictions" (Ibid.).

Voice is a fundamental concept in Bakhtin's dialogic theory, which refers to the presence of the speaker in a certain discourse or text. This fully echoes his explanation to Dostoevsky's inclination to dialogism:

In every voice he could hear contending voices, in every expression a crack, and the readiness to go over immediately to another contradictory expression; in every gesture he detected confidence and lack of confidence simultaneously; he perceived the profound ambiguity, even multiple ambiguity, of every phenomenon (Bakhtin, 1997, p.30. Cited from Vice, 1997, p.55).

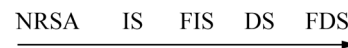
By contrast, voice can also be monologic, which is a symbol of autocracy and which needs recognition instead of response. According to Bakhtin, double-voiced discourse is response-oriented, and thus, is not analyzable by using any kind of traditional linguistics. Conventional linguistics concentrates on small grammatical units, certainly not on a whole utterance. But for Bakhtin, he says that utterance is "the real unit of speech communication", and his own approach to literary language is called by himself "metalinguistics", whose aim is to show the differences between monologic and dialogic language and treat "the specific nature of dialogic relationship between rejoinders in a dialogue" (Bakhtin, 1997, p.183. Cited from Vice, 1997, p.55). All those things cannot be done under the traditional linguistic framework. Bakhtin observes that traditional stylistics is "deaf to dialogue" (Bakhtin, 1997, p.273. Cited from Vice, 1997, p.61), and unable to approach "the distinctive social dialogue among languages that are present in the novel" (Bakhtin, 1997, p.263. Cited from Vice 1997, p.61). The failure of traditional stylistics to deal with language is correspondent with its failure to deal with the novel; for both have been seen as "self-contained" system that cannot 'stand in a dialogic interrelationship with other languages" (Bakhtin, 1997, p.274. Cited from Vice, 1997, p.59). Bakhtin argues that most theories of the novel try to separate its style and its content, its "formal" from its "ideological" elements. In contrast to this, he takes novel as "a social phenomenon", at the level of both form and content. In this sense, the novel is thus "multiform in style and variform in speech and voice" (Bakhtin, 1997, p.261. Cited from Vice, 1997, p.59). Bakhtin lists five "basic types" of different elements out of which the novel is usually composed:

- (a) Direct authorial literary-artistic narration (in all its diverse variants);

- (b) Stylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration (*skaz*<sup>2</sup>);
- (c) Stylization of the various forms of semiliterary (written) everyday narration (the letter, the diary, etc.);
- (d) Various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech (moral, philosophical or scientific statements, oratory, ethnographic descriptions, memoranda and so forth);
- (e) The stylistically individualized speech of characters. (Bakhtin, 1997, p.262. Cited from Vice, 1997, p.60).

In addition to the identification of the five categories of novelistic discourse, Bakhtin also makes a distinction between utterances in the novel into three kinds of dialogic relations: First, "the primordial dialogism of discourse", between individuals "utterances inside a single language"; second, between "social languages" within a single national language; and third, between 'different national languages within the same culture (Bakhtin, 1997, p.275. Cited from Vice, 1997, p.61). In *The Color Purple*, dialogic interaction occurs within, first, a single national language, English (between the black English of the protagonist, Celie and other characters' language through Celie's narration); and second, between different social languages within a national language (the protagonist Celie's black English and her sister Nettie's standard English). All these languages acknowledge each other's existence in the novel, speak to each other, and their interaction is thus dialogic.

In the dialogic discourse, there exist two or even more interacted voices. These voices do not merely co-exist in the utterance or discourse, but form a variety of dialogic relations: First, there is a clear boundary among these double-voices and multi-voices, which is mostly employed in direct speech (DS); and second, one voice is dominant over other voices or one voice distorts other voices. This is best illustrated by indirect speech (IS). According to Leech & Short (1981, p.324), speech can be divided into five types: Direct Speech (DS), indirect speech (IS), free direct speech (FDS), free indirect speech (FIS) and narrative report of speech acts (NRSA). In accordance with the degree of interference of the narrator, they order them in the following figure:



**Figure 1**  
**Line of Interference in Report**

As moving along the line of speech presentation from the more bound to the freer end, we can find the fact that narrator's interference seems to become less, and when

<sup>2</sup> Skaz is a mode of narration that 'imitates the oral speech of an individualized narrator' (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*: 18. Cited from Sue Vice, 1997, p.22).

we need the most extreme version of FDS, the characters are left to talk entirely on their own.

