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A sentimental tale: death and madness in The Bondwoman's Narrative

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A sentimental tale: death and madness in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*

by

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A Sentimental Tale: Death and Madness in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*

"I ask myself for the hundredth time How will such a literary venture, coming from a sphere so humble be received?"

~*Hannah Crafts, The Bondwoman's Narrative*

Introduction

The studying of literature is never complete. Henry Louis Gates Jr., Director of African American Studies at Harvard, proved this in 2001 when he discovered an unpublished manuscript at an auction at Swann Galleries in New York (Gates ix). New books provide a chance for a new perspective about literary history. Gates's discovery, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* by Hannah Crafts, published a little over a year later in 2002, immediately became a hotbed for critical commentary because of the controversy surrounding the identity of its author and its genre.

Much of the scholarship completed thus far focuses on Crafts's identity and its impact on the text. Gates believes the author to be an African American female fugitive slave. This assumption makes the find extraordinary because, as Gates notes in the introduction to the book, this manuscript would provide a chance for literary scholars to study how an African American slave really felt or thought without the distortions of a white editor. Unfortunately, Gates could not find conclusive proof that Crafts is a fugitive slave, though he does present convincing arguments as to why the author is most likely an African American woman. Later scholars have accepted that Crafts is an African American woman, but do not agree that she was ever a slave.

The controversy surrounding Crafts's identity is at the heart of the controversy surrounding the book's genre. If the work is viewed as a slave narrative, as the title perhaps

suggests, then it is integral that Crafts is who she says she is: a female fugitive slave who escaped from North Carolina and settled happily in New Jersey. Some scholars have classified this work as a hybrid of the slave narrative and sentimental genres. However, it is important to note that just because the author may have been African American does not necessarily mean that scholars should classify this work as a slave narrative. In fact, even if Crafts were a slave, it still does not automatically make her story a slave narrative. Instead, this work should be placed solidly in the category of early 19th century sentimental fiction. What has been overlooked in the controversy regarding identity and genre is the critical commentary Crafts makes about the destructive nature of slavery and patriarchy. Extremely well-read in both genres, she employs aspects of the slave narrative in her work of sentimental fiction. Specifically, her use of the themes of death and madness (originally thought to be primarily problems for white women) to critique these systems in which women, black and white, found themselves in during the early 19th century make this book an exceptional find.

Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s Discovery of Hannah Crafts

Gates suspected he may have found something extraordinary in February of 2001 when Swann Galleries in New York held its annual auction of “Printed and Manuscript African Americana” (Gates ix). It was here that Gates came across the holograph manuscript while perusing the catalog, which offered the following description of the manuscript:

Unpublished Original Manuscript. Offered by Emily Driscoll in her 1948 catalogue, with her description reading in part, “a fictionalized biography, written in an effusive style, purporting to be the story, of the early life and escape of one Hannah Crafts, a mulatto, born in Virginia.” The manuscript consists of 21 chapters, each headed by an epigraph. The narrative is not only that of the mulatto Hannah, but also of her mistress who turns out to be a light-skinned woman passing for white. It is uncertain that this work is written by a “Negro.” The work is written by someone intimately familiar with the areas in the South where the narrative takes place. Her escape route is one sometimes used by run-aways. (xi)

The sentence “It is uncertain that this work is written by a ‘Negro,’” signaled to Gates (though some scholars later disagreed) that someone felt there was a possibility that this was written by an African American. He knew that if true, this manuscript would be the first written by an African American fugitive slave and thus would constitute a major literary find. Because the manuscript was unpublished, Gates argues that this is the first chance to see what an African American slave felt without the finger prints of a white editor. He holds that:

Often when reading black authors in the nineteenth century one feels that the authors are censoring themselves. But Hannah Crafts writes the way we can imagine black people talked to – and about – one another when white auditors were not around, and

not the way abolitionists thought they talked, or black authors thought they should talk or wanted white readers to believe they talked. This is a voice that we have rarely, if ever, heard before. (Gates xxiv)

It was this unique voice that interested Gates. After acquiring and studying the manuscript, he assumed that the author was indeed black for a number of reasons. First, however, he notes that Jean Fagan Yellin¹ and William L. Andrews² have shown that “the artistic challenge of creating a fictional slave narrative” had appealed to some white authors, although none ultimately succeeded in keeping their white identity anonymous (xiv). Gates also points out that the huge success of the 1852 publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, makes it unnecessary for an author to create a fictional black identity.

