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Peering into the Jezebel Archetype in African American Culture and Emancipating Her from Hyper-Sexuality: Within and Beyond James Baldwin's 'Go Tell It on the Mountain' and Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple'

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Abstract

Literary authors and performing artists are redefining the image of the Jezebel archetype from a negative stereotype to an empowering persona. The reformation of the Jezebel's identity and reputation, from a manipulating stereotype to an uplifting individual may not be a common occurrence, but the Jezebel archetype as a positive figure has earned a dignified position in literature and in reality. Jezebel archetypes wear their sexuality proudly. Her sultriness may be the first aspect of her identity that readers see, but readers must be cautious not to overlook her merit and moral standards as a character that has the potential to advance and mobilize her peers (within fiction and reality).

Keywords

Jezebel, Black Sexuality, Hyper-sexuality, stereotypes

Disciplines

African American Studies | Cultural History | English Language and Literature | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Rhetoric and Composition | Social History | Women's History | Women's Studies

Comments

English Senior Thesis

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Peering into the Jezebel Archetype in African American Culture
and Emancipating Her from Hyper-Sexuality: within and Beyond
James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and Alice Walker's
The Color Purple.

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English 403 The Bible and African American Literature & Culture

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Literary authors and performing artists are redefining the image of the Jezebel archetype from a negative stereotype to an empowering persona. The reformation of the Jezebel's identity and reputation, from a manipulating stereotype to an uplifting individual may not be a common occurrence, but the Jezebel archetype as a positive figure has earned a dignified position in literature and in reality. On one hand, within the realm of fiction, readers of an African American female character that associates herself with the traditional Jezebel stereotype tend to characterize her identity with erotic sinfulness, reducing her contributions to the novel as sexual profanity and victimization. Jezebel archetypes wear their sexuality proudly. Her sultriness may be the first aspect of her identity that readers see, but readers must be cautious not to overlook her merit and moral standards as a character that has the potential to advance and mobilize her peers (within fiction and reality).

Characters that are geared towards the Jezebel archetype are thematically subjected to coercion, sexual profiteering, and a surplus of incidents that are derivatives of sexual abuse. However, the Jezebel character is not married to the concept of a woman lost in eroticism. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, James Baldwin crafts a fresh version of the Jezebel archetype: Esther. He builds an outspoken character that finds the strength within her, and he also mobilizes her personal moral compass from sexual behavior to self-reliance and accountability. In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker likewise molds a distinctive Jezebel persona, Shug Avery. On the surface she is arrogant, physically attractive, and the country town's unholy Blues singer; underneath that external projection, she embodies an original concept about God and falls in love with Celie, allowing Celie to experience the full depths of personhood. Instances of the Jezebel

archetype, gradually, subvert the deceiving, corrupted, and transparent figures. Her identity sings more than one note and yet, while she stays true to her sexual identity, she embodies a symphony of substance, attributing to plot lines and real world inspirational strides, beyond sexual pleasure and remorse.

Before readers can begin to comprehend how authors extend the identity of the Jezebel beyond the characteristics of sexual defamatory and shame, the origin of her notorious reputation needs to be defined. The Jezebel's reputation is established in the bible, by a figure that is characterized as a murderer, prostitute, and an enemy of God. A close reading of the biblical text articulates that for more than two thousand years, Jezebel has been saddled with a distasteful reputation as the "bad girl of the Bible, the wickedest of women," (Gaines). In other words, she is perceived as a sinner that refuses opportunities for redemption, and she is not ashamed of her destructive behavior (Gaines). In the world of literature, the Jezebel archetype is projected upon figures that antagonize and ruin their communities with evilness and impulsive sexuality. The authors of *Breaking The Chains: Examining The Endorsement Of Modern Jezebel Images And Racial-Ethnic Esteem Among African American Women* articulate the Jezebel as one of the most pervasive, negative stereotypical images of black women, perpetuating the false-perception of them as promiscuous, the community's harlot, and sexually permissive (Brown, White-Johnson, and Griffin-Fernell 525). Furthermore, the identity of Jezebel originated from the eras of slavery when white slave masters exercised almost complete control over Black women's sexuality and reproduction. As time continued, the figure of the Jezebel was labeled as the exploiter of man's weakness and her hyper-sexuality was blamed for his moral failings. As a result, they developed a wrongly accused but

distasteful reputation (West 462). Moreover, as time moved forward, the opinions about the Jezebel stereotype did evolve, but only in the vein of negativity. Many diminish her ability to claim ownership over her sexuality, which serves as one of the defining characteristics of her identity. Her identity remained pinned under the bar of oppression, but many missed the opportunity to argue how the Jezebel was a character that embodied strength and multi-functionality.