In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, one of the most distinctive features is her use of double-voicedness by the means of DS, FDS, IS, and FIS. And the following part of this paper will concentrate on the interpretation of dialogic analysis in *The Color Purple*.

## 1. DIALOGISM OF LANGUAGES IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*

*The Color Purple* is composed of a series of letters (total number is 92, among which 70 is written by Celie, the protagonist, either to God or to Nettie, and 22 by Nettie to Celie.) So in this sense, it belongs to the third category among the five "basic types" a novel is composed of, that is, letter stylization. However, it is also noticed that *The Color Purple* is also a piece of literary work, so it also goes to the first category, that is, direct authorial literary-artistic narration. Therefore, it is not difficult for us to reach the conclusion that from the very beginning, *The Color Purple* is dialogism or double-voiced. The two voices contend with each other and, thus form a special stylistic and aesthetic effect on Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

More importantly, in *The Color Purple*, dialogism is represented, first of all, by different varieties of language: One is black dialect of English, and the other is standard English. As mentioned above in the first section, these two varieties (that is, two social languages) interact dialogically within a single national language, that is, English. These two different social languages serve to identify characters' existence in the novel. Both characters (here I mean the two writers of these letters) are of black origin, coming from the same family, but they use different social languages in their letters. By writing to each other (or to God), the characters (or narrators) are dialogic in the sense that they not merely talk to others, but talk with others. Their languages represent two social groups: one is the black and the other is the white. The double voices contend with each other, for in Celie's letters, black English is dominant, while in Nettie's letters, standard English plays a major role. Concerning the whole novel, the black English dominates over the standard English, leading to the impression that the black will win their identity and status in the future, for language of a group is the symbol of their personal identity. It also indicates that the differences between black and white will gradually be got rid of, and that everyone will be equal in the real sense, not merely in terms of language.

## 2. DIALOGISM OF NARRATION IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Dialogism in *The Color Purple* can also be seen from the perspective of narration. On the whole, there are two

narrators who by writing letters, tell the reader what has happened to the narrators themselves and other characters in the novel. The two narrators are, on the other hand, also characters of the novel, therefore, the author, the first-person narrator, other characters and the reader together compose of a multiple-voiced discourse. All these voices interact with each other and contend with each other, so that their won says can be heard and responded by their listeners. For example, Celie, is not only the protagonist of the novel, but also the narrator of the stories around her. Sometimes, because of the use of first-person pronoun, the author (here refers to Alice Walker) blends the authorial narration into Celie's narration. In this sense, the author's voice and the narrator's voice are mixed together, thus producing the effect of vividness and truthfulness. Similarly, voices of different characters are contending with one another, trying to express their own and also other's views from their perspectives. In addition, both of the two narrators use first-person pronoun, giving the reader a sense of participation, in this way the author anticipates the reader's responses in dialogic understanding and, their interpretations become another voice among the multiple voices of the novel. See the example below:

(1)

He beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church. I may have got something in my eye but I didn't wink. I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them. Maybe cause my mama cuss me you think I kept mad at her. But I ain't. I felt sorry for mama. Trying to believe his story kilt her.

Sometime he still be looking at Nettie, but I always git in his light. Now I tell her to marry Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. I don't tell her why.

I say Marry him, Nettie, an try to have one good year out your life. After that, I know she be big.

But me, never again. A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don't bleed no more.

Here in this extract, Celie is the narrator and also the character who experiences the story that she tells to the reader, so her double voices are mixed with. And there is her Pa's voice and a girl's voice, also, there are responses anticipated by the narrator from both the characters and the reader. In this sense, all these people together narrate the story in different voices and from different perspectives.

