

Critique

Intersecting the tools of psychological and sociological research which attempt to explain real human behavior with the tools of the novelist which attempt to portray a fictional accounting of human behavior, Walker presents an analytical model for examining the coping behaviors of three women in two novels of Alice Walker: *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple*.

The three women, Margaret and Mem in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and Celie in *The Color Purple* are examined in terms of their ability to confront, manage and otherwise cope with the drabness of their marital experiences. The ability of these three women to meet their challenges is analyzed within a psychological-sociological-literary model having two major components: "locus of control" and "appraisal."

The author defines locus of control as meaning the problem-solving ability of the three black women. Appraisal is represented as the ability of each woman to discern from a range of alternatives, choices which will result in some personal gain, or an otherwise benefit to her.

The author presents this framework presumably to assist readers of Alice Walker's novels in better understanding, if not appreciating, the myriad of challenges besetting the three women in the two novels. Moreover, it is the apparent intent of this model to assist readers in seeing these three women as proactive beings: women attempting to assert some influence, if not control, over their lives.

The author asserts that each of the women develops coping strategies which enable them to make decisions, albeit in many instances the wrong decisions, about how their lives will be led. Translated, decision making for these women invariably involves trying to improve their marital relationships. The focus of the paper is on the ability of each of these women to carefully evaluate their respective situations, their plights, and to make decisions that will improve on their life circumstances. The ability of each woman to appraise, that is, evaluate her situation and to come up with the right decision is a critical and reoccurring element of both the analytical model and the paper. The author of the paper spends much time presenting Mem, Margaret, and Celie within the context of appraisal.

Overall, the paper provides an interesting analytical framework for examining the literary contributions the black novelist can make towards explaining the black predicament, and especially the predicament black women find themselves in in this society. The framework is helpful if we are interested in better understanding and assessing the complex, subtle, and occasionally very confusing ways black women confront—and at times conquer—the many challenges presented to their womanhood and personhood.

A less appealing feature of the model is its inability to assist in assessing the ability of Margaret, Mem, and Celie in surviving as

independent, self assured individuals. Perhaps this is not so much a failing of the model as it is due to the powerfully dependent personas of the women. Each is portrayed essentially as victim. Although the particular life circumstances of each differs—in common—Margaret, Mem, and Celie live basically loveless lives; they're brutalized and neglected by their husbands, they are exploited by their environments, and they are long sufferers.

The analytical model presented in the paper, while holding out promise as an additional eclectic tool for better understanding the coping strategies of the three women in the subject works, it does not inform us much about the extent to which Margaret, Mem, and Celie seek independence, the essence of surviving whole, in their employment of coping strategies. This point notwithstanding, the paper makes an important contribution in the first instance to understanding the multifarious coping dimensions of the black women in Alice Walker's two novels. In the second instance, the paper brings us closer to the world of black women.

—Otis L. Scott

Critique

An examination of the coping strategies of vulnerable and victimized women characters in Alice Walker's fiction does suggest possibilities for coping with racial oppression. The most oppressed woman in Walker's fiction, however, is not Mem, Margaret, or Celie, but Sofia, the wife of Harpo, Celie's stepson in *The Color Purple*. Certainly Sofia is one of those "women who are cruelly exploited, spirits and bodies mutilated, relegated to the most narrow and confining lives, sometimes driven to madness." But she is not brutalized by her husband. Her tormentors are much more powerful and, therefore, much more frightening.

When Sofia is first introduced, she is nobody's victim. Big, pregnant, and sassy, she seems not to have a care in the world. "I ain't in no trouble. Big though."¹ Once she and Harpo are married—after the baby is born—Sofia refuses to let him beat her. She tells Celie:

All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me. (46)

In fact, it is Sofia, not Shug Avery, who first encourages Celie to fight Albert. "You ought to bash Mr. _____ head open, she [Sofia] say. Think bout heaven later" (47). When she tires of fighting Harpo, the independent Sofia simply leaves.

But later she encounters a force much more brutal and powerful than Harpo or her male relatives. She comes face to face with white justice in the form of the mayor and his wife. When the mayor's wife asks the very clean Sofia if she would like to be her maid, Sofia's response is a