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Surface and Depth in *The Color Purple*

The Color Purple is an outstanding work of fiction written by Alice Walker. This novel tells the story of the physical and emotional abuse of African-American women in a male-dominated society. This paper highlights why Walker gives Shug Avery, an independent blues singer, inspiration to influence submissive women. In contrast, Walker displays why Sophia, a strong well-spoken woman, could not play a successful role in encouraging Celie, the protagonist, to seek freedom after years of maltreatment and silence. Shug, more than Sophia, could influence Celie to take action and stand for her rights. In fact, understanding the difference between the roles of Sophia and Shug in Celie's life could be understood from surface reading and symptomatic reading. This to say that the drastic change in the protagonist's personality in *The Color Purple* is related to both the unmasked and masked interpretation. This paper concludes with showing the importance of surface and symptomatic reading in analyzing *The Color Purple* sufficiently.

The novel starts when Celie sends letters to God addressing the constant fears that she has while living with her stepfather, Alphonso. Celie believed her stepfather to be her real father until her younger sister, Nettie found out the truth many years later. In the story, Celie appears as a weak and submissive black woman who endured sexual and physical abuse from her husband, Albert. It is worth noting that Celie calls Albert, 'Mr.' as a way of respect. Indeed, Celie has a broken personality and low self-esteem, and she is convinced from an early age that she is ugly

and dumb. Celie lives with her husband and his four ungrateful children. Walker discusses domestic abuse in depth in her novel, for instance Celie writes letters to God explaining how she feels when Albert starts beating her. She writes,

He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man.(Walker 23).

Celie does not retaliate in response to her husband's abusive actions. In fact, Celie's harsh childhood made her patient and weak, she could not protect herself from Alphonso, and as a consequence, she gives up resisting her abusive husband after getting married. She loses hope and accepts the brutal reality. Moreover, Celie knows that she means nothing to Albert, she writes, "All he think about since us married is how to make my mind. He don't want a wife, he want a dog" (Walker 65). Albert underestimates Celie and this detrimentally affects her self-esteem. He keeps her locked at home as a prisoner and he forces her to take care of his kids like a servant. Celie accepts her life with patience, and she keeps sending letters to God as a way of vocalizing her struggle.

Years after marriage, Harpo who is Albert's eldest son, falls in love with a young, robust, confident and outspoken girl named Sofia. Sofia develops a strong friendship with Celie, and she takes action when her husband underestimates her. As the story progresses, Harpo beats Sophia as a result of his father's advice. Albert asks Harpo to beat Sophia to make her mind. Albert asks Harpo,

You ever hit her? Mr. ast. Harpo look down at his hands. Naw suh, he say low, embarrass. Well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating. (Walker 36)

Sophia reacts, and she beats Harpo back, then, she leaves to her sister Odessa's house. Celie observes Sophia's action with wonder, she sees how she is strong enough to defend herself. Celie writes, "Sofia the kind of woman no matter what she have in her hand she make it look like a weapon." (Walker 264). In fact, Sophia always tries to avoid male dominance by reacting orally or physically. It is worth noting that Sophia fights her father and brother to get whatever she wants. She marries the man she loves, and she also fights slavery when she refused to work as a maid for a white woman. But Sophia's independence and power did not influence Celie even when they became close friends. Instead of being influenced by Sofia's strong personality and independence Celie asks Harpo to beat Sofia to keep her in line. Sophia says to Celie,

You told Harpo to beat me, she said.

No I didn't, I said.

Don't lie, she said.

I didn't mean it, I said.

Then what you say it for? she ast.

She standing there looking me straight in the eye. She look tired and her jaws full of air.

I say it cause I'm a fool, I say. I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't (Walker 40)

It is obvious that Celie does not believe that a woman should be treated respectfully. She lived with underestimation, and she thought inferiority is a way of living. In the ‘The Intentional Fallacy’ (1946), William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, argue that, “A poem should not mean but be.” A poem can *be only* through its meaning—since its medium is words—yet it is, simply is, in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant.” (469). Wimsatt and Beardsley notion of finding the meaning in the text applies to answer why Celie is speechless. All evidence answers why Celie remains submissive and patient even after seeing Sophia’s strong personality. By looking at the surface, it is easy to know why Celie hesitates to take any action. Indeed, Celie could not vocalize her husband’s physical and emotional abuse due to her awareness of his physical reaction. Moreover, she is aware of the consequences that might follow her rebellion, and she knows that she has no place to go like Sophia. On the other hand, it seems that Sophia’s unshakable strength came from the brutal reality of how women are treated in her society. She resists everything that might belittle her. She wants to live with dignity, strength and respect. And she does not want to fit in the stereotypical images of women around her. In fact, the text itself has answers that make the reader understand Celie’s weakness and Sophia’s strength.

Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus argue that reading the text should be explicit rather than implicit. They insist that the meaning of the text is unmasked, and it could be found without adding external interpretation. In their view “we should oppose the idea that the text of literary criticism is to disclose the hidden and the deep. We should reject symptomatic reading, or “depth” reading, and embrace “surface reading” instead” (Moi 177). However, relying on the surface does not always help the reader to unmask the whole meaning. In fact, there is another meaning that walker intended to highlight in Sofia’s strong personality. The meaning is related

to Walker's role as an activist for human rights. Indeed, Walker's name is well-linked to her participation in the Civil Rights Movement throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Maian Leuthardt writes, "Walker gives her voice to those who cannot express themselves, especially women and children"(Leuthardt 7-8). Walker's intention in *The Color Purple*, somehow, stands to encourage women to resist individuals who bring nothing but pain.

Linking Sophia to Walker's history of advocating women's rights relates to a symptomatic reading. Symptomatic reading tries to determine what a particular text is unable to say or represses because of its ideological conviction" (Oxford Reference). Symptomatic reading was first elaborated by Marxist thinkers such as Louis Althusser and Frederic Jameson. Jameson argues that symptomatic reading is used to "seek a latent meaning behind a manifest one [and] rewrite the surface categories of a text in a stronger language of a more fundamental interpretive code"(9). In fact, adding historical background to analyze Sophia's attitude enriches the understanding of the text, and this is what Jameson believes in. For Jameson, text is shaped by absence, and decoding the meaning of the text reveals what the surface does not clarify. In fact, symptomatic reading does not only tell us about Walker's intention of making women resist, it also tells more about the appearance of Shug later in the text.

Shug appears in the story to make a drastic change. Shug lifts Celie up and introduces her to a new life full of love and respect. In the beginning, Shug is brought in the home by Albert with a nasty woman disease. Celie takes care of Shug, and then, they become best friends. Celie starts thinking of Shug's freedom, and she says, "I wish I could be traveling with her" (Walker). Celie also thinks of Shug's rights of decision making , Celie writes, "She got a right to look over the world in whatever company she choose." (Walker 273). Shug sings the blues and has good relationships with people around her. Everyone likes to talk with her and listens to her music.

Shug, furthermore, charms men with her beauty and seduction. She is always well-dressed and sexually attractive. Indeed, Shug's life revolves around her desires and independence, and this what is missing in Celie's life.

Later, Shug encourages Celie to start a new business, and convinces her to sew and sell pants. As the time progresses, Shug sings the Blues to Celie and calls her Miss Celie. In fact, Shug inspires Celie and teaches her how to take care of herself, and as a consequence, Celie starts to develop a new strong identity. By the end of the story, Celie decides to leave to Memphis. She admits in the presence of others including her husband her desire to start a new life with Shug. Celie writes:

Mr___ reach over to slap me. I jab my case knife in his hand. You bitch, he say. What will people say, you running off to Memphis like you don't have a house to look after? Shug say, Albert. Try to think like you got some sense. Why any woman give a shit what people think is a mystery to me. Well, say Grady, trying to bring light. A woman can't git a man if peoples talk. Shug look at me and us giggle. Then us sure nuff. Then Squeak start to laugh. Then Sofia. All us laugh and laugh. (Walker).

It is interesting to see the brave reaction from Celie after years of silence, and it is obvious that Shug plays a big role in pushing Celie to stand for her freedom and dignity. In fact, Sophia took actions and fought male superiority in front of Celie many times, but unfortunately, Celie remained submissive and obedient. It is important to know why Shug is the one who could successfully empower Celie's weak personality. In fact, answering this question relates to the history of the blues. The blues is intertwined with black people and slavery. Slaves were singing the blues to ease the misery of their life. Moreover, "blues songs commonly expressed personal

emotions and problems, such as lost love or longing for another place or time, they were also used to express despair at social injustice”(Blues as a Protest).

