

Intertextual Revisionism: Recontextualizing The Eurocentric Literary Tradition In Hannah

Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*

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Much of the scholarship surrounding Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is focused on verifying the identity of its author as a formerly enslaved black woman. While I think that scholarship surrounding Crafts identity can be important, especially given the context of the time period in which the manuscript was initially written, I think that fixation on authorial identity can obstruct the full scope of the novel's value as social commentary. I would argue that more productive scholarship surrounding the text comes from analyzing the intertextual elements present within it. For example, Rachel Teukolsky's argument about how *The Bondwoman's Narrative* repurposes *Bleak House* to talk about the aesthetics of slave and class hierarchies highlights the depth of the novel's social awareness. Similarly, Rebecca Soares posits that by including references to various texts in her novel, Crafts can be understood as an ideal consumer of print culture, or someone who is able to craft a more nuanced argument about social issues through her understanding of the interconnectedness of various texts. In this regard, it is also helpful to note how Crafts reconstructs the Bible, a text that both scholars Lawrence Buel and Katherine Clay Bassard point out was the most popular and authoritative text for white readers during the time period. Through these instances, we can understand that while it is important that Crafts is able to exhibit creativity and agency through her ability to write, her role as a reader, in being able to identify connecting thematic ideas tied to the shortsightedness of white hegemonic discourse and Eurocentrism is more important. It is precisely her role as a critical reader that

makes her an effective writer. Through the role of reader, Crafts was able to reposition each text that she borrowed from a Eurocentric social context to create a more comprehensive and effective critique of the dehumanizing and hypocritical ideology of the United States and its white ruling class.

Teukolsky's talks about the visual aesthetics in *Bleak House* and how they are adopted in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* to challenge the way in which the U.S. sees itself as separate and free from the corrupt ruling aristocracies of Europe. This is apparent when Crafts repurposes the portrait gallery from *Bleak House* for this new context in her novel. Teukolsky makes the point that the portraits from *Bleak House* are representations of the genealogy of a corrupt and oppressive aristocracy (497). She also points out that the portraits are a nod to the Gothic genre as well, as the figures in the paintings can be understood as ghosts or immortal likenesses that watch over the family even after death (497). In *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Crafts takes these portraits of the aristocracy and places them within the context of the Southern Gothic in a slave plantation (Teukolsky 513). The terminology Crafts uses to describe the story behind the portraits is good at evoking this sense of the Gothic (Teukolsky 513). Crafts writes that the original patriarch of the De Santa family, Sir Clifford, "ordered his portrait and that of his wife to be hung in the drawing room, and denounced a severe malediction ... against any possessor of the mansion who being of his name and blood should neglect to follow his example" (16). The use of the term malediction powerfully denotes this idea of a curse brought on through a dead ancestor. Since the drawing room is ordered to remain by the dead, no one is able to act outside of the wishes of Sir Clifford, lest they be cursed or doomed to a horrible fate. Therefore, the portrait gallery in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is similarly cursed by a premonition of family genealogy like it is in *Bleak House*. By creating a direct correlation between the slave owners of

the U.S. and the aristocracy of England, Crafts is able to challenge a core aspect of the United State's collective ethos-- that the U.S. is a fundamentally different and freer nation than its European counterparts. Crafts is able to point to the hypocrisy of this idea through this new portrait gallery by revealing how the United States didn't so much break away from a corrupt aristocracy as much as they just created a new one in the form of slave owners beholden to the legacies of their ancestors and generational wealth.

We can also read Crafts's incorporation of Dickensian class criticism within *The Bondwoman's Narrative* as a means of pointing to how concepts like race and class are not separate or distinct forms of injustice, but are instead both interconnected socially constructed hierarchies that are used by the ruling class to maintain power. This concept of the intersectionality between race and class and their utility as a means of socioeconomic domination is most overtly pointed to when Crafts rewrites the setting of *Bleak House's* slum of Tom-All-Alone's as a slave plantation. While describing the horrible conditions that the field slaves are forced to live in, Crafts laments the prevalence of a system that is, "not confined to any one place or country or condition. It extends through all grades of society from highest to lowest. It bans poor but honest people with the contemptuous appellation of 'vulgar.' It subjects others under certain circumstances to a lower link in the chain of being than that occupied by a horse" (Crafts 205). Here, Crafts is alluding to a broader cultural problem that slavery is merely a component of-- a system that is able to justify overt dehumanization in the name of power. This system she refers to both excludes poor and honest people and also likens others to animals or property. Here, she is positing that it is the limited idea of viewing others as a means to improve one's status, rather than as fellow human beings, that enables prevailing social problems like slavery or class inequality to persist. She is pointing to how slavery and class exploitation are not

