

**Alice Walker and the Depth of the Hidden Self: A Freudian Approach to
Character Analysis in The Color Purple**

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Date of submission: 17/10/2025

Date of acceptance: 16/12/2025

Date of publication: 27/12/2025

Abstract:

This study explores Alice Walker's novel The Color Purple from a Freudian perspective, highlighting the presence of the unconscious in shaping the characters and the feminine experience. The novel reveals the struggle of the self between repression and desire, male dominance and feminine liberation. The heroine, Celie, represents a model of the wounded self that moves from repression to awareness, from submission to self-discovery, where the unconscious becomes a space for psychological and spiritual liberation. It also illustrates the symbolic reading of colors, correspondence, and romantic relationships as a mirror of the hidden self and its quest for inner balance. The study confirms that Walker transcends the social dimension to delve deep into the feminine psyche and reformulate identity through consciousness and language.

Key words: Alice Walker, Unconscious, Freud, The Female Self, symbolism, Id and ego.

1.Introduction:

Alice Walker is one of the most prominent feminist voices in contemporary African-American literature. Through her novels and poetry, she has established a critical and humane vision that transcends the boundaries of literature and embraces cultural and social resistance. Walker belongs to a generation of female writers who have taken it upon themselves to rewrite history from the perspective of Black women. She has presented a literary discourse in which feminist consciousness intersects with racial and class consciousness, revealing the depth of the female human experience in a society based on structures of male dominance and systematic racism.

This vision is clearly evident in her famous novel The Color Purple (1982), a landmark in African-American feminist literature due to its profound psychological

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and spiritual dimension.

The novel not only depicts the harsh social reality experienced by Black women under male oppression and racial discrimination, but also delves into the depths of the human psyche, revealing the internal struggles its characters face between desire and repression, submission and liberation, and memory and pain. Walker relies on internal narrative and self-monologue to give her characters a voice that expresses their suffering and long silences, making writing a means of liberation and self-reformation.

Sigmund Freud provided a rich theoretical framework for understanding the human psyche, based on the concept of the unconscious as a reservoir of repressed desires and painful memories that form the basis of human behavior. According to Freud, these unconscious forces do not disappear but reappear in various symbolic forms, whether in dreams, verbal slips, or works of art and literature. From this perspective, literature becomes a fertile field for the manifestation of the unconscious, as psychological conflicts are translated into symbols, images, and metaphors that express repressed desires and complex emotional experiences.

When these concepts are applied to Alice Walker's fictional world, we discover that *The Color Purple* represents a rich literary model for studying the dynamics of the unconscious in character development. The heroine, Celie, embodies a troubled self, burdened by childhood trauma and parental violence, embarking on a long journey from silence to disclosure, from oppression to self-awareness. The psychological transformation Celie undergoes can be read from a Freudian perspective as an internal analytical process, in which the character moves from repression to confession, from the unconscious to the conscious, in a process similar to psychotherapy that leads to liberation from repressed pain.

Based on this conception, this study seeks to approach *The Color Purple* from a Freudian perspective, focusing on the representations of the unconscious in the characters' behavior and on the symbols Walker employs to reveal the repressed feminine self. Walker's fictional world is not only based on social conflict but also on the profound psychological tension between the id, ego, and superego, where language and correspondence become a means of empowering the self and regaining control over its destiny. The study also seeks to reveal the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis, describing literature as a space where imagination meets the unconscious, language meets desire, and the self meets the other.

Accordingly, the main problem of this study revolves around the following question:

How is the unconscious manifested in *The Color Purple*, and what psychological and symbolic mechanisms did Alice Walker use to reveal the repressed feminine self?

The basic hypothesis is that Walker writes about women not only from the outside, but also from within; from the depths of her hidden self, where the literary text becomes a therapeutic space for restoring psychological balance and reformulating feminine identity through confession, language, and symbolism. Thus, for Alice Walker, creativity becomes both an existential and a resistance act, seeking to liberate the body, soul, and memory from the constraints of the past and the legacy of social and psychological oppression.