In terms of understanding the depths of the Jezebel archetype, few authors go beyond the explicitness of erotic behavior or Black women's sexuality. However, the image of the Jezebel has transformed into a character that embodies more moral substance. Modern adaptations of the Jezebel archetype are just beginning to surface and individuals are beginning to filter out her destructiveness from her identity. For instance, in the collaboration of *Breaking The Chains*, the authors are finding the overlap between female empowerment and oversexed characters. The text reads,

Additionally, modern depictions of the Jezebel image may not only portray African American women as hypersexual, they are also shown as being in complete control of their sexuality...To be sure, such depictions can be viewed as a projected sense of empowerment and independence. (Brown, White-Johnson, and Griffin-Fernell 527)

Emerging from the pits of mindless sexual conduct, the Jezebel archetype demonstrates examples of agency and she rebels against the forces of superiority. Stemming from her erotic energy, the behavior of the Jezebel is innovative, demonstrating that she is an individual who designs her own rules. Her sexualized behavior is the opposite of shallowness and transparency, even though her outlook is honest and forward. She seems impulsive, but in actuality her persona charts a new pathway of female independence. In the journal article of *Good Girl, Bad Girl: Foreign Women Of The Deuteronomistic*

History In Postcolonial Perspective, the Jezebel archetype appeals as a renounced identity. Cromwell writes that, “As narrative proceeds, Jezebel is pictured as repeatedly usurping male authority and acting against the traditional social structure of male leadership.” In brief, examining the Jezebel archetype outside of her one-dimensional erotic behavior, it is crucial to conduct a discussion that re-conceptualizes sexuality with an eye towards empowering African American women instead of condemning them.

Even though history proves that the Jezebel archetype is introduced as an unfavorable character, her image does not reside there but migrates away from wickedness and moves towards empowerment, changing the judgment about erotic nature from a negative to positive perspective. Well-established scholars such as Carolyn West, Danice Brown, Rhonda L. White-Johnson, and Felicia Griffin-Fennell argue that the identity of the Jezebel can be hyper-sexual and a discrediting depiction of African American women, but that is not the only identity of the Jezebel, and there is evidence that she amounts to more than that. It may not be a frequent occurrence, but Black sexuality can be a virtue and a venue for personal and spiritual growth and agency. African American writers have massively voiced their disagreement with the Jezebel archetype, claiming that the ugliness of this stereotype perpetuates and encourages sexual victimization and sexual permissiveness underneath the identity of Black women, and yet the Jezebel stereotype still persists as a narrative-norm within African American literature. She is drawn as the “African American woman with a shapely body who is seductive, alluring, oversexed, and manipulative...using her sexual attraction and promiscuity to receive attention and material goods,” (Brown, White-Johnson, and Griffin-Fennell 526). The Jezebel archetype is often illustrated as the literary figure that

lives within the angry yet alluring persona, arrogantly flaunting her promiscuity and looseness, but it is crucial to recognize the Jezebel characters that are the exceptions, who redefine their presumptuous illustrations. Jezebel characters that empower their sexuality are scarcely portrayed in African American literature. Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* serves as an example of this rarity, in which a Jezebel archetype, Esther challenges and surpasses the criticism made by the other characters. This reinstates her as a positive and strong female character, instead of being diminished to her hypersexualized counterpart. Baldwin's construction of Esther attempts to reclaim and rehabilitate the Jezebel archetype's stained reputation by assigning her integrity and self-responsibility, plus she aims to mobilize the other characters forward while thickening the plot line.