Second, Gates offers the conclusions of Dorothy Porter, “one of the most famous black librarians and bibliophiles of the twentieth century,” who claimed that there was internal evidence that Crafts was black. The first clue, notes Porter, is the intimate knowledge of slave life on a Virginia plantation revealed in the book. Second, she cites as evidence Crafts’s habit of regarding African Americans as people first, something Gates also argues that whites were unable or unwilling to do. He points out that in Stowe’s novel the white

¹ Jean Fagan Yellin has written a number of books about women and slavery in the antebellum period including *Women and Sisters: The Anti-Slavery Feminists in American Culture* (1990) and *The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776-1863* (1972). She has also edited an edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. She is arguably most famous for her work with Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1987, 2000). Until Yellin, it had been commonly believed by literary scholars that the narrative had been written by white abolitionist Lydia Maria Child. She has been awarded numerous grants and awards from places like the Smithsonian, Harvard University, and the W.E.B. Dubois Institute for Afro-American Research. (Gates, “Jean Fagan Yellin”).

² William L. Andrews is perhaps most well-known for his scholarship on the slave narrative. He has written two books: *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnut* (1980) and *To Tell A Free Story* (1986), along with editing numerous collections of criticism regarding African American and southern literature. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997), *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (1997), and *The Literature of the American South: A Norton Anthology* (1997) are three major works that he has co-edited (“William L. Andrews”).

characters “receive virtually no racial identification” (xix). Due to this evidence, both Driscoll and Porter concluded that *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, unlike *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, was likely an autobiographical tale of a female fugitive slave. After completing his own study of the manuscript, Gates had two goals: authenticate the age of the text and confirm the racial identity of Crafts.

Gates was referred to Dr. Joe Nickell³ who wrote a report based on his analysis of the text. A couple of places in his report caught Gates’s interest. Nickell writes that the manuscript is “an authentic manuscript of circa 1853-1861” because of the presence of iron-gall ink, which had been widely used until 1860 (Nickell 310). Additionally, he notes a reference in the text to a statue of President Andrew Jackson in Washington that was not finished before 1853 and the lack of any reference to the Civil War. Nickell also contends that the book “was apparently written by a relatively young, African American woman who was deeply religious and had obvious literary skills, although eccentric punctuation and occasional misspelling suggest someone who struggled to become educated” (311). Upon reading this report, Gates began to wonder if he would ever find the true Hannah Crafts because it seemed that she did not want to be found.

While Nickell and others sought to authenticate the manuscript, Gates was attempting to locate the writer. Gates was unable to locate any Hannah Crafts in the census records that would have fit what she tells about herself in the book. Gates then counted 31 characters in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* that have first and last names. After finding some names that

³ Dr. Joe Nickell’s report is included in Appendix A of Gates’s 2002 edition of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. Nickell is a writer for *Skeptical Inquirer* and author of seventeen books, including *Pen, Ink and Evidence: A Study of Writing and Writing Materials for the Penman, Collector, and Document Detection* (1990) and *Detecting Forgery: Forensic Investigation of Documents* (1996). He is also a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Inquiry in Amherst, New York (Gates xxx).

matched in the Milton, Virginia area where Crafts set the first part of her novel, he concluded that “the fact that the surnames of these characters matched real people who lived so closely together in one section of Virginia suggested that it was at least possible that Hannah Crafts had named her characters after people she had known in Virginia as a slave” (xli). Gates was able to locate only two people in the census records, John Hill Wheeler, a southern slave owner and his wife Ellen Wheeler, whom he assumed to be the slave owners Crafts writes of escaping from. After some research, Gates learned that Wheeler did hold government positions in the 1850s as described in the text and was a strong supporter of slavery.

Wheeler became well-known in 1855 when one of his female slaves, Jane Johnson, escaped. This is mentioned in Crafts’s book, a fact that Gates latches on to as proof of Crafts’s identity as a female slave when Mrs. Wheeler mentions her dismay at “losing” Jane. Crafts writes Mrs. Wheeler as saying, “Oh dear, this is what I have to endure [the combing of her matted hair] from losing Jane, but she’ll have to suffer more, probably” (149). Mrs. Wheeler relates how Jane escaped, a story remarkably similar to that of Johnson’s actual escape, which Gates sees as evidence of her identity.

Mr. Wheeler, who kept a diary for more than twenty years, recorded his attempts to retrieve Johnson extensively in his diary, a treasure trove of information for Gates. “The period covered in the diary housed at the Library of Congress is May 30, 1850, to his death in 1882” (Gates li). Gates notes that much of the year 1858 is ruined, and the second half of 1856 is missing (li). He specifically searched what was remaining of Wheeler’s diary for mention of Hannah Crafts and found none, though there are periodic mentions of Johnson for years after her escape. The diary suggests that Wheeler never gave up trying to reclaim Johnson until the Civil War ended his pursuit.

Along with Wheeler's diary, a catalog Wheeler made on June 10, 1850 of all of his books in his library was also found. Bryan C. Sinche⁴ compiled this list, which helped Gates establish the connection between the author of the book and Wheeler. Gates and later scholars note the numerous literary allusions the author makes that can be connected to the books from Wheeler's catalog. Gates explains these literary references in the text by citing Crafts when she says she is able to steal away behind curtains in the library and read, though this is done before she is sent to the Wheeler home. Although Wheeler's catalog of books was helpful in proving how a fugitive slave could be so knowledgeable of literature, neither the catalog nor the diary could establish beyond a doubt the identity of the author. While Gates was unable to locate a Hannah Crafts, he was able to compile a list of possible candidates, though none fit the description the author provides exactly.

