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Volume : 15 à 16 pages ; interligne : 1,5 ; pas d'écriture : 12, Times New Roman.

Ordre logique du texte

- Un **TITRE** en caractère d'imprimerie et en gras. Le titre ne doit pas être trop long ;
- Un **Résumé** en français qui ne doit pas dépasser 6 lignes (60 mots)
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Elle doit être brève et insister sur l'originalité des résultats de la recherche menée.

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Les sources consultées et/ou citées doivent figurer dans une rubrique, en fin de texte, intitulée :

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Les rapports et des documents inédits mais d'intérêt scientifique peuvent être cités.

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Les auteurs qui souhaitent se faire publier dans nos colonnes sont priés d'avoir cette philosophie comme fil directeur de leur réflexion.

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LITTERATURE

AESTHETICS OF SURVIVAL IN MICHAEL PHILLIPS'S *ANGELS WATCHING OVER ME*

Ebony K. AGBOH*

Abstract

Of all times, peoples have always been confronted with hardships including domination, oppression, wars, loss of dear ones, slavery, etc. Most of the time, and in any of these challenging cases, survival always seems the most important action to take and expect to overthrow the defying situation. This article questions the issue of survival in American fiction writer Michael Phillips's *Angels Watching over Me* (2003) wherein two girls, the first Katie from a white master dominant background, and the second Mayme from a black slave family condition and more unfortunate, are strained at the cross road of the same fate and almost equal destiny that they confront. Within such an unpredictable post American Civil War context whereby the loss of the protagonists' parents entails the writer's strategy to find back, in each character's life conditions and experiences, some survival techniques he portrays to ensure their subsistence. Religious aesthetics, as an approach to this narrative, considers art, symbol, feeling, beauty, taste, imagination, and perception in the light of God, revelation, and the sacred. It is implemented throughout this paper whose aim is to study how Michael Phillips's survival techniques represent those angels watching over Mayme, whose future held nothing but slavery.

Keywords: White; Black; War; ruin; life experience; Angels.

Résumé

Les peuples de tous les temps ont toujours été confrontés à certaines difficultés, y compris la domination, l'oppression, les guerres, la perte de proches, l'esclavage, etc. La plupart du temps, et dans chacun de ces cas difficiles, la survie semble toujours l'action la plus importante à prendre et s'attendre à renverser la situation défiante. Cet article remet en cause la question de la survie dans l'œuvre de l'écrivain américain Michael Phillips *Angels Watching over Me* (2003) dans laquelle deux filles, la première Katie, issue de la

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race dominante des maîtres Blancs, et la seconde Mayme, descendante d'esclaves noirs et surtout plus malheureuse, toutes deux à la croisée des chemins d'un même destin qu'elles affrontent. Dans un contexte post-guerre civile américaine aussi imprévisible qu'incertain où la perte des parents des deux protagonistes provoque la création de techniques de survie par l'écrivain à partir des expériences de chaque personnage pour assurer leur subsistance. L'esthétique religieuse, comme approche de ce récit, considère l'art, le symbole, le sentiment, la beauté, le goût, l'imagination et la perception dans la lumière de Dieu, la révélation, et le sacré. Il est mis en œuvre tout au long de ce document dont le but est d'étudier comment les techniques de survie de Michael Phillips représentent ces anges qui surveillent Mayme, dont l'avenir ne tient qu'à l'esclavage.

Mots-clés : Blanc, Noir, guerre, ruine, expérience de vie, anges

Introduction

When I first came across *Angels Watching over Me*, I sensed the novel would be narrating “my life”, that is, a story like my own because of the experiences I have gone through so far. Before I realize it deals with slavery and racial issues of antebellum America, the only thing left for me was to unfold the narrative and identify a character whose life would eventually be of interest for me.

Often, life exposes most believers or more generally most human beings to “an embarrassing question: *are angels real?*” (Angel, 2012, p. 1) In fact, an angel is both a mythic and mystic being that intervenes in peoples' lives by bringing them goodness which is basically dependent on circumstances and situations they confront. Many tend to agree that angels are sent by Almighty God to protect them. Prophet's *How to Work with Angels* classifies angels according to their roles that include protection, illumination, love, guidance, healing, peace, and joy and takes the stand to convince the reader that

angels are good messengers who “are always near to whisper words of warning, guidance and encouragement” (1998, p. 3).