A major, but not the only, aspect of the Jezebel's identity is how her sexuality mobilizes her own character development and maturation. Within the text and also from the readers' perspective, the response towards black women who practiced any degree of erotic behavior escalates to slut shaming, thereby classifying her as a wandering character, ruined with lust, and restricting her from the opportunity to mature. For instance, the renunciation of the modern and empowering image of the Jezebel are summarized as,

African American women as hypersexual, they are also shown as being in complete control of their sexuality. Though it is questionable how much control these women truly have over their sexuality...To be sure, such depictions can be viewed as a projected sense of empowerment and independence...Consequently, they may fall victim to self-fulfilling prophecy, behaving in a manner that further supports these negative, race-based, sexual depictions. (Brown, White-Johnson, and Griffin-Fernell 527)

Again, this reasoning of those who critique the Jezebel's is not valuable, but it fails to address all the aspects of personal growth and agency that the Jezebel embodies. Readers should be cautious not to irrationally reduce the Jezebel identity to an emblem of sexual debauchery, and should instead peer into her persona as a complete person. The archetype of the Jezebel does not only pertain to erotic accountability and responsibility of sexual appearances and stance, but it is equivalently involved in her internal development. The physicality of eroticism is only the top-layer of the Jezebel archetype, thereby her oversexed identity is a vessel that demonstrates how black women's sexuality has the capacity to employ eroticism as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and human agency. Through the character of Esther, Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* rescues the Jezebel stereotype, by designing her as a female figure that takes responsibility of her sexuality and its consequences. In addition, she deducts a lesson from her sins and even advises her sexual partner, Gabriel, to take responsibility for his own actions and misdoings. The character of Esther is a figure that emits the vibe of a sexually experienced female. Yet, as her affair with Gabriel unravels, she proves that she can amount too much more than the novel's hypersexual mistress.

Within *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Esther uninterruptedly holds her confidence in her sensual persona. From the moment that the readers meet Esther, they can see that she is shameless about her sensual spirit and she is resistant to change; for example, she says, "Reverend, look like to me you'd get tired, all the time beating on poor little Esther, trying to make Esther something she ain't...Don't you know I'm a woman grown, and I ain't fixing to change?" (Baldwin 122). The character of Esther is a literary example of female empowerment, as the readers see how Esther stands behind her actions and

embraces her passionate body language while other characters, such as Gabriel express their disapproval. Returning back to the textual evidence, she says, “I ain’t done nothing that I’m ashamed of, and I hope I *don’t* do nothing I’m ashamed of, ever” (Baldwin 123). Building on her female empowerment of sensual nature, Baldwin designs the character of Esther around the Jezebel archetype but instead of distancing Esther from the eroticism, he centers the core of her character on her sexuality to proudly illuminate her sultry and shameless attitude.

Baldwin leans *into* the Jezebel stereotype, challenging the inherent sinfulness of sex, but that does not mean she is shallow, thoughtless, and selfish. Baldwin’s strategy to incorporate power through women’s sexuality mirrors the argument demonstrated in Audre Lorde’s groundbreaking essay, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” The black feminist poet points out the multi-functionality of seductiveness and eroticism, and she thoroughly explains that there is a bridge between sexuality and power:

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives...The erotic is a measure between our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. (Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”).

Lorde argues that sexuality is a source of energy, a fountain of power. More specifically, it is a component of the larger construct of the erotic as a source of female authority and control. Undeniably, hyper-sexuality has its consequences, but sexuality is a characteristic of human nature, carrying the burden of simultaneously oppressing and empowering women who choose to dabble in the arena of sexual affairs. The Jezebel archetype that Esther symbolizes serves as the epitome of female figures embracing their enticing allure and sexy flair, which elevates the power and honor within women's sexuality.

Furthering Baldwin's rehabilitation of the Jezebel archetype, Esther's sexual affair with Gabriel yields an outcome that shows how her character is multifunctional and complex. Her identity plays more than one musical key but rather a concert that exhibits the variance of struggles and perseverance: for example, female maturation, facing the fears of motherhood, and sacrificing her freedom for her unborn child. Within a few pages, Baldwin demonstrates how Esther rapidly speeds through the tiers of character development. Her growth process is highlighted when Baldwin writes " 'I...just want to go somewhere,' she said 'go somewhere, and *have* my baby and think all this out of my mind,'" (Baldwin 132). Immediately, Esther recognizes the repercussion of her Jezebel mannerisms, but she does not bury the outcome of the affair with shame, rather she moves in the directions of consciousness and sensibility. Another example of Esther reinventing the Jezebel stereotype occurs in her letter to Gabriel; she says, "*I'm going to have my baby and I'm going to bring him up to be a man*" (Baldwin 134). Even though the character of Esther is not entirely rational and she does carry a limitless outlook on life, no one exercises control over Esther besides Esther. No other characters, not even