2. Theoretical Framework: Psychoanalysis and Freud's Unconscious:

Psychoanalysis, founded by Sigmund Freud at the beginning of the twentieth century, is one of the most influential approaches in human thought and literature. Freud did not limit himself to explaining human behavior from a medical perspective; he established a new vision that viewed humans as the product of internal conflicts driven by unconscious forces, arising from repressed desires and painful memories that have not found their way to conscious expression (Freud, 2010, p. 34).

Freud believed that the human psyche consists of three interacting and conflicting forces:

- The id: The repository of primitive instincts and drives that seek immediate gratification without regard for morality or reality.*
- The ego: The force that attempts to balance the desires of the id and the demands of the superego in light of reality.*
- The superego: This is the internal representative of moral and social authority, imposing principles of discipline and conscience on the individual (Freud, 2010, pp. 45–47).*

Freud explains this psychological structure by stating that "mental life is not a homogeneous whole but rather a struggle between opposing forces seeking control" (Freud, 2010, p. 52). Thus, the psyche becomes a constant battlefield between instincts and constraints, between desire and duty, a reality clearly reflected in literary texts that express the collective and personal unconscious.

Freud's discovery of the concept of the unconscious had a profound impact on literary criticism, as literature was considered the space where these hidden forces manifest. In the moment of creativity, the writer expresses not only his consciousness but also his repressed impulses and inner conflicts, which find an outlet in writing. This is why Charles Moran (1998, p. 72) argues that:

“Literature speaks the language of the unconscious; it transforms inner conflicts into symbolic narratives.”

That is, literature speaks the language of the unconscious, transforming psychological conflicts into symbolic narratives that enable an understanding of the self from within.

In this context, Ernest Jones (1951, p. 30) links the creative process to Freudian dreams, arguing that literary works resemble dreams in that they are symbolic expressions of repressed desires and forgotten childhood memories. The writer, like the dreamer, produces linguistic symbols that conceal what is not explicitly said.

Louise Tyson (2006, p. 12) suggests that the psychoanalysis of literature is not limited to the study of the writer, but extends to the analysis of characters and symbols as representations of complex psychological processes within the text. She adds that Freudian criticism is concerned with unraveling the hidden layers of literary discourse by observing "what the text says without intending it"—that is, uncovering the text's unconscious meaning (Tyson, 2006, p. 19).

According to Peter Barry (2017, p. 115), literature is a fertile space for the embodiment of repressed desires, because literary language functions like a dream in concealing the true meaning behind images, metaphors, and symbols. Thus, Freudian reading becomes a kind of psychoanalysis of the text, where the critic treats the text as a doctor treats a dream: attempting to interpret the symbols to reach the meaning behind them.

*This article draws on this insight to read Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* as a literary text that expresses the feminine unconscious within an oppressive social and cultural context. Through her heroine, Celie, the author paints a psychological map of a woman torn apart by trauma and deprivation, whose desires are repressed by patriarchal, religious, and racist oppression. In this sense, Celie becomes an example of a self-attempting, through writing, to free itself from the captivity of a repressed unconscious.*

Celie begins the novel as a silent, submissive girl, addressing God in her letters as if she were addressing the unconscious itself. This form of internal narrative represents what Freud called "catharsis," in which repressed pain is transformed into liberated words (Freud, 2010, p. 278). The letters the heroine writes are not merely a means of communication; they represent an act of confession and the recovery of the shattered self through language.

This correspondence reveals the psychological defense mechanism Freud spoke of, whereby people resort to projection and repression as means of escaping trauma. Celie projects her fear first onto the image of God, then onto the men in her life, before rebuilding her self-awareness through her relationship with Shug Avery, a symbol of liberation, desire, and the creative self. From a Freudian perspective, Celie's transformation in consciousness can be read as a transition from the

dominance of the superego, represented by strict religious values and submission to authority, to the triumph of the ego, which learns to reconcile with its desires and express them freely. Celie's journey thus becomes a symbolic psychotherapeutic journey, in which memory merges with confession, language with liberation, and desire with literary creation.