## 3. SPEECH REPRESENTATION IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Direct speech, free direct speech, indirect speech, and free indirect speech are the most conspicuous means the narrator or, rather the author conveys characters' speech, for as a whole, both narrators employ free direct speech when addressing to their letters to the letter recipient. But

within the free direct speech, when the characters are talking to each other, there also exist other speech forms, such free indirect speech, and indirect speech. There are no quotation marks throughout the novel, free direct speech is employed where the characters apparently speak to the reader more immediately without the narrator as an intermediary; while free indirect speech is the form between direct speech and indirect speech, and is usually thought of as a freer version of an ostensibly indirect form. According to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's definition of free direct speech, it is 'direct discourse shorn of its conventional orthographical cues. This is the typical form of first-person interior monologue' (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983. Cited from Vice, 1997, p.93). He also defines free indirect speech as being 'grammatically and mimetically intermediate between indirect and direct discourse', and the former is 'mimetic to some degree' while being mostly concerned with reporting the content of an utterance, and the latter a "quotation" of a monologue or dialogue' creating the "illusion of 'pure' mimesis" (Ibid.).

It is the mixing of direct speech, free direct speech, indirect speech and free indirect speech in the discourse of *The Color Purple*<sup>3</sup> that produces its particular version of double-voiced discourse. See the following example:

(2)

My little sister Nettie is got a boyfriend in the same shape almost as Pa. His wife died. She was kilt by her boyfriend coming home from church. He got only three children though. He seen Nettie in church and now every Sunday evening here come Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. I tell Nettie to keep at her books. It be more then a notion taking care of children ain't yourn. And look what happen to Ma.

Here in the above extract, Celie, the narrator and the protagonist, narrates to God the story of her family members. As a whole and in the broad sense, her narration can be taken as free direct discourse, that is, under the background of free direct speech, there includes, in particular, an indirect speech whose addressee is her sister Nettie—"I tell Nettie to keep at her books". And then, the indirect speech shifts to the direct speech—"It be more then a notion taking care of children ain't yourn. And look what happen to Ma", without reminding the reader of its shift. This is Celie's own word and her own style when speaking to her sister, but its place within the context of subject construction of indirect speech (that is, the utterance before free direct speech) has the effect of making it seem like the word of another person who shares Celie's dialect. Volosinov discusses cases like this where the "narrator's speech is just as individualized, colorful, and nonauthoritative as is the speech of the characters" (Volosinov, p.121. Cited from Vice, 1997, p.94).

In dialogic discourse, there exist double or multiple

<sup>3</sup> Because of the limit of space, my examples are cited mainly from pages 14 to 17. For the reference of the cited part, see Appendix.

voices that interact with each other. See example (3) below:

Mr.\_\_\_\_ finally come right out an ast for Nettie hand in marriage.but He won't let her go. He say she too young, no experience. Say Mr.\_\_\_\_ got too many children already. Plus what about the scandal his wife cause when somebody kill her? And what about all this stuff he hear bout Shug Avery? What bout that?

I ast our new mammy bout Shug Avery. What it is? I ast. She don't know but she say she gon fine out.

Here in this example, there are indirect speech and free direct speech, and there is also a shift from indirect speech to free direct speech and then to indirect speech again. The mixture of direct and indirect speech has a dialogic or double-voiced effect in the text. First, we hear the voice of He—Celie and Nettie's Pa, who is arguing with Mr.\_\_\_\_ and refusing Mr.\_\_\_\_'s proposal to marry Nettie. He was third-person pronoun which is a symbol of indirect speech. By using indirect speech, the narrator or the author has, to some extent, a partial control in the interference of the speaker's report. In this way, we can, through the eyes of the narrator (or the author), get the image of Celie's Pa (actually he is her stepfather): sex discriminating, cunning, and quibbling. So the narrator's (actually Celie's) voice interacts with Pa's, thus, expresses her attitude toward her stepfather. Then we hear Celie's voice in free direct speech—what it is? She is asking her new mammy (her stepmother) about Shug Avery. By making use of free direct speech, the author gives "I", Celie, the freedom to speak without or with little interference. So in this way can the reader respond to her question simultaneously with her stepmother, making us curious about who Shug Avery is. In this way, the reader participate in the story and their voice interplay with that of the character, Celie. Then the third voice is heard, which is uttered by Celie's new mammy. By rearranging her new mammy's original utterance, Celie the narrator interposes between the reader and the character. The narrator's or the author's voice is not apparently present, but by the use of indirect speech, her voice can be heard, and her attitude revealed.