Gates concludes with the assumption that Crafts made the choice not to have her manuscript published rather than being unable to. He first speculates that Crafts was afraid of discovery and felt that due to the autobiographical nature of the novel that publishing would give her whereabouts away. Ann Fabian,⁵ Gates notes, hypothesizes that Crafts wrote her book based on the books that she had read in Wheeler's library but was savvy enough to realize that the time for an anti-slavery novel had passed (lxiv). Nina Baym⁶ asserts that because the novel was written in the first-person, it would have been more of a challenge to publish the manuscript. She concludes that Crafts ran the risk of being discredited if

⁴ Bryan C. Sinche's list of Wheeler's books is included in Gates's 2002 edition of *The Bondswoman's Narrative* in Appendix C. He compiled this list while a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina ("Bryan C. Sinche").

⁵ Ann Fabian has written about American literature including *Card Sharps, Dream Books, and Bucket Shops: Gambling in 19th Century America* (1999) and *The Unvarnished Truth* (2000) ("Ann Fabian").

⁶ Nina Baym is perhaps best known for her work in the recovery of women's literature from the 19th century. She has written extensively in the field of American literature including "more than 60 articles, 130 reviews of American authors, and seven academic books" and served as editor of the commonly used *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (Lyons).

published using the first person but if it was publicized as being entirely fictional, she ran the risk of being ignored.

Despite the mystery of why the novel remained unpublished for so long, Gates argues that the book is still a major literary find. Although he was unable to actually prove that Hannah Crafts was indeed the fugitive slave woman she claims to be, evidence suggests that she was telling the truth. If she is telling the truth, Gates writes, “*The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is such a great find because it’s a chance to study a manuscript written by a black woman or man, unedited, unaffected, unglossed, unaided by even the most well-intentioned or unobtrusive editorial hand” (xxxiii).

Critical Response to *The Bondwoman's Narrative*

A year after its discovery, the book was published and on bookstore shelves. Two years later, Gates and Hollis Robbins edited a collection of critical essays about the book entitled *In Search of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays on The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Recognized scholars such as Nina Baym, William Andrews, Jean Fagan Yellin, and Lawrence Buell⁷ all make a contribution to the scholarly discussion. In the introduction to the collection, Gates notes that the critics accept his theory that Hannah Crafts was the black fugitive slave she claimed to be:

These scholars take it as a more or less settled matter that the author was a woman of African descent who wrote this text after attaining freedom in the North. Just as importantly, all of these scholars accept Hannah Crafts's narrative as a serious and important piece of writing that has dramatically changed how we view the antebellum literary landscape. (Gates xi)

It is important to note that in nearly all of the essays in the collection, the question of Hannah Crafts's identity impacts the scholarly discussion of the text. According to Gates, the scholars in the collection have written essays that fall into five categories:

1. "essays that explore the idea of Hannah Crafts as a writer self-consciously locating herself within the literary marketplace and within two distinct genres – the slave narrative and the sentimental novel"
2. "essays that focus on *The Bondwoman's Narrative's* relationship with individual canonical texts"

⁷ Lawrence Buell is interested in the 19th century, especially the antebellum period. Some of his published work includes *Literary Transcendentalism* (1973), *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), *Emerson* (2003), and *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005).

3. “essays that explore the theological, legal, and cultural contexts of antebellum American life”
4. “essays that situate Crafts’s novel in an emerging subgenre that can be called African American gothic”
5. “essays that analyze the identity of the author” (Gates and Robbins xi)

At the end of the collection, Gates and Robbins also include four reviews that were published following the book’s publication in 2002. By proposing five categories of scholarship, it appears that the wide variety of issues *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* raises have been adequately addressed. However, really only three main categories are evident thus far:

1. Essays that explore the literary aspects of the text, such as genre and the canon
2. Essays that report the context of the book
3. Essays that further investigate the identity of the author

A multitude of issues have been left out when creating these examples.⁸ For example, while a few of the essays throughout the critical collection discuss sentimental aspects of the text, there is a large gap in the scholarship to date. None of the essays explore solely the sentimental genre and how Crafts used it to speak out against the systems of patriarchy and slavery.

Essays that Explore the Literary Aspects of The Bondwoman’s Narrative

The first group of essays consists of those by Augusta Rohrbach, Lawrence Buell, William Andrews, Ann Fabian, John Stauffer, Hollis Robbins, Catherine Keyser, Jean Fagan

⁸ While fruitful, it is beyond the scope of this project to attempt to identify the number of issues that still might be addressed when analyzing *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*.