Gabriel, are pressuring her into female adulthood; Esther is her own catalyst. Her words show that on the surface she appears as the traditional Jezebel image, but as the readers near the end of her presence, it is evident that she is not spiteful, manipulative or wicked, but more along the lines of a character that examines her circumstances and continues to move forward.

Keep in mind, Baldwin designs Esther's impact as a brief but transformative experience, even though her character only occupies a few dozen pages and her affair lasts for nine short days. Esther does not exist textually for a long period of time, but her influence efficiently dishevels the Jezebel stereotype within the time Baldwin allots her.

There is no textual evidence that shows Esther's history before her sexual encounters with Gabriel. The readers are only equipped with Gabriel's biased assumptions that she is a temptress and a symbol of seduction; on the contrary the text proves that Gabriel is responsible for initiating the affair. In a close reading of Gabriel and Esther's brief romance, it is evident that Gabriel surrenders to his own desires and sexual urges, not the other way around. Esther did not corrupt or ruin Gabriel, but in fact it is Gabriel that is drawn to Esther; the text reads, "He thought that he was pulling back against her hands—but he was pulling her to him. And he saw in her eyes now a look that he had not seen for many a long day and night, a look that was never in the eyes of Deborah," (Baldwin 123). Once she discovers that her affair with Reverend Gabriel results to their "bastard" child (also known as Royal), Esther matures rapidly and challenges Gabriel to do the same, so that they can properly foster and raise their son. Baldwin constructs the character of Gabriel to be incapable of admitting his fault and flaws, corrupting everything he touches with his arrogance. It is Esther, the novel's

Jezebel, who has the stronger and leading voice, boldly calling out Gabriel's attraction to her. She admits her role in their affair and she does not conceal or try to mask her actions, but more importantly she exposes his erotic impulses and that he is equally responsible for the creation of their son.

Baldwin writes a pivotal dialogue between Esther and Gabriel, where Esther points out that it is Gabriel who carries the insecurities about Esther's identity, not Esther herself. Esther sees herself as a dignified person and she will not let Gabriel's judgment dishevel her self-confidence and respect.

"No," she said, "and I reckon you *wouldn't* marry me even if you *was free*. I reckon you don't want no whore like Esther for a wife. Esther's just for the night, for the dark, where won't nobody see you getting your holy self all dirtied up with Esther. Esther's just good enough to go out and have *your* bastard somewhere in the god damn woods. Ain't that so, Reverend?" (Baldwin 123)

Gabriel appears to shoulder the weakness of public exposure and ridicule, and cannot confront his hypocrisy. More specifically, Esther orates that Gabriel's relationship with his wife is not the force that is hindering him from claiming her. She attempts to mobilize Gabriel's morality by explaining the dual-responsibility within their son's conception, but the Reverend is incapable of personal accountability since he denies all of her accusations and deflects every solution or piece of advice she proposes. Esther reveals that it is Gabriel's cowardice about the public's response towards his association with Esther that cripples him, preventing him from admitting his faults and taking ownership of his affairs.

Often times, the validity of the Jezebel figure is not even considered because they are seen as nothing more than symbols of seduction and temptation. Patricia Hill

Collins sings in concert with the common perception of the Jezebel stereotype, which limits the Jezebel persona from accomplishing anything else besides sexual favors and victimization. She articulates that not only are black female voices being overlooked and unheard, but she teases out how exactly black female figures are buried by oppression. She points out that, while an oppressed group's experience gives them the advantage to view their circumstances from a stance of difference, their lack of control over the apparatuses of society continues the ideological hegemony, making the articulation of their self-defined standpoints difficult to convey. The evolution of the Jezebel archetype is habituating new territories that stretch onto different planes of reclaiming self-worth and intelligence. A mentality such as this can offer black women a different view of themselves, a view that encourages African American women to value their own subjective source of knowledge. Authors are mapping how Jezebel personas can use alternative ways to create an independent self-awareness. However, the reinvention of their oversexed identity into sex-positive figures struggles to gain validation from outsiders, since its credibility goes against centuries of images that denies the Black women the identity of respectable members of humanity.