Just as mentioned above, free direct speech can arouse the reader's response, invite their own comment but without or with little interference from the author. This is one of the functions of free direct speech. In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker uses free direct speech to give her characters the freedom to speak freely, and unveil them through their own utterances, but at the same time, the author sets a third voice (besides the voice of the author and the characters) to interpose between the reader and the character, so that she can make her readers judge the attitude she holds toward her characters. Here is another example below to illustrate this point:

Mr.\_\_\_\_ say, Well Sir, I sure hope you done change your mind.

He say, Naw, Can't say I is.

Mr.\_\_\_\_ say, Well, you know, my poor little ones sure could use a mother.



Well, He say, real slow, I can't let you have Nettie. She too young. Don't know nothing but what you tell her. Sides, I want her to git some more schooling. Make a schoolteacher out of her. But I can let you have Celie. She the oldest anyway. She ought to, marry first. She ain't fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled. Twice. But you don't need a fresh woman no how. I got a fresh one in there myself and she sick all the time. He spit, over the railing. The children git on her nerve, she not much of a cook. And she big already.

This dialogue takes place between Celie's stepfather and Mr. \_\_\_\_ (her future husband) in a secret place, arguing about Mr. \_\_\_\_'s proposal to marry Nettie. At the first sight, their utterances are spoken directly to the other party, "you", esp. when "Well", first-person pronoun "I" and second-person "you" appear in the discourse. We listen to their argument as if we were present participating their dialogue. But the at the second thought, we can unconsciously feel a feeble voice interposing between the characters and the reader. The talk between the two men happens in a secret place and naturally cannot be heard by any other characters, but during their dialogue, a third voice appears, "Well, He say, real slow", and "He spit, over the railing". With no doubt, the narrator is not present, but by using this third voice, the narrator takes her part in the talk. So not only the two men are in a dialogic tone, and so are the narrator and the reader. By contending with the characters' voice, the narrator's voice rises unnoticeably but at the same time conspicuously, therefore, we see things not only through the characters' own utterances, but also through the eyes of the narrator. Furthermore, the narrator's attitude of disdain and disgust toward the two men and their cruelty can be felt by this use of mixing reporting representation.

From the examples cited above, we can feel the dialogic interaction of these modes of speech presentation (direct speech, free direct speech, indirect speech and free indirect speech) frequently produces the effect of double-voicedness (or even multi-voicedness) in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. "Volosinov points out that the analysis of novelistic reported speech gives the critic insight into the reception of another's utterance, into the 'inner-speech consciousness of the recipient'" (Volosinov, p.117; Vice, 1997, p.95). He goes even further, and suggests that 'the history of speech representation in the novel registers the history of "socioideological communication" as a whole' (Vice, 1997, p.95). Analysis of the construction of reported speech in Alice Walker's novel reveals Celie's self-address, how she sees herself, other characters and things around her, how the mode of the address of others affect her "inner-speech consciousness" (Volosinov, p.123; Vice, 1997, p.95) and how she gradually awakens. The unsettling mixture of speech representation modes can be explained in narratological terms, but again its effect can best be described by using Bakhtin's notion of dialogism. As Volosinov puts it in his *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*,

what is expressed in the forms employed for reporting speech is an active relation of one message to another, and it is expressed, moreover, not on the level of the theme but on the stabilized constructional patterns of the language itself. (Volosinov, p.116; Vice, 1997, p.96)