Yellin, and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. In “‘A Silent Unobtrusive Way’: Hannah Crafts and the Literary Marketplace,” Rohrbach⁹ argues that although Crafts’s story is based on some fact, it is actually a work of fiction and she also asserts that because Crafts was black, she was never able to publish her story (3-4). “Crafts’s novel,” concludes Rohrbach, “may have proved too much of an assault on the color lines and conventions of the publishing world” (9). Rohrbach proposes that Crafts’s novel is set up in chapters that end with cliff-hangers because she was accustomed to reading books such as those by Charles Dickens that were originally published in a serial format. Specifically, Rohrbach cites chapters 14 and 15 as examples of where Crafts’s knowledge of the “conventions of serialization” is amply evident (7).

While Rohrbach and other scholars are looking at Crafts’s work as a whole, Andrews focuses on the final section of the book in his article entitled “Hannah Crafts’s Sense of an Ending.” At the end of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, Hannah finds herself settled in New Jersey with Charlotte and William, friends from slavery that escaped before her, living next door. She is somehow reunited with the long-lost mother that she barely knew and is now married to a minister. Hannah’s marriage is a key symbol of her freedom, given her conviction that marriage and children under slavery serve as only a punishment and it is the threat of marriage during slavery that forces her to flee north. Andrews begins his essay by concurring with Rohrbach that Crafts’s tale is not an autobiography, but rather a novel:

In the mid-nineteenth century, titling a book as a ‘narrative,’ such as Douglass’s or Brown’s [William Wells Brown], was a way of signaling that it was a true story ... At

⁹ Augusta Rohrbach has written a book entitled *Truth Stranger than Fiction: Race, Realism, and the U.S. Literary Marketplace* (2002), as well as published articles in various journals (“Augusta Rohrbach”).

the same time, however, that ‘narrative’ was used to denote a true story, usually an autobiography, the term was also appropriated by writers who wished to mask a fictional account as factual so as to enhance sales of their books. (33)

This distinction is significant because Gates is careful to claim that while parts of Crafts’s text appeared to be fictionalized, other parts “rang true.”

Andrews notes that the book is more than likely fictional because of the lack of specificity regarding Hannah’s escape, an aspect of the tale Gates uses as evidence that Crafts was indeed a fugitive slave. At this time, Frederick Douglass,¹⁰ the leading spokesperson for African Americans, was encouraging fugitive slaves to keep their method of escape to themselves so as to not give it away. Douglass did not want any roads to freedom closed by slave owners (such as Wheeler) who were reading slave narratives. Andrews points out that though Douglass advocated keeping the routes a secret, slaves still gave away important details to protect themselves from the accusations of fraud, specifically that they had ever actually been slaves (36). Hannah’s vague description of her escape is an indicator, Andrews contends, that the story is more than likely made up. Instead of a factual ending, he argues that the ending is more in line with the ending in sentimental fiction of the first-half of the nineteenth century. Due to this, Andrews feels that Crafts was probably a free black woman rather than a fugitive slave. By questioning the truth of the tale and labeling it as a fictional work, further avenues of criticism and understanding are opened.

Russ Castronovo, Priscilla Wald, Christopher Castiglia, Karen Sanchez-Eppler, Robert S. Levine, and Zoe Trodd explore another avenue of criticism: the aspects of the

¹⁰ See Frederick Douglass’s three autobiographies: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, 1892).

gothic literature tradition that are present in Crafts's work. Nearly all of these scholars address the scene in which Hannah stands before the row of portraits of the Vincent family. Sanchez-Eppler¹¹ mentions this scene in her essay "Gothic Liberties and Fugitive Novels: *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and the Fiction of Race" when she makes the argument that Crafts's text is a hybrid work. Sanchez-Eppler argues that Crafts uses the gothic genre, but revises it. She claims:

Crafts re-imagines the gothic genre, just as Hannah re-interprets the ancestral portraits, and for both it is this readerly rejection of expected or authorized meanings, the openness to counter-factual, counter-intentional invention that makes this scene so liberating. (257)

While it appears that the gothic was one of Crafts's favorite genres, Sanchez-Eppler claims it "also appears to be the least stable" and that she uses it to "label her terrors as fiction and to redefine them as thrilling" (265).

Like Sanchez-Eppler, Trodd¹² also mentions the portraits in the Vincent home in her essay, "'Don't speak dearest, it will make you worse': *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, the Afro-American Literary Tradition, and the Trope of the Lying Book" and compares Crafts's work with James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Nella Larsen's *Passing*, and Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*. Trodd contends that Crafts was "exploring the doubleness of language through the anagram form and sounds a warning to Afro-Americans about the process of proving one's

¹¹ Karen Sanchez-Eppler has written *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (1993) and *Dependant States: The Child's Part in 19th Century America* (2005) ("Karen Sanchez").