Psychoanalysis, then, allows for a deeper understanding of the novel as a therapeutic space for the female self. The letter writing in *The Color Purple* is not merely a narrative technique, but a process of reconstructing a fractured identity, where the text itself becomes a mirror of the writer's unconscious and the feminist community to which she belongs. From this perspective, Alice Walker offers a model of what she calls "therapeutic writing," which aims to liberate the self through language.

3. Psychoanalysis in *The Color Purple*: Celie and the Journey from Repression to Consciousness:

3.1 Childhood and Early Trauma: The Wound of Origin and the Formation of the Unconscious

From the very first pages, Celie is presented in her inner voice, writing a letter to God: "Dear God, I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me." (Walker, 1982, p. 1)

This opening represents a moment of initial rupture in her consciousness. Unable to directly express the trauma (her rape by her father), she turns to writing as a mediator between the conscious and the unconscious.

Language here is not communication, but rather an attempt to understand the incomprehensible. In psychoanalytic terms, these letters represent acting out—that is, the outpouring of trauma in speech or writing without conscious awareness of it (Freud, 2010, p. 315). When Celie writes: "He never had a kind word to say to me. Just say you're gonna do what your mammy wouldn't." (p. 3)

What Freud called the primal scene appears, instilling in the child a lasting sense of shame and fear of the body. This creates a repressed unconscious that causes Celie to hate her body and treat it as an external object.

The loss of her children to rape further deepens this psychological detachment. She later recalls: "He took my baby. Kilt it out back." (p. 4)

The omission of emotional details in this cold narrative demonstrates the degree of denial the psyche resorts to to avoid collapse.

As Louise Tyson (2006, p. 44) notes, "Cele's fragmented language reflects the ego's detachment from pain, transforming the experience into a mechanical, emotionless

narrative”—which makes the reader witness the language of the unconscious more than the conscious.

3.2 From Silence to Desire: Encountering Shug Avery as a Self-Analysis

When Shug Avery enters Celie's life, a new phase of consciousness begins. And from her first appearance, Celie writes with amazement: *“She is the most beautiful woman I ever saw.”* (p. 40). This simple description conceals what Freud called projected desire. Shug represents the bold unconscious, daring to express, to sing, and to love without fear. She embodies the id, the instinctual part of the psyche, in contrast to Celie, who represents the superego, repressed by dogma and custom (Freud, 2010, p. 67).

The decisive shift occurs when Shug tells Celie: *“God love all their feelings. That’s some of the best things God did. And when you know God loves ‘em, you enjoy ‘em a lot more.”* (p. 177). This dialogue is a symbolic moment of psychoanalysis: Shug redefines the concept of God so that it reconciles with the body and desire, allowing Celie to free part of her unconscious.

The tone of her writing then changes; instead of speaking only of pain, she begins to talk about pleasure, beauty, singing, and sewing. In one of the later passages, Celie says: *“I git to feeling like I can do anything. Just like Shug say, I feel just right.”* (p. 191)

This new feeling is what psychoanalysis calls libidinal energy release, the creative and positive return of repressed desire to the surface of consciousness (Moran, 1998, p. 91). Her love for Shug is presented not as an anomaly, but as a liberation from internal constraints. The relationship represents a union between consciousness and unconsciousness, between spirit and body, between sound and silence—and for this reason, it is the core of the novel's therapeutic journey.

3.3 Writing as Psychoanalysis: Language between Repression and Expression

Writing in *The Color Purple* is Celie's only means of confronting her unconscious. At first, she writes only to God, but later she turns to writing to longing, then to herself. This transformation embodies, in Freudian terms, the ego's transition from dependence on an imagined father figure to autonomy (Freud, 2010, p. 221).