Interest in angels has grown in the last few decades. [They] have taken the lead role in some films and television programs. Increasing number of books are being written about angels. There are many spiritual advisors who offer to help people to get in touch with “their angels.” This makes for increased interest in them and goes some way to making them an acceptable topic for conversation or art work. (Angel, 2012, p. 2)

As long as literature is grounded in social existence, angelic stories that are part of religious beliefs will infuse many novels. Madeleine L'Engle (2007), Karen Kingbury (2014), Michael Phillips (2003) are but a few of the many writers who offer the reader pieces of fiction in that regard. The reading and interpretation of their works might not be easy because of the sensitivity of the religious topics. However, whether implicit in the work, as when a lyric poet meditates on a flower, or quite explicit and circumstantial, as when a novelist traces the history of a family or a society, (Brooks, 1974, p. 95) every aspect can offer ground for interesting analyses.

African American antebellum literary works described most black characters standing individually or collectively against social, political and cultural oppression provoked by white masters. It is hardly assumable that only black characters in any American fiction work tend to fight for their welfare because the reality that white characters stand for fight as well against uncomfortable situations. To some extent, suffering is a portion of all depending on the levels and/or circumstances. Very often, black characters confront complex situations in which only “angels” could help them. It is clear that this essay does not pretend to develop a purely religious approach to the

novel; it is a literary study which relies on the representation of angels in the novel under study.

Angels Watching over Me recounts both Mayme's and Katie's experiences during the American Civil War and after. Both characters started on different racial, social and economic grounds. Katie's secured and assured path to wealth and welfare seemed unshakable. In a totally chaotic slave context where poverty and misery prevailed, Mayme only had faith to hold onto it. Before the author puts them together in a dreadful environment created by the death of their parents, he confronts them with survival situations that will serve as their shields when death and desolation strike them. Thus this essay postulates that the writer's literary techniques implemented for both characters' resilience represent "angels" who directly intervened to help them out of adversities.

This study is sustained by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's original idea that aesthetics is "science dealing with the knowledge gained through the bodily senses"(Plate, 2005, p. 19). Put together, religion and aesthetics will be used to shed light on the way this article means to conduct its analysis and interpretation of religious facts and events in the narrative. In other words, there are symbols and signs whose analysis in light of religion aesthetics refer to the supernatural and godly creatures that intervene in human's lives to assist them in hard times.

This work is structured around three sections including the difference between the social and economic contexts of the protagonists' lives, the beginning of the winds of despair and the characterization of narrative angels for survival.

1. Setting Mayme's and Katie's Social and Economic Backgrounds Apart

1.1. Mayme's Unfavored Life Slave Context

African American fiction is full of with social and economic contexts often considered difficult and hard for them (African Americans). In fact, on the psychological level it has been proven epigenetically that there is a way the “experiences of previous generations can affect who we are” (Jones, 2014, p. 11). Arguably the sufferings of a generation are intrinsically connected to the various events undergone by the parents or the fore parents. The phenomenon of slavery in many novels reveals, most of the time, how pathetic the conditions of slavery affect them and bring readers fond of racial justice to think positive in terms of their lives and means of fighting this phenomenon.

Before this article sheds light on the fight against slavery in an attempt to understand the issue of parental responsibility vis-à-vis the children, it is worth noting that in 1662, *Blacks faced the possibility of life servitude. The General Assembly of Virginia decided that any child born to an enslaved woman will also be a slave*; meaning that a child born to an enslaved mother inherits her slave status (Colonial Williamsburg Education, 2020). Mayme lives under a condition which predicts nothing else than becoming a slave. She confesses that at first, “she just told stories to her little brother Samuel. And that she loved to listen to the yarns the old slaves would spin around their nightly fires, and later she'd tell Sammy those stories too.”(Phillips, 2003, p. 11). Clearly, Mayme does not see herself in a different context. Life has set her up to be a slave and she cannot escape it. Her life is reduced to taking care of her younger brother while their mother works in the field. Mayme will not be able to escape plantation works

just like her mother. She describes them as “wrinkled brown hands”(Phillips, 2003, p. 16). It would be interesting at this stage to raise the point that despite Mayme’s preset future, her mother was able to notice “some *unordinary smarts*² in dat brain of yors. So I reckon you’ll get along all right fine in dis ole world’, whateber becomes of you”(Phillips, 2003, p. 10), meaning that the mother is foreseeing those “unordinary smarts” like the “angels” around her child. They are the ones that will watch over her when life around her begins to harden. Mother confessed “good Lord’s giben you a gif’ most folks ain’t got.”(Phillips, 2003, p. 11).