¹² Zoe Trodd has published numerous articles and co-edited *John Brown and the Coming of the Civil War*. In 2006, she received the William Harris Arnold and Gertrude Weld Arnold Prize for her essay "Collecting Women: Women-Readers and the Nineteenth-Century American Archive" ("Critical Prizes").

humanity through the mastery of Western languages and literature” (298). Trodd also argues, as other scholars in the collection do, that the book is fictionalized and “not to be taken literally” (303).

In addition to the genre of the text, critics have also explored how this book fits with the “canon.”¹³ In “Blackening *Bleak House*: Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*,” Robbins examines how Crafts borrowed from Dickens’s *Bleak House* in telling her tale.¹⁴ More specifically, she looks at the scene in which Mrs. Wheeler’s face powder turns her face black, the event that causes Hannah to fall from her mistress’ favor. Robbins argues that “the effect of the black powder scene is to change the complexion of the text from a traditional sentimental novel to something darker” (75). In addition, Robbins also claims that Crafts does not plagiarize from canonical texts that she may have read, but instead “tends to hide behind the diction of others when she is introducing a character or when the narrative voice is conceiving (or renegotiating) a personal relationship with the reader” (Robbins 74). This tends to occur at the beginning and ending of chapters. In agreement with other critics, Robbins concludes that *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* cannot be factual and is instead a “diligently constructed work of fiction” (83).

Yellin, best known for her work with Harriet Jacobs’s narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, compares *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by pointing out similarities between the two texts. Both make use of a figure that would later become

¹³ I hesitate using this word and all that it implies. I do so because Gates and the scholars in this grouping of essays use the term.

¹⁴ Hollis Robbins has co-edited *The Annotated Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (2006) and *In Search of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays on The Bondwoman’s Narrative* (2003) with Henry Louis Gates Jr., as well as co-edited *Selected Works of William Wells Brown* (2006).

known as the “tragic mulatto.” However, Stowe uses the tragic mulatto character in a stereotypical fashion, Yellin argues, but Crafts resists this:

She [Hannah], however, does not follow the stereotypical pattern – although when bought by Saddler, she is threatened with sale as a sexual slave, like other Tragic Mulattos. Nor does *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* present her as a pathetic “mixed-race” protagonist whose “black blood” prevents her from the “white” life to which she aspires. (Yellin 109)

Hannah eventually pretends to be white in order to flee from slavery. Yellin argues that upon reaching the North and what freedom it offered, Hannah was able to “reject whiteness” (109). She concludes that although *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* certainly had an influence on Crafts and that *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* “makes a different statement about slavery and racism in nineteenth-century America” by avoiding stereotypical portrayals of African American characters (114).

Essays that Explore the Context of The Bondwoman’s Narrative

Dickson D. Bruce Jr., William Gleason, and Bryan Sinche (who compiled the list of books from Wheeler’s catalog of his library found in his diary) examine the antebellum contexts of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* in the second group of essays in Gates and Robbins’s collection. For example, Sinche examines Hannah’s religious faith in his essay, “Godly Rebellion in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*,” and the decisions that she makes in light of it. Crafts, he argues, faced the difficult challenge of showing slavery to be the evil that it was but also portraying a fair and just God that would allow the continuance of it. Hannah’s

two excursions into the woods demonstrate her religious faith and the skill that Crafts had as an author:

Crafts does not utilize the wilderness to demonstrate Hannah's determination to escape slavery, nor does she present the protagonist's self-reliance. Instead, she places Hannah in the wilderness so the reader can see that God's favor is the key to her success. (176)

Sinche contends that Hannah's primary goal is not to resist slavery but to aspire to live in domestic bliss as a middle-class (white) woman. She escapes from slavery when it no longer allows her to live according to her own morals and in the end is rewarded with the domestic bliss that she had been striving towards. Instead of arguing whether the tale is factual or fictitious, Sinche concentrates on her religious faith.

Essays that Explore the Identity of the Author of The Bondwoman's Narrative

Nearly all of the authors in Gates and Robbins's collection analyze to some degree the identity of the author and its impact on the text itself. Some use it as a starting point for their analysis and others, such as Nina Baym, Rudolph P. Byrd, Thomas C. Parramore, Katherine E. Flynn, and Joe Nickell, use the issue of identity as the basis for their entire essays. Baym, well-known for her scholarship on sentimental fiction of the early nineteenth century, makes a case for a woman named Hannah Vincent as the author of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. She dismisses the idea that the manuscript was written by a fugitive slave because "a novel as complex as this one . . . would have been composed by a person with a long immersion in imaginative literature" and "such an immersion would be much more possible for a free woman than a fugitive slave" (Baym 316). She concurs with Gates

and Nickell that the author was most likely a woman due to the lack of male characters in the novel. She also agrees that the author was probably African American because of the notable number of black characters. Texts by white (and some black) abolitionists, Baym observes, usually had more white characters than black (317). She concludes that Hannah Vincent is the most likely candidate for the identity of the author.