merely accidental anomalies of society, but structures inherent in the systemic qualities of western culture, used to enforce and justify the socioeconomic power of the ruling class.

Not only is Crafts able to point to the overlapping nature of race and class as socially constructed hierarchies, but by reworking the writings of popular white social reformist authors during the time period, she is also acting as a critical reader that is highlighting the shortcomings and limitations of social criticism originating from a Eurocentric context. Rebecca Soares explores this idea in her article “Literary Graftings: Hannah Crafts's “The Bondwoman's Narrative” and the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Reader,” when she talks about how Crafts alludes to both Dickens’s *Bleak House* as well as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (14). Both of these texts were celebrated during the time period Crafts was writing *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* for how they approached particular avenues of social stratification. However, they both fall short of pointing to broader similarities between the ideas of social hierarchies present in the socialization of race and class, failing to highlight the interconnectedness of oppression and exploitation within a larger global context. Soares points out that this was probably a sentiment recognized by Frederick Douglass because he published both a serialized version of *Bleak House* alongside ongoing debates regarding the scholarly merit of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in his newspaper (14). A newspaper that Crafts was suspected to have been a reader of (Soares 15). With both texts presented in the same context of Douglass’s paper, this would leave room for a reader like Crafts to critically examine these texts together and see how they might connect (Soares 15). Because Crafts’s novel has so many allusions and connections to *Bleak House* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, it is possible to read *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* as sort of revision of both of those works. Crafts was able to find connections between the commentaries of both texts and then combine and repurpose them to create a more

comprehensive and complete understanding of how class and race are socially constructed ideas used by the ruling class to maintain their position within society. Through the text, Crafts points to how works like *Bleak House* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, while they are strong works for the time period and are both acknowledging important social topics, are still flawed and have room to improve and highlight the broader social context that slavery and class exploitation are components of. In this way, Crafts is using *The Bondwoman's Narrative* to illustrate the importance of black authors and black literature, because they are able to portray more nuanced depictions of social problems that white authors writing for wealthy white readers during this time period simply could not. While it is important that she was able to achieve this commentary through creative authorship, the groundwork for her commentary stems from her ability to effectively read various texts and put them in conversation with each other.

Crafts is also able to challenge white ruling ideology and Eurocentric literature by portraying a disparaged, enslaved woman, Hannah, with an autonomous and elevated narrative voice. Teukolsky writes that since Crafts is utilizing aspects of *Bleak House* and narrating *The Bondwoman's Narrative* from the perspective of a disenfranchised member of society, it is tempting to think of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* as a rewritten version of *Bleak House* from the perspective of a character like the street sweep, Jo (513). However, Teukolsky points out that this is not really the case because Hannah's narration is utilizing an elevated voice that evokes the tone of *Bleak House* characters such as Esther and the third-person omniscient narrator (513-514). This elevation is on display in the same section where she alludes to *Bleak House's* Tom All-Alone's to describe the field slave's quarters. In this section, Hannah says, "All day they toil beneath the burning sun, scarcely conscious that any link exists between themselves and other portions of the human race. Their mental condition is briefly summed up in the phrase that