Esther's argument with Gabriel about how he should join her in parenthood is an attempt to develop Gabriel as a character. Although Esther proves herself to be the leading and stronger voice, she fails to push Gabriel because he refuses to allow himself to be pushed by a character that seems beneath him. He perceives her as nothing more than a Jezebel, denying the tangible evidence of his own flaws and corruption. Esther is literally handing over the answers to his problems and depicting the only way to navigate through this messy situation with self-responsibility, honesty, and maturity.

Yet, Gabriel's arrogance and attitude towards Esther as a Jezebel blinds him from taking her advice into consideration. The character interaction in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* joins the argument around the ignored potential of the Jezebel; that as long as they are reduced to nothing more than a sexual object, then their potential to mobilize other characters, or their peers, will never be realized.

Baldwin constructs the character of Esther to dismantle the historical mold and alleviates the oppression held over the Jezebel stereotype by allowing Esther to reclaim her own independence and distancing herself from male-dependability. For instance, she detaches herself from Gabriel by saying, "But I reckon,' she said slowly, 'that I don't want to be with you no more' n you want to be with me. I don't want no man what's ashamed and scared. Can't do me no good, that kind of man'" (Baldwin 123). Instead of bamboozling men into bed, Esther liberates herself from being the seductive mistress that leans on the shoulders of her sexual partner, instead relies upon her self-confidence and ventures into the realm of parenthood on her own terms. Esther refuses to conceal the product of their affair because she is not ashamed of her son, and also she chooses not to disrespect herself, by perpetuating Gabriel's lies and tyranny.

Baldwin's character of Esther in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* reframes the Jezebel archetype, by pulling out her dimensionality from within and outside of her pronounced sexuality. Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* unmask the irony about oversexed females, such as Esther, and challenges the integrity of hollow Christians, like Gabriel, who fail to receive all that Jezebel characters have to offer. In more detail, Baldwin emancipates the Jezebel archetype from her hypersexual stereotype by revealing her potential as a character that can contribute to the text's virtues, apart from her

symbolization of sin and evil. Unfortunately, her message and her intelligence are never fully comprehended or weighed because the erotic component of the Jezebel identity allows outsiders to silence her, turning a blind eye towards her wisdom and guidance.

The Color Purple, written by Alice Walker, is a novel that housed female figure that dismantles a negative reputation and inserts her own credibility and integrity as a multi-dimensional character: Shug Avery. Shug Avery affects each of her peers in her own way. To Albert she is the love of his life, an incomplete story which calls him to her again and again. To the general public within the novel, she is characterized as a “nasty” woman, a whore, though the men and women of the town are actually threatened by her independence and self-constructed religious philosophy. For the crowd that gathers at Harpo’s jook-joint, she is a visual appealing songstress and performer, adored for her scandalous attire and her soul stirring versions of well-known Blues ballads. Even the preacher of the church makes quick assumptions and judgments about Shug, preaching sermons about Shug’s wildish behavior, as “He talk bout strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and talking about other women mens. Talk bout slut, hussy, heifer, and streetcleaner” (Walker 49). Shug is deemed immoral because she flaunts her sexuality; but beyond her appearance, the church dislikes her for the reason that she is a Blues singer. Since the genre of Blues music covers topics of sexuality and sex, this musical ideology conflicts with traditional Christian views. Typically the church embraces absolutes and has narrow definitions of good and evil behaviors, which combats with the musical genre of Blues that allows performers to sing about explicit and uncensored, pleasurable realities (Moore 81). There is a variance in the perception about Shug’s identity and her levels of respectability and

dignity. Similar to Esther from *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Shug's peers write her off as a transparent and self-centered individual, missing the opportunity to familiarize themselves with her complex personality, the benefits of being her companion and her strong set of principles and openness.