In his discussion of the author's identity, Parramore¹⁵ gives a detailed background of John Hill Wheeler and concludes that given this evidence it is likely that Hannah Crafts did not actually go to North Carolina, the state from which she claims to have escaped. Parramore reports that first of all, Wheeler sold the land that he owned in North Carolina in 1853 (365). Gates proposes that Hannah Crafts escaped from the Wheeler plantation in North Carolina between March 21 and May 4, 1857 (lvi). Wheeler did take a trip on a boat like the narrator of *The Bondswoman's Narrative* describes, but he was headed to visit his sister's plantation in Virginia, not North Carolina.

In the book, Hannah escapes from the plantation when she is told that she will be marrying Bill, a slave on the Wheeler plantation that worked in the fields. "No such union," Parramore claims, "could have taken place without the permission of the plantation's [his sister's plantation] Dr. Moore, who, famous for his relative mildness and sensitivity toward his slaves, would certainly not have given it" (365). Parramore concludes that "no scrap of evidence verifies Hannah's testimony that she was ever Wheeler's slave," a serious blow to the foundation of Gates's argument that Hannah Crafts was indeed an escaped female slave.

¹⁵ Thomas C. Parramore has written a number of articles and two books: *Southampton County, Virginia, 1650-1978* (1978) and *The First Four Centuries* (1994) (Gates 445).

When examining Gates's arguments in support of Crafts being who she says she is Parramore finds problems with his logic. Gates argues that Crafts gained her literary expertise through Wheeler's library. Parramore argues that this is a moot point because other libraries, large and small, of the time also contained the titles referred to in Crafts's work. Gates was only able to locate two of the 31 names that Crafts give in the work and concluded that since only a slave would have been able to accumulate the personal knowledge of the Wheelers, Crafts must have been who she says she is, an argument Parramore dismisses:

Claims that Hannah 'was intimately familiar with Mr. and Mrs. John Hill Wheeler' are also suspect, since the information she passes on about them was a matter of public record in virtually every periodical during, and for some time after, the 1855 Passmore Williamson case. (Parramore 366)

He concludes that Crafts's work is not autobiographical like Gates claims, but that "the inherent importance and value of the narrative is undiminished by an admission that it is not, after all, an autobiography" (Parramore 367).

Katherine E. Flynn¹⁶ offers her interpretation of the identity of the author in "Jane Johnson, Found! But Is She 'Hannah Crafts?': The Search for the Author of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*." According to Flynn, Jane Johnson, Wheeler's slave that escaped, cannot be dismissed as the author. Just as Parramore gives background about Wheeler, Flynn gives more background information on Johnson. She does not find any actual evidence that Johnson wrote the novel, but she does add weight to Gates's argument that the author was familiar with the Wheeler household.

¹⁶ Katharine E. Flynn has been a Certified Genealogical Records Specialist SM since 1997.

Reviews of The Bondwoman's Narrative

At the end of the collection of critical essays, Gates and Robbins include a section containing four reviews of the book that came out after the book was published. Mia Bay wrote a review for the *New York Times*, Hilary Mantel for the *London Review of Books*, John Bloom for the *National Review*, and Ira Berlin for the *Washington Post*. These four reviews give background about the manuscript's discovery and a synopsis of the plot for their readers. Mantel's review, "The Shape of Absence," agrees with scholars that the manuscript is not an autobiography, but rather a novel. She writes, "The novel shows us that she has been able to protect her psyche, and keep its core intact; an autobiography would merely assert it. Autobiographies display the triumph of experience but novels are acts of hope" (430). She closes with the assertion that the book is a "most touching example of art as solace" (430).

While Mantel has few negative comments about the text, Berlin begins his review, "Desperate Measures," with harsh criticism of the book "extravagantly praised by a bevy of Pulitzer Prize winners" (439). He says:

At the outset it should be acknowledged that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is not great literature. Rather it is a dull, sometimes tedious read filled with the stock figures of 19th-century African American fiction – abused slaves, villainous masters, spiteful mistresses, mercenary slave traders, tragic mulattoes and compassionate strangers. (439)

Berlin is able to forgive the "turgid prose" for the insight that Crafts gives into the world of slavery. He concludes that this is what is important about the text: its window into the nature

of slavery, not the “firsts” (i.e. first book written by an African American fugitive slave) the book has accumulated.

Bloom is even more unforgiving than Berlin in his review, “Literary Blackface.” He explains numerous concerns he has with Gates’s assumption that the author is African American. His first is with the time span between the discovery of the book and when the book was published. “But in this case [Gates discovering the manuscript and publishing it] we went from ‘uncertain this work is written by a ‘Negro’ to ‘first known novel written by an African American woman’ in less than a year, and that included the time the book was at the printer” (Bloom 432). Bloom contends that this “literary event” has as much to do with the fact that Gates, who is “probably the most famous scholar of black history and literature in America,” was the one to discover the book as it was that a lost novel was discovered (432). He cites the fact that Gates’s name was bigger than that of Crafts’s on the cover of the book as further evidence of this.