Without overlooking Katie’s various privileges she (Mayme) is deprived of, she (Mayme) is not even upset; she holds her mind positive by preparing to help angels operate “*miracles*” in her life. She believes “ Laws can be passed to help even things out, but when it all comes down to it, there’s only one way for hearts to be changed and real freedom to get around to everybody”(Phillips, 2003, p. 16).

1.2. Background to Katie’s Privileged Life

Katie’s world as fictionalized does not have anything common with that of Mayme. The difference between Mayme and Katie is their skin color. Mayme is black, and Katie is white. The gap between them is full of stories that turn around the issues of master and slave or bourgeois and proletarian. In either case master or bourgeois, many characters created with these characteristics always enjoy life and look down upon the downtrodden rest of the world. Mayme says : “Katie and I were white and black, once we got used to it, the difference between us made us even closer – not because we got to be the same but just because we were different. But we were different in more

² My *italics*

ways than the color of our skin.”(Phillips, 2003, p. 15). What is exactly the difference? Their differences expand not only at the level of their skin color but also at the level of the privileges Katie is enjoying in the American society as a child of a master. The fact of the matter is that in the train, Katie always “sits in front with the white folks.” The other privilege Katie has is her right to vote which her parents have enjoyed over the years. Aside these aspects of the political life that show their differences and mainly the privileges of Katie, there is also the physical appearance symbolized by the hands of Katie that cannot be damaged by wrinkles because she has never worked on a farm as a white person.

2. Katie and Mayme in the Context of Similar Living Condition

The analysis of the various techniques of survival in the context of the aesthetics of religion increases the opposition between angels and demons that has to be explored in a relevant manner. War as a phenomenon organized and implemented by human beings brings about desolation, death and sorrow that represent devilish agents in the collective imagination of many readers.

2.1. Mayme against complex adversities

In fact, Mayme suffered the advent of the War between the North and the South. However, it is worth noting that she used to be confronted with many difficulties before the advent of the chaos. Mayme’s attitude before, during and after the war did not change as such. She was used to solving daily problems according to the means she could afford in her slavish context. Thus, the advent of the war could not have the same resonance to her as to Katie. Mayme and her family were subjected to all kinds of life situations whether happy or sad. Mama, Mayme’s mother has this to say: “dis here’s a hard life we

lead. We neber know what's gwine happen ter any of us from day ter day" (Phillips, 2003, p. 10). Obviously, Mama has accepted and acknowledged their living condition as slaves on Clairbornes' plantation. They are poor people in the midst of a wealthy family, but they believe in the mercy of God to change their lives. The statement that her daughter Mayme will get along "all right fine in dis ole worl', whateber becomes of her," (ibid) she anticipates that everything good is going to happen to her daughter.

In fact, the war does not sound very new to the slaves, it rather represents additional hardships they had to overcome. War caused the massacre of her people as

a thunder of riders was coming so fast I could feel the ground shaking under me. With the shouts and like a hundred men bearing straight for the houses, yelling and shooting. I heard screams from Mama and the rest of the women. Then gunfire and more shouts. Terrible sounds filled the air all around me. Horrible screams and loud explosions from the guns all mingled together in an uproar that was defeating [...] The riders were shooting and trampling everybody and knocking everything over and riding around recklessly with their horses kicking and rearing all over the place. (Phillips, 2003, p. 96).

The massacre generates in Mayme the strength she needs to find solutions to more complicated issues that occur in the novel. The way she lived with her parents, the way she survived the massacre fills the reader's mind with scenarios of lucky people escaping bad guys. From afar, she could hear and see them operating and killing her people. Thus, witnessing her people die has created desolation and then change in her life; the condition of war has reinforced her human status.

2.2. Ruined Katie : Descending from privileges to hardships

War as one of the winds of despair that started blowing in the life of Katie generated a change in her destiny as the novel unfolds. In the beginning she had no idea what was going on because “she took it all as part of the natural order of things” (Phillips, 2003, p. 41). But when the War broke out on April 12, 1861 and the news of the death of her brother Jason reached back to them, life started becoming meaningless to her. Her father and all other brothers all gone to fight in that “stupid and senseless” war (Phillips, 2003, p. 42) infer the very chaos around her. If Katie’s mother was unable to understand the reason why her husband Richard Claiborne “was leaving his wife and daughter alone just so he could try to kill other men who had also left wives and daughters behind at their homes, neither could Katie the child. Katie’s life is now getting more and more strained and biased because she would have to do some of the activities she was not used to. She had slaves at home who took care of the farms, the cattles, and many other things related to the wellbeing of their plantation. It can be said that Katie’s privileged world began to shrink because of the absence of their slaves. As a matter of fact Katie had to play the overseeing roles in the absence of her father and brothers. Exposed to hardship and a lot of things to learn about plantation life before she could run it effectively, Katie’s life can be interpreted as a declining life created in the novel in order to present war as a devilish phenomenon that contributes to the downfall of the Claiborne plantation.