Cele later says:

“Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear people. Dear everything. Dear God.” (p. 285)

The expansion of the addressee from “God” to “everything” expresses the self's integration with the world. She no longer seeks salvation in others, but discovers it in herself. This linguistic development represents what Ernest Jones (1951, p. 70) calls

symbolic healing, where the word is transformed from an instrument of pain into an instrument of knowledge. Each letter, then, is a written psychoanalytic session, in which memories, desires, nightmares, and repressed feelings are brought to life.

Ultimately, writing itself becomes a form of new consciousness: *"I don't write to God anymore; I write to you. What happens to me now is what I care about."* (p. 199). The discourse has moved from the metaphysical to the subjective, from the sacred to the human, from the unconscious to the conscious.

3.4 Reclaiming the Self: From the Repressed Unconscious to the Reconciled Consciousness

In the final chapter, after years of loss and anguish, Celie says:

"I'm so happy. I got love, I got work, I got friends and family. I'm thankful to God for the color purple." (p. 290)

Purple here becomes a symbol of the unification of the fragmented parts of the self. It is not only the color of sadness, but also the color of consciousness, as it combines red (desire) and blue (serenity).

From a Freudian perspective, this ending represents the realization of ego integration, as Celie is no longer a prisoner of repression or fear, but is instead able to balance instincts and conscience.

Thus, the entire novel becomes a journey into the depths of the Black feminist unconscious, where liberation from male and social oppression becomes synonymous with liberation from internal psychological constraints.

Through Celie, Alice Walker writes a psychoanalytic biography of marginalized women, transforming the story into literary therapy, and literature itself into a therapeutic space.

4. The Symbolic and Linguistic Dimension in "The Color Purple": Nature and Color as a Mirror of the Unconscious:

4.1 Purple: A Symbol of the Transition from Pain to Consciousness

Purple is the title and symbolic key to the entire novel. It combines red (symbolizing desire and life) and blue (symbolizing the soul and purity), becoming a visual representation of Celie's journey from body to spirit, from oppression to consciousness.

In one of the central passages, Shog Avery says: *"I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it."* (Walker, 1982, p. 196)

This statement represents, in the language of symbolic psychoanalysis, a moment of insight. Here, God is no longer an external authority observing the human being, but rather a symbol of the positive inner energy that calls for awareness of beauty in everyday life.

According to Carl Jung (1959, p. 118), colors in literature embody the contents of the collective unconscious. In this context, the color purple represents the balance of psychological opposites—between matter and spirit, between pain and healing, between past and future.

When Celie finally says, “I’m thankful to God for the color purple.” (p. 290), she is not simply talking about a color or a natural scene, but rather about her newfound awareness that sees beauty even in the smallest details. Thus, purple becomes a symbol of psychic rebirth, a concept Jung refers to as individuation—the realization of the integrated self after inner conflict.

4.2 Nature as the Voice of the Feminine Unconscious

Nature in Walker’s novel is not a narrative backdrop, but rather a symbolic object that expresses the characters’ psychological states. In moments of oppression, nature is described as harsh and dry, while in moments of awareness and liberation, it transforms into a vibrant space.

In one of Celie’s final letters, she writes: “Everything wants to be loved. We sing and dance and holler, just trying to be loved.” (p. 282). This universal realization that “everything wants to be loved” reflects her transition from a closed ego to a universal consciousness, where love becomes a universal principle encompassing both human and nature.

Nature here expresses the maternal unconscious discussed by Irigaray and Lovenikas in their feminist theories—nature becomes the embodiment of a symbolic womb that embraces the feminine and provides healing (Tyson, 2006, p. 63). Cele's connection to the land through sewing and farming also represents a return to psychological and spiritual roots.

Sewing, for example, is not merely a craft, but a symbolic act of re-mending a shattered self: each piece of cloth represents a fragment of her memory, and each handiwork is an attempt to restore identity. This can be read Freudianly as sublimation—the transformation of repressed energy into creative activity (Freud, 2010, p. 243).