His next concern is with Gates’s logic, specifically that the writer could not have been white simply because there were few white authors that had successfully passed as a black writer. Gates maintains in his introduction that there were really no financial benefits for a white author to try to pass as a black author after the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Bloom quotes Gates as saying, “My fundamental operating principle when engaged in this sort of historical research is that if someone claimed to have been black, then they most probably were, since there was very little incentive (financial or otherwise) for doing so” (qtd. in Bloom 434). Not all literary ventures, Bloom points out, are undertaken with the goal of profit in mind. This is especially true given that Crafts’s manuscript was unpublished and there is no historical record of her trying to publish it.

Similar to other scholars, Bloom has trouble with the Wheeler connection. He points out that Hannah Crafts was never mentioned in Wheeler's diary though the man kept careful account of his attempts to regain possession of Johnson, his other runaway slave. "Even if she ran away during the latter half of 1856 [in which part of Wheeler's diary is missing], it's hard to believe he would not continue his efforts to get her back, just as he did with Jane Johnson" (Bloom 437). Bloom does acknowledge that the author of the text had some familiarity with the Wheelers and that Hannah felt they were terrible people, but that this is not sufficient proof that she was their slave.

It is a close reading of the text, Bloom says, that accounts for Gates's belief that Hannah was a fugitive slave. Her references to other black people and her education are other areas of disagreement between Bloom and Gates. Gates contends that a sign of Crafts's African American identity stems from the fact that she introduces other black characters without giving hint as to their race. Bloom retorts, "This argument borders on the obscurantist. Anyone who had imaginatively entered into the life of a black woman would write in the same manner" (437). Gates compares Crafts's introduction of characters with that of Stowe, a white female author, who does introduce black characters by mentioning their race first. Following Bloom's logic, this can be explained by the fact that Stowe never claimed to be entering into the first-person narrative of an African American woman.

Bloom also contends that the education Crafts details and the sophistication of the manuscript do not make sense. He says:

Gates would have us believe that a woman in her twenties, escaping in 1857 from a slave state that forbids the education of blacks, would complete a 301-page novel before 1861, and that this novel would show an intimate familiarity with, among

other things, the conventions of sentimental novels, Gothic novels, ‘the law of the Medes and Persians,’ the ‘lip of Heraclitus,’ and words like ‘magnanimity,’ ‘obsequious,’ ‘vicissitudes,’ ‘hieroglyphical’ and ‘diffidence.’ (437)

Gates claims that this knowledge came from Wheeler’s extensive library, an issue that Bloom contests. He points out that it is highly unlikely that Wheeler, who was such an avid supporter of the institution of slavery, would allow his slaves to have free run of his library, and that even allowing Crafts the three years of freedom, it is still not enough time for her to acquire this kind of education.

Further support for Bloom’s argument can be found in the manuscript itself. Hannah says of life with her mistress, Mrs. Wheeler:

I occupied a little room, communicating by a single door with that of my mistress. She wanted me always near and handy, she said, so that when summoned I could come on the instant. A little bell stood on a table by her side, and its ting a ring reminded me of my servitude a hundred times a day. (160)

Crafts also comments earlier in the manuscript that sometimes at night, she would be called out of bed to attend to one of Mrs. Wheeler’s whims. When would Hannah have found the time to sneak into Mr. Wheeler’s library to steal books, let alone read them? Crafts does tell of a time when she was reading a book in the library while hiding behind the curtain, but this was not in the Wheeler household. It occurred when she was still a slave on the Vincent plantation.

There are other issues with Gates’s assumptions about the identity of the author. For instance, why would Crafts use the actual name of the Wheelers, but none of her other owners? Gates was unable to locate the Vincents or the Henrys on any census records. Baym

suggests that Hannah Vincent, the free black woman, gave her first owners her own last name in a subversion of the common naming process slaves underwent, whereby a slave would take the last name of his or her owner. Others say that this is a fictionalized account and this why the Vincents and Henrys could not be located. That leads to the question of whether the Wheelers were actually Hannah's owners or perhaps, as Parramore suggests, simply included because of their notoriety in 1855.

Despite the problems Bloom has with Gates's assumptions, he still feels that the book is an interesting read. About its author, he concludes, "Unfortunately, there's nothing in the book that couldn't have been researched, imagined, or observed by a white author" and that since the marketing campaign for the book rests on the fact that the book was written by a black woman, Bloom feels that "we should at least be honest enough to say that its unproven" (Bloom 435).