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## CONCLUSION

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Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is diverse in interpretation, and in this current paper, the device of Bakhtin's dialogism is used to understand her novel. It includes dialogism in terms of language (dialect and standard English), narration (two narrators and the relationship between narrators, characters and the reader) and reporting speech representation. "Volosinov observes that the materiality of language, which precedes 'inner personality', determines differentiation in a society, its sociopolitical order; it organizes society hierarchically and deploys persons interacting within it" (Volosinov, p.153. Cited from Vice, 1997, p.100). Alice Walker employs a particular combination of ways of reporting speech and through the device of shared black dialect and social status (black women were the lowest in the white-dominated society), offer a threat to the order and hierarchy of the society represented in her novel. The protagonist, Celie, a very important voice in the novel, awakens step by step by interlocutions with other voices (eg, her sister Nettie, Shug Avery and other characters). These voices interact, contend and influence on one another, resulting a multi-voiced effect in the novel. However, the use of dialect by both narrator (refers to Celie only) and characters makes the "hybrid constructions" so marked, and the markedness of the "hybrid constructions" suggests that *The Color Purple* is dialogic. In this sense, to better interpret Alice Walker's novel, we should, as far as I can see, not analyze it monologically, but should penetrate it with Bakhtin's dialogic notion, so that we can get a more comprehensive understanding of the author's real intention.

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## APPENDIX

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Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* from pp.14-17.

Dear God,

He come home with a girl from round Gray. She be my age but they married. He be on her all the time. She walk round like she don't now what hit her. I think she thought she love him. But he got so many of us. All needing somethin.

My little sister Nettie is got a boyfriend in the same shape almost as Pa. His wife died. She was kilt by her boyfriend coming home from church. He got only three children though. He seen Nettie in church and now every Sunday evening here come Mr.\_\_\_\_. I tell Nettie to keep at her books. It be more then a notion taking care of children ain't yourn. And look what happen to Ma.

Dear God,

He beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church. I may have got something in my eye but I didn't wink. I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them. Maybe cause my mama cuss me you think I kept mad at her. But I ain't. I felt sorry for mama. Trying to believe his story kilt her.

Sometime he still be looking at Nettie, but I always git in his light. Now I tell her to marry Mr.\_\_\_\_. I don't tell her why.

I say Marry him, Nettie, an try to have one good year out your life. After that, I know she be big.

But me, never again. A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don't bleed no more.

Dear God,

Mr.\_\_\_\_ finally come right out an ast for Nettie hand in marriage. But He won't let her go. He say she too young, no experience. Say Mr.\_\_\_\_ got too many children already. Plus what about the scandal his wife cause when somebody kill her? And what about all this stuff he hear bout Shug Avery? What bout that?

I ast our new mammy bout Shug Avery. What it is? I ast. She don't know but she say she gon fine out.

She do more then that. She git a picture. The first one of a real person I ever seen. She say Mr.\_\_\_\_ was taking somethin out his billfold to show Pa an it fell out an slid under the table. Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail. She brining with her foot up on somebody motocar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some.

I ast her to give me the picture. An all night long I stare at it. An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery. She be dress to kill whirling and laughing.

Dear God,

I ast him to take me instead of Nttie while our new mammy sick. But he just ast me what I'm talking bout. I tell him I can fix myself up for him. I duck into my room and come out wearing horsehair, feathers, and a pair of our new mammy high heel shoes. He beat me for dressing trampy but he do it to me anyway.

Mr.\_\_\_\_ come that evening. I'm in the bed crying. Nettie she finally see the light of day, clear. Our new mammy she see it too. She in her room crying. Nettie tend to first one, then the other. She so scared she go out doors and vomit. But not out front where the two mens is.

Mr.\_\_\_\_ say, Well Sir, I sure hope you done change your mind.

He say, Naw, Can't say I is.

Mr.\_\_\_\_ say, Well, you know, my poor little ones sure could use a mother.

Well, He say, real slow, I can't let you have Nettie. She too young. Don't know nothing but what you tell her. Sides, I want her to git some more schooling. Make a schoolteacher out of her. But I can let you have Celie. She the oldest anyway. She ought to, marry first. She ain't fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled. Twice. But you don't need a fresh woman no how. I got a fresh one in there myself and she sick all the time. He spit, over the railing. The children git on her nerve, she not much of a cook. And she big already.