3. Narrative Angelic Creatures’ Push to Survival in *Angels Watching Over Me*

Whenever we are born, angels and demons run to us to take possession of our heart, soul and body depending on how we come into the world. In fact, when demons get into a person, their job is to

block you from achieving your destiny before getting back to your Creator. Citronnelli (2018) is of the view that there are seven ways demons enter a person and ten other ways they exit; but this section is not concerned with these ways. Instead it posits that demons take it for granted they mean to destroy peoples' lives. However, when angels take control of your life, they always lead you to peace and love before any hard situation emerges. Prophet (1998, p.3) believes that : “the angels want to be a part of your lives. They are ready to help you solve problems, big and small and bring you closer to your Higher Self – real or spiritual self.” In the wake of this, it is obvious that I am more interested in identifying all fiction-characterized angels that could play any protective role in either Mayme's or Katie's lives.

3.1. Mayme as Katie's Angel

In the novel under scrutiny, Phillips the author created different types of characters including human beings, things, and events. At some point when confronting hardships, a number of human beings get transformed into personified angels in order to give help to their fellows. This fact seems the most recurrent in the world because it functions in a visible manner. Angels in the spiritual form embody a human nature to save people.

Arguably, the author of the novel has endowed Mayme with an angelic behavior pattern in the narrative for her to come to rescue Katie and take the stand of her angel. When her job was over, she felt it unnecessary to continue being with Katie instead of going back to other businesses. “This would be my last night here in this nice soft bed. I'd been at Rosewood long enough to get used to the comfort, but it was time for me to go back to being a colored girl again” (Phillips, 2003, p. 262). The foregoing underlines Mayme's role as an angel in

the house of Katie where she could bring the latter back to good mood when they were all facing the hardships of the war: “Miss Katie... Katie!” I shouted toward the woods. “They’re gone! You can come out now!”(Phillips, 2003, p. 250). When the assailants were definitely far away from them, the reader catches another word of the angel Mayme providing some advice to the threatened Katie:

Don’t you know Miss Katie – they’re going to find out! I’ve been telling you all along that I have to leave sometime, and soon. And if you don’t do something, you’re gonna have to go to your aunt or one of your uncles or some kindly person around here... or else to an orphanage. (Phillips, 2003, p. 255).

The passage portrays an angel intervention in Katie’s life to help her find a way out of problems. Mayme then has been created by the author as an angel to protect Katie and help her survive.

3.2. Intuition and Knowledge as Mayme’s aesthetic Archangel

Mayme is Katie’s angel; but the fact that both characters face the same chaotic situation implies that the angel has to take care of herself. The point is how to go about it? Actually, an angel cannot take care of him/herself; they have the capacity to survive any tough situation, and live according to their nature. Mayme who has been characterized as an angel has to face life herself and also find her way out. Knowingly, her first mission is to bring help to people before she could think about herself. Prophet (1998, p. 7) affirms that “angels are to God what sunbeams are to the sun. God created angels to serve and minister to us”.

Before the American Civil War broke out, Mayme had deadly living conditions. As a slave girl living with her parents on Clairebones’ plantation, she could not expect any bright future. But she had to cope with it and survive until she could help another person

in difficulties. The point is that Mayme is an angel and there is an archangel that operates to protect Mayme. The archangel whose protective role is to safeguard Mayme is characterized in the novel by providence. Providence is simply “government by the lord's divine love and wisdom” (Swedenborg, 2006). The action of providence in the life of Mayme is manifested in various forms. The first form of providence in her life is represented by her intuition which prompted her to hide from marauders when they came to kill the slaves on Clairebone's plantation:

a thunder of riders was coming so first I could feel the ground shaking under me. With the shouts and horses and the dust and dust flying, it looked to my eyes like a hundred men bearing straight for the houses, yelling and shooting. I hear screams from Mama and the rest of the women. Then gunfire and more shouts. Terrible sounds filled the air all around me. Horrible screams and loud explosions from the guns all mingled together in an uproar that was deafening.