Shug's most important relationship is the one that she builds with Celie, serving as Celie's spiritual guide to freedom and homosexuality. Few recognize Shug's functionality, but Marlon Moore's "God is a (Pussy): The Pleasure Principle and Homo-Spirituality in Shug's Blueswoman Theology" peers into the character of Shug and explains how Walker constructs Shug so that her sexual experiences do not dominate her principles. In terms of Shug's relationship with Celie, Moore explains the importance of Shug and Celie's bond, writing "Celie's spiritual growth is also examined for the ways it reveals the foundation of Shug's bodily-based theology: that a woman who recognizes her own sexual pleasure as sacred is a woman intimate with God" (Moore 77). Due to Celie's letters to God, readers are aware that Celie has a strong voice, and she is not a character that keeps her damages bottled up, but rather uses her writing skills as a form of therapy to heal the harm that is inflicted on her. Outside of her diary entries, Celie is silenced, abused, and manipulated every way imaginable, forced to commit involuntary acts due to patriarchal rule, such as sex with her father and Mr. ___ (also known as Albert). Specifically, she believes that the main purpose for her abuse is because she cannot fulfill her husband's expectations. As indicated by her conversations with Shug,

What he beat you for? she ast.

For being me and not you.

Oh, Miss Celie, she say and her put her arms around me. Us sit like that for maybe half an hour. Then she kiss me on the fleshy part of my shoulder and stand up.

I won't leave, she says until I know Albert won't even think about beating you.

(Walker 77)

It is within this moment where Shug acts as a shield for Celie, delaying her departure from Mr. ____ 's property to protect Celie from Mr.____ 's rage. Before Shug and Celie's romantic relationship begins, Shug takes a responsibility to diffuse the domestic abuse and attempts to replace Mr.____ 's abusive behavior with love and sincerity. The character of Shug distances herself from the identity of the traditional Jezebel because it is impossible for her to simultaneously be the "wickedest of woman" or the "bad girl" and have compassion for Celie. Shug may be a female character that enjoys having sex, but her sexual experiences do not subtract from her morality and her ability to sympathize. If anything, she is a rare individual, who cares for others and the status of their physical and emotional health.

The character dynamic between Celie and Shug continues to move forward, specifically when Shug educates Celie about her genitals. Celie never received any form of sexual education, and more specifically no one cared to inform her about the details of male and female anatomy or sexual orientation. A pivotal point in the novel is the sexual education that occurs between Shug and Celie, as Shug introduces Celie to the prospect of a clitoral orgasm.

Listen, she say right down there in your pussy is a little buttons that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody. It get hotter and hotter and then it melt. That the good part. But other parts good too, she say. Lot of sucking go on, her and ther she say.

Lot of finger and tongue work. (Walker 79)

The character of Shug embraces her Jezebel archetype, by sharing her knowledge about sexual intercourse with Celie. This conversation launches the beginning of Celie's

journey into claiming her own body for her own sexual pleasure. Celie views this conversation as steps towards her own sexual liberation. Many readers would reject this discussion, labeling it as obscene and profane, however Moore locates the substance within in it, saying,

It is Walker's 'message of Nature [and] the Universe' that Shug brings to Celie in a way that equates sexual ecstasy with spiritual ecstasy, a message that includes homoerotic and masturbatory experience," (85)

The sexual education conversation is an example of Shug empowering herself by speaking about her consciousness of the anatomical pleasure and sexual stimulation, but the conversation is also an instance of Shug empowering and uplifting Celie. Shug retrieves the sexual material and resources that are embedded within the Jezebel archetype to dismantle Celie's ignorance about sexual stimulation regarding a woman's anatomy. Walker designs the character Shug as a rescuer of the Jezebel stereotype due to Shug's sexual teachings. Through the character of Shug, Walker emphasizes the importance for women to be aware of sexual stimulation and the anatomy of the genitals, unmasking the intelligence that the Jezebel archetype obtains.