4.3 Language and Symbolism: From Whisper to Voice

At the beginning of the novel, Celie's language is poor and limited—short sentences, broken grammar, and devoid of emotion. But as her psychological experience develops, the language gradually changes, becoming more poetic and confident.

Eventually, her letters transform into an open, poetic discourse: “Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear people. Dear everything.” (p. 285) This expansion of address represents what Peter Parry (2017, p. 128) calls the “expansion of narrative consciousness”—the narrator's awareness expanding to encompass the entire universe.

In doing so, language itself becomes a symbolic space for liberation from unconscious silence. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the language in *The Color Purple* can be said to represent a map of the unconscious:

- *At the beginning, the language of repression (silence, denial).*
- *At the middle, the language of desire (confession, love).*
- *Ultimately, the language of consciousness (acceptance, gratitude, harmony).*

In this sense, language becomes a means of passage from the unconscious to the conscious, from the wounded self to the reconciled self.

Liberation is achieved not only through love or action, but also through the word, which reorders psychological chaos and transforms pain into meaning.

4.4 Psychological and Spiritual Integration: The Conclusion of the Journey

In the closing scene, when Celie reunites with her sister Nettie, her children, and her friends, she says: “Us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this is the youngest us ever felt.” (p. 288) This statement, as Jones (1951, p. 84) sees it, embodies the moment of symbolic return to tranquil childhood—that is, the restoration of the self to what it was before the initial trauma.

Cele has been freed from fear and shame and has reshaped her relationship with herself and the world. Thus, the text ends with a reconciliation between the inside and the outside, between the self and nature, between language and the body.

The Color Purple is not just a novel about oppression, but about psychological healing through love, awareness, and beauty.

Purple is a mirror of the unconscious, illuminated from darkness—a symbol of the human journey from darkness to light, from repression to freedom.

5. Conclusion

Alice Walker and the Depth of the Hidden Self: A Freudian Approach to Character Analysis in *The Color Purple*

The Color Purple is more than a narrative of a Black woman's suffering in a violent society; it is a profound therapeutic journey into the layers of the human psyche, where psychoanalytic theories meet with a critique of patriarchal social structures.

Through the character of Celie, Alice Walker crafts a comprehensive psychological architecture that embodies what Freud called the return of the repressed—the return of the repressed in the form of a new consciousness, capable of reinterpreting the world not as a prison, but as a space for liberation.

Initially, Celie represents the archetype of the "repressed self," living within a cycle of repression, fear, and shame. But through love (African longing), language (writing), and nature (earth and the color purple), she succeeds in transforming repressed libidinal energy into creative and spiritual energy.

Thus, she transforms from victim to subject, from object in the discourse of the Other to a speaking subject who writes her own existence. This psychological journey is not limited to the traditional Freudian structure, but rather transcends it to touch upon what Walker herself calls in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" womanism a feminism reconciled with one's roots, one's body, and one's spirit.

In contrast to Freudian analysis, which focuses on the conflict between the id, the ego, and the superego, Walker presents an integrative vision that sees healing in the reconciliation of the conscious and the unconscious, and of the human being and the world. From this perspective, purple becomes not merely an aesthetic symbol, but a sign of the completion of the psychological circle:

The color, initially a muted backdrop to nature, eventually becomes a symbol of inner rebirth because those who observe the beauty in "the purple in the field" have reached a level of awareness that enables them to see themselves in everything.

Thus, Alice Walker reformulates the concept of psychological salvation through literature, asserting that liberation is achieved only when pain is transformed into meaning, and meaning into awareness. It is a journey from the dark unconscious to the inner light, from the repressed voice to the free language, from the wounded body to the reconciled body. From a feminist psychoanalytic perspective, *The Color Purple* is a literary testament that writing itself can be therapeutic, and that literature, when it listens to the human unconscious, becomes a path toward healing.

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