they know nothing” (206). Here, Hannah is clearly positioning herself at a distance from her fellow enslaved people, which feels strange given how she was just alluding to a system that dehumanizes and excludes others for the sake of power a few paragraphs earlier. Teukolsky also pointed out how strange it is that Hannah is positioning herself outside of the fate of these other slaves, stating that, “Unlike the field hands, she is literate in the ‘hieroglyphics’ of Nature’s beauty, much like Esther in *Bleak House*” (515). However, by using this elevated voice through what might be viewed as a disenfranchised character, Crafts is able to reject the simplification of disenfranchised people, and enslaved black people in particular. Instead, she creates a much stronger representation and personification of black characters as it rejects viewing them as a monolith whose identity is tethered solely to the complexion of their skin or their propensity for suffering. This depiction of Hannah refuses to fall into the potentially harmful stereotypes present in works like Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Hannah isn’t a romanticized martyr like Uncle Tom, nor is she a tragic mulatto figure like Eliza, she is a rounded character with her own distinct opinions on knowledge and what it means to be free. She also maintains a sense of optimism and self preservation throughout the novel, not allowing herself to fully embrace despair and never fully succumbing to the harsh realities that slavery has put her through. She does this without minimizing the horrific nature of the institution of slavery as well. Even though Hannah’s views towards the field slaves could be perceived as pretty harmful, calling them ignorant, this sort of hierarchical positioning she engages with illustrates her earlier point about how society is beholden to a system that stratifies others throughout every aspect of society. So it is through this elevated voice that Crafts is borrowing from *Bleak House*, that Hannah is able to engage with this complex introspection that rejects simplified depictions of both race and class simultaneously.

This elevated voice is also present throughout the novel as Crafts uses allusions to the Bible to build a sense of spiritual and moral authority that could appeal to a predominantly white Christian readership. In his article, “Bondwoman Unbound: Hannah Crafts’s Art and Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literary Practice” Lawrence Buell points out that Crafts, “was an author who, despite facing obvious impediments to the mastery of the dominant high culture, was capable of invoking the antebellum period’s most important literary master text” (Buell 16). Indeed, Crafts wastes little time in invoking the Bible and white Christian discourse, referring to her story as a result of the divine hand of Providence in her preface (Crafts 3). She also simultaneously humbles and elevates her voice throughout the novel with passages like “I can never be great, nor rich; I cannot hold an elevated position in society, but I can do my duty, and be kind in the sure and certain hope of an eternal reward” (Crafts 11). Here, Hannah is exhibiting a pious and righteous introspection, one that mirrors Biblical teachings of embracing one’s station in life and faithfully embracing the prospect of an eternal life. This would undoubtedly appeal to the potential white readers of the novel during this time period given the influence that the Bible had on social conventions and structures (Buell 16). As Katherine Bassard points out in her book *Transforming Scriptures: African American Women Writers and the Bible*, Crafts’s novel would have almost been considered a contemporary retelling of Biblical stories like the Story of Esther (Bassard 69). Bassard also asserts that by beginning each chapter of the novel with a Biblical verse, Crafts effectively makes her text a “literary pulpit” that she is able to preach from (Bassard 68). Through her reading and reconstruction of the Bible, Crafts is able to assert a degree of spiritual authority which effectively asks white readers during the time to reconsider preconceived ideas of black people in regards to spirituality and morality. Through these allusions, Crafts also seems to ask how just an institution like slavery can be if it allows pious

and righteous people like Hannah to suffer while wicked and greedy people like Mr. Trappe are able to act freely. It's a strong means of humanizing black people within the eyes of a white Christian social context while simultaneously challenging the merits of white hegemony within a religious context.

Through examining scholarship regarding the textual influences of Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, we can see how Crafts's identity as a reader is more empowering than her role as writer because of the way in which she is able to deconstruct and repurpose works from a Eurocentric literary tradition to more accurately address the ways in which the white ruling class of the United States maintains its socioeconomic power. Through using allusions to works like *Bleak House*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the Bible, Crafts isn't merely creating a hyperlink to other texts but revising and updating the texts to create a social commentary that highlights the interconnectedness of various forms of social stratification as well as the hypocrisy and problematic nature of white ruling ideology. Indeed, when doing a contemporary reading of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* we can see the merit of looking beyond slavery to see the broader social problems of white hegemony, economic domination, and exploitation that Crafts is alluding to. This is because even after the abolition of slavery, the United States was still able to oppress black people through Jim Crow era policies and segregation. Thus, Crafts is able to highlight the heart of social inequalities, inequalities that we still feel the effects of to this day.

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