An aspect of the Jezebel archetype that is rarely weighed or considered is her homoerotic desires, however, Shug and Celie share a homoerotic connection, which serves as a black lesbian survival mechanism. Neither of the women are seen fully by their peers until their first sexual encounter. Shug is perceived as a careless, loose temptress, and Celie is not even valued as a person, but perceived as a domestic servant and a woman that Mr. _____ can have sex with whenever he pleases. The first time Shug and Celie engage in sex, the details of their lovemaking are omitted. Celie simply says, "Us kiss and kiss till us can hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other...Then I feel

something real soft and wet on my breast” (Walker 109). Even though their lovemaking reaps reciprocal benefits, Shug uplifts Celie since this instance is Celie’s first erotic arousal. Her genuine desires for Celie allow Celie to feel like a person rather than an object or an instrument, seeing that Celie is never asked to give sexual consent. In more detail, Celie is raped and beaten by her father and engages in emotionless and non-consensual sex with Mr.____, and she admits, “Nobody ever love me, I say” (Walker 109). Shug’s homoeroticism empowers Celie to feel loved, beautiful, appreciated, and valued for being no one else other than her self.

Walker’s *The Color Purple* is a significant moment in literary history of black lesbian writing, and it directs the functionality of the Jezebel archetype into the direction of same-sex relationships, which unfolds before the readers’ eyes. Shug’s pursuit of Celie enables both female characters to undergo “Black Lesbian Shamelessness, which is defined by its celebration of the fact that same-sex relationships sustain and nurture the lives of countless black women” (Lewis 159). Celie and Shug, as sexual partners, depict the example of sexual vulnerability and mutual dependence that has them operating together toward self-love and self-respect, rather than resorting to patriarchal relationships. They take refuge within each other and draw their strength and build their dignity from the love that they share.

On the other hand, Shug’s defining characteristic as Jezebel is her own set and interpretation of spiritual and religious values. The preacher of Celie’s church references Shug as the “antithesis of Christian womanhood,” which positions spiritual achievements, good behavior, and obedience to biblical guidance such as, “Watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak” (Moore 80 &

Matthew 26:41 King James Version). Shug elects not to choose between her relationship with God and her body's desire, therefore, she explains that it is her own belief that God instilled sexual urges and erotic thoughts into his creation, yet not as a test of temptation but as a emotion that one should explore intimately.

Oh she say. God love all them feelings. That some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise god by liking what you like," (Walker 178)

In other words, Moore describes her religious philosophy as a "full appreciation of sensual pleasures" which "is the foundational principle of Shug's construction of humanity's relationship to God" (82). Regardless, even if Shug's fictional peers or the novel's readers disagree with Shug's interpretation of how sexuality fits within Christianity as an empowering and enriching component, in the very least the creativity that blends sexuality and God's intentions for humanity need to be acknowledged. Walker designs Shug to contrast with the traditional identity of the Jezebel, considering that Shug is not lost in eroticism or bamboozled by its sensuality. Shug refuses to allow the church's disapproval to affect her sexuality as a black woman. Shug sees how her individuality as an empowering sensual Blues singer fits into Christianity, and she sees herself as a sacred being in a state of "holy communion" with the Creator (Moore 82). Shug emancipates herself from the Jezebel stereotype of hyper-sexuality because she is not blinded by her sexual energy, nor does she equate sexuality as a religion. She diffuses the taboo discussion around temptation, sexuality, sexual urges and how they fit underneath the canopy of Christianity. Walker attributes Shug a strong, sturdy voice to Shug, and a creative and limitless mentality as she explains sexuality's position within mankind's relationship to its Creator.

Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and Walker's *The Color Purple* both serve as examples of how Jezebel archetypes progress and mobilize and maturely respond to other characters within the world of fiction, but Patricia Collins' *Black Sexual Politics* lays out how the Jezebel's emancipation from hyper-sexuality occurs in the real world as well. Collins pulls in the well-known Black Jezebel personas such as Josephine Baker, and members from Destiny's Child. In comparison, the empowerment of mind and body that readers see in *The Color Purple*, such as "Shug seeing a hot one...wearing a gold dress that show her titties near bout to the nipple," mirrors the confidence within sexuality that audience members see while viewing these sultry performance artists. On the contrary, Collins asks the dual-sided question: how can they claim independence when they are judged immediately for the sexual demeanor, whether this judgment is inflicted upon them, empowered by them or both (*Black Sexual Politics* 51)? She questions the motivation behind sex-centered personal branding, stating that the message they intend to convey is not being received as they might imagine. For their respective audiences, the distinctive sexual spectacles exhibited by these female icons invoke sexual meanings that conduct an untouched conversation around the dynamics of black women's (*Black Sexual Politics* Collins 27, 57).