I dropped my water bucket and ran toward the quarter. *But about halfway back I stopped and hid behind a tree*³. Whatever was going on, it was clear it wouldn't do a girl like me a bit of good to run out into the middle of it. (Phillips, 2003, p. 96)

The expression of the narrator at this level generates fear about the fate of the little girl that had gone for some water. When fear gains ground, there is almost no way for the fearer to escape except by relying on intuition that helps find the way out peacefully. Intuition is “the spiritual perception or immediate knowledge, ascribed to angelic and spiritual beings, with whom vision and knowledge are identical”(Oxford, 1978, p. 30) does not come to speak as a normal human being ; it flashes, in a flitting manner, into the mind of the person who has to grab it and take an action accordingly.

³ My *italics* to underline the fact that this was the voice of intuition she could perceive and act accordingly.

Another aspect of the manifestation or representation of the action of an angelic entity in the life of Mayme is showing in the encounter she had with Katie after the war when everything in their surroundings collapsed.

To get acquainted with someone might seem a mere fact not well apprehended by evasive readers as events created by the author to convey with a specific end in mind. Indeed, an encounter with someone is not enough for one to think that the encountered person will generate any angelic action. The matter of the fact is when two people meet, each one brings something new to the life of the other in order to impact their lives. This, in fact, is arguably represented like an angel's intervention in someone's life. For their first contact, Mayme has this to say: "in the middle of a doorway stood a *white* girl, probably a year or so younger than me. She was staring straight at me through big eyes that looked even more afraid than I felt" (Phillips, 2003, p. 107). My italics in the quotation underscore the idea of knowledge to bring to someone in darkness. Knowledge is therefore like a liberator of a captive. She says: "There were more books in that house than I'd ever imagined could be anywhere. How could one family have so many books? I thought it would be awfully nice to be smart enough to read books like these" (Phillips, 2003, p. 127). It is averred that knowledge is power. Because Katie is well read, she had the power to speak and act like Mayme's master.

It is now the turn of Katie to bring joy to Mayme's life by teaching her how things work in wealthy mansions. Life is joyful, people have enough to eat, they can cook fancy meals, have a lot of books to read and acquire more knowledge, learn to play an instrument and feel the music flow ; that is what wealthy families have

or do all the time. The touch Katie will bring to Mayme's life is to teach the latter how to play the piano on the beats of Mozart, who seems unknown to Mayme:

I've never heard such pretty music. We used to sing a lot in the evenings, but there weren't any pianos and mostly no instruments at all, just voices. It was pretty enough. But what you're playing is so different than anything I ever heard (Phillips, 2003, p. 150)

As if to help Mayme out of her ignorance, Katie replies: "that was Mozart." (Ibid)

Mayme played the role of a re-comforting angel in Katie's life. But, in return, Katie offered herself as a knowledge provider angel to Mayme: "take my hand" [she said] "I'll teach you" (Phillips, 2003, p. 151). The type of knowledge she came across during these dark days of the Shenandoah County massacre sounds like the disposal of a survival gateway.

Mayme and Katie could now be sublimated into accomplice angelic creatures that diffuse happiness and joy because both survived the war, the massacre, and the dreadful social and economic atmosphere the writer created around them:

two young women sat on the seat. The white girl who was driving the team wore a pale green-and-white frock, gloves and bonnet, and looked every bit the aristocratic young lady. The other, who was taller and plainly attired as a slave, wore a simple blue chambray work dress and straw hat. But whatever the differences in the color of their skin, they seemed to be having a good time, singing and laughing as they neared the town. (Phillips, 2003, p. 315).

The coexistence of both characters in this narrative represents the writer's ability to prove they are angelic creatures. He did not only mean to reveal their skin differences but also, he tried to portray the

ability of two angelic creatures to co-operate and collaborate by turning each other for survival.

Conclusion

This study has consisted in producing a critical analysis of Michael Phillips' *Angels Watching Over Me* in light of the religious aesthetics. The study has shown that the survival techniques created by the novelist in this narrative represent various angelic creatures that intervened in Mayme's life in order to push her slowly toward her chances of surviving the war. The narrative framework in which Mayme and Katie evolved was scrutinized and it was established that the context of Mayme's life as a slave presupposedly offered her little chances of survival against Katie's living conditions as a wealthy white mistress and whereby everything seemed arranged to presage nothing dreadful. However, the implication of the writer's devilish creature related to war and chaos leveled both situations before the intervention of all types of angelic creatures to re-comfort and offer support that has led to their survivals.

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