After slavery, African-Americans continued singing the blues with emotional lyrics that expressed life issues and sorrow. Historically, in the early decades of the 20th century, some black women started to sing the blues, “black women such as Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, and Bessie Smith made the first blues recordings in the 1920s. These ladies were primarily stage singers backed by jazz bands, singing what is known as “Classic Blues.” They were also known as “Blues Queens” (web 1). Indeed, those singers were well-traveled and financially independent. They attracted people’s attention around them, and they lived on their own terms. Female blues singers aimed to sing songs that might help women overcome emotional and physical obstacles. For instance, Bessie Smith’s song “Preachin' The Blues” touches women’s feelings. Smith sings,

Let me tell you, girls, that your man ain't treating you right

Let me tell you I don't mean no wrong

I will learn you something if you listen to this song

I ain't here to try to save your soul, just want to teach you how to save your good jelly roll

Going on down the line a little further now

There's many a poor woman down

Read on down to chapter nine,

Woman must learn how to take their time (Taft 236).

This song was performed by Smith with spirituality in order to touch all women's hearts. By hearing these words, women in some ways could get a sense of hope towards themselves and know their value as women. This song, in one way or another, pushed women to take action and live with dignity. Frankly, Walker portrays historical facts about African-American history, and she highlights two main points. First, the role of the blues in helping black people to fight oppression and seek dignity, and second, how female blues singers were socially different from other black women in terms of freedom and dignity. These two main points are not clearly understood without reading *The Color Purple* from a historical angle. Some readers have limited knowledge about African-American history, and they might interpret Celie's late self-recognition as positive changes caused by Shug's support. When in fact, this interpretation adds weak explanation to Celie's new independent life.

In fact, the surface has nothing to tell about the blues as an assemblage that relates to social and emotional issues. The surface tells readers about the blues as a kind of music sung by black women, but does not tell when and how the blues is used or what is the purpose of choosing the blues singer in the text to lead the change. Clearly, Walker emphasizes the idea of the blues in Squeak's character. Squeak is Harpo's lover after Sofia leaves him. Harpo treats her unfairly and underestimates her mixed race. He calls her yellow due to her white and black ancestry, while in fact, her real name is Mary Agnes. After being taught how to sing the Blues in public by Shug, Squeak starts to build a new unshakable identity for herself as a blues singer. She starts to sing Shug's songs in Harpo's juke joint, and then, she starts to write her own songs. Then, she stands for her racial identity and became confident and strong. For instance, Squeak sings:

They call me yellow
 like yellow be my name
 They call me yellow
 like yellow be my name
 But if yellow is a name
 why ain't black the same
 Well, if I say Hey black girl
 Lord, she try to ruin my name (Walker 99)

Harpo tells Squeak, “I love you, Squeak. He kneel down and try to put his arms round her waist. She stand up. My name is Mary Agnes, she say” (Walker 97). This situation brings many questions about Harpo’s respectful and emotional attitudes toward Squeak when she achieved success and gained social attention as a blues singer. This indicates the self-worth that Squeak realized after being victimized for years, and it shows how Harpo starts to feel worried about Squeak’s transformation might lead her to leave him as Sofia did. This example tells how singing the blues adds respect and recognition to marginalized and oppressed woman, and this is exactly what Walker wants to pinpoint, but from a historical framework.

Conclusively, symptomatic reading and surface reading are intertwined when it comes to understand women’s weaknesses and strengths in *The Color Purple*. The surface tells us why Sophia chooses to live her life with dignity even with the bad consequences of her rebellion. Indeed, she wanted to fight the harsh reality of underestimating women in her society. On the other hand, the surface tells us why Celie remained submissive even after observing how Sophia stands up for her rights. Celie could not do anything for herself because she was afraid of

Albert's physical reaction. When in fact, the symptomatic reading tells more about Celie's transformation after meeting Shug. Shug, more than Sophia, could empower Celie's weak personality because she inspires her emotionally and spiritually through singing the blues.

Listening to the blues along with seeing Shug's independent life and social recognition encouraged Celie to take action and leave Albert after years of silence. Celie understood how independent women like Shug, gained respect because they are decision makers and fanatically independent. They have features that other women do not have. They live on their own terms and do whatever they want without fearing male punishment. The lyrics of the blues, moreover, taught women how to liberate themselves from weakness, oppression, and fear. It supported them spiritually and helped them cope with the social and personal issues. The historical background of the blues and female blues singers helps readers to understand Celie's drastic and brave transformation more deeply. This is to say that the dual use of surface and symptomatic reading play a big role in answering questions about the *The Color Purple*.

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