Similarly, Josephine Baker, a dancer and singer who became wildly popular in France during the 1920s and devoted a large sector of her life to participating within the Civil Rights movement by boycotting segregated clubs and concert venues, was aware of the sexual stereotypes applied to women of African descent. She played along with the "primitive" stigma but for her own reasons. Baker entertained the French with the openness of her body, a crucial example of how a savage, uncivilized, and wild sexuality

remained connected with Black sexuality, which negatively symbolized a sign of racial difference. Baker did not believe in hiding her sexuality or beauty because certain audiences could not handle her empowerment of black female sexuality; that was their problem. Her sexuality liberated herself, encouraging her to embrace her erotic energy, and also enabled her to move far beyond her initial depiction as a bare-breasted Jezebel image. (*Black Sexual Politics* Collins 28)

Given the excessiveness of American mass media with the visibility of sexualized spectacles, how can American culture be sexually restrictive to African Americans when sexuality seems to be incorporated into everything? In fact, there are other alternatives than closeting African American sexuality because Black sexuality itself serves as an icon for sexual freedom. The work of contemporary artists such as the members from Destiny's Child channel their sexual expression into musical compositions that carry themes of empowerment and ownership such as "Miss Independent" and "Survivor."

Contrary to perceiving black eroticism and sex appeal as an outcome of racism and an attack on an individual's dignity, black women who reclaim sexuality as a source of power rooted in spirituality, expressiveness, and love can craft a new understanding of black femininity, which is needed for a progression in black sexual politics. When reclaimed by individuals and groups, redefined ideas about sexuality and sexual practices can function as sources of joy, pleasure, and empowerment that simultaneously affirm and transcend individual sexual pleasure for social good (*Black Sexual Politics* Collins 57). Therefore, performing artists such as Josephine Baker, and the members from Destiny's Child are not redefining black sexuality as a scandalous performance. They are uplifting themselves by parading their bodies across a stage with strength, poise, and self-

assurance. They refuse to conceal the flattering aspects of their body figures, because certain audiences continue to view black women as oversexed symbols, neither will they play along with an audience's immaturity. They are not concerned in how others reduce them and objectify them because they are glorifying their skin and their curves. These performing artists are leaning into the Jezebel archetype as they tease out the pride in self that has been buried, reduced, pressed and minimized to hyper-sexuality and sexual obscenity.

There is a diversity of identities across the figure of the Jezebel because the Jezebel persona embodies more differences than similarities, varying from the original, manipulative, biblical character to a positive contemporary adaptation of sexuality and black womanhood. Individuals, fictitious or real people, who embrace the identity of the Jezebel archetype, emancipate themselves from the Jezebel stereotype by creating their own ethical code. The generalization of Jezebel archetypes as soulless, egotistical and narcissistic females is a missed opportunity to explore the evolving representation of black womanhood. Although one might wonder what separates Jezebel archetypes such as Esther, Shug, Josephine Baker and Destiny's Child from the molds and forms of the traditional Jezebel persona. The defining characteristic each of these female figures is that they are empowering their sexuality for *themselves*. Undeniably, each of them has to defend the intensity of their sexuality to the people that surround them, and they also carry the responsibility of responding to the circumstances that their sexuality and sensual nature lead them to, but all in all, re-examining the depths of the Jezebel archetype opens up a new realm of possibilities that recognizes sensual behavior as the first impression, not an individual's entire identity.

The biblical character of the Jezebel outlines the initial image of the Jezebel as a traitor, a wretched soul that cannot be saved. Even though the identity of the Jezebel has transgressed, there is an aspect of the biblical Jezebel character that serves as the common denominator, and continues to be incorporated into today's reclamation and adaptation: her shamelessness, her unapologetic attitude for being herself and refusal to sacrifice any portion of her sensual identity. The Jezebel archetype's shamelessness is the backbone of her identity, empowering her to teach her sexual education to her female companions, or stand against a hypocritical Reverend that denies the existence of his children, and lastly to promote the attractiveness of their shapely bodies as they put on a musical performance with confidence and boldness.

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