A Consensus of Critical Interpretation

Gates's literary find is not yet ten years old. Due to this, scholars have not yet had the opportunity and advantage of reading each other's work and responding to it. Perhaps the most important issue at stake is the truth of the tale. Throughout the collection of essays, scholars disagree on whether the book is fact or fiction. Gates and Robbins note this in their introduction to the collection of essays:

These essays ask a new set of questions: What kind of text is *The Bondwoman's Narrative*? Is it biographical or entirely fictional? Was she seeking to produce a work of a particular literary genre or to challenge that genre? As a writer, is Hannah Crafts

as sophisticated as she appears to be? What is the extent of her class or race consciousness? (xi)

In order to prove that Crafts was an African American fugitive slave, Gates must assume that the book is at least partly autobiographical. He assumes that Crafts is telling us the truth when she discusses her participation in the Wheeler household. Scholars writing after Gates disagree with his notion that the work is one of truth. They claim instead this is a work of fiction and base their analysis on this notion. Few acknowledge in their essays the ramifications of this allegation. The main support for Crafts as an escaped fugitive comes from the connection with the Wheelers. If the book is fictional, as some of the scholars claim, then the tenuous connection is severed and Gates is left without proof of the author's identity whatsoever. Without proof of the author's identity, the essays that use Gates's assumption that Crafts was a fugitive slave as foundation for their analysis are suspect. A simple answer to this question might be that it is a fictionalized account of actual events. A response to that is, "How do we know that any of the events are factual just because they sound like they could be real?"

The answer is that we don't. We simply do not know who Hannah Crafts was, whether the book is entirely fictionalized or only partially so and it appears that at this point in the scholarly history of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, the question of identity plays a major role in the criticism being produced. Perhaps this is rightly so considering that this text is saved from obscurity based on the conjecture that Crafts is an African American female author. However, this does not give the scholarly discussion much of a direction for future work since at this point in time, we do not know for sure who Crafts really was. We may never know who actually wrote *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, but we do have the text itself

to examine. Rather than focus on identity, literary study would be best served by looking at the genre of the book itself.

Critics agree that the manuscript falls into one of three categories: the slave narrative, the sentimental or (to borrow Baym's phrase) domestic novel, or the African American gothic. It is true that the author does indeed use traditional gothic elements when telling her tale, but it would appear that the book falls into either the first or the second category and uses aspects of the Gothic tradition to enhance ideas about the misery slavery inflicted. Post-colonial scholars might object to my attempt to categorize the novel as either the slave narrative or the sentimental novel genre. They, along with the scholars who wrote in the first section, "The Slave Narrative and the Sentimental Novel," would propose that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is a hybrid text, making it unable to neatly fall into either category. The theory of hybridity, which criticizes the theory of essentialism, basically contends that because of colonialism and the forced interactions of cultures, it is impossible to have a homogenous identity. Aijaz Ahmad¹⁷ argues in his essay, "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality," that hybridity takes two forms: cultural and philosophical/political. He claims, "The basic idea that informs the notion of cultural hybridity is in itself simple enough, namely that the traffic among modern cultures is now so brisk that one can hardly speak of discrete national cultures that are not fundamentally transformed by that traffic" (286). Transferring this idea of cultural hybridity to a literary text suggests that it is impossible to categorize a work of literature because it is always a combination of genres.

¹⁷ Aijaz Ahmad is a well-known Marxist critic. He has written several books including, *Ghazals of Ghalib* (1971), *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992, 1994), and *Lineages of the Present: Political Essays* (1996) ("Aijaz Ahmad").

Post-colonial theorists would argue that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is a text that resists categorization.

While this is true, the critical discussion has much to gain from categorizing this specific text due to the unknown identity of the author. Despite knowledge of literary hybridities, scholars tend to refer to the manuscript as a slave narrative even if they believe it is also an example of another genre. Sanchez-Eppler maintains that even though Warner Books advertised the work when it was published in 2002 as “a book that might be the first novel produced by a black woman anywhere” because this is more alluring than another slave narrative, Crafts’s work is indeed still part of that tradition. This insistence on categorizing the work as a slave narrative can perhaps be attributed to the themes the novel deals with slavery, especially the escape from slavery and the assumption that it was written by a female fugitive African American slave. Moreover, it shows similar stylistic features with other slave narratives such as those of Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs. For these reasons, it is easy to view the text as a slave narrative that borrows elements from the sentimental and Gothic genres.

However, upon closer study, the book is better defined as a sentimental novel that borrows from the slave narrative and Gothic traditions. Viewing the book in this light answers the question, “What do we do with this text if we may never learn the true identity of its author?” Sanchez-Eppler notes that “the anxieties over authenticity and the investment in the comparative prestige and power of the novel that underlie Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Warner Books’ decisions of how best to present this manuscript are inherent to the text

itself” (255). She cites Michel Foucault,¹⁸ who recognized how vexing the matter of authorship is to critics: “if a text should be discovered in a state of anonymity ... the game becomes one of rediscovering the author since literary anonymity is not tolerable” (qtd. in Sanchez-Eppler 255). By publicizing the book as the first book written by a female African American fugitive slave, Gates raised an issue for many scholars because of the lack of concrete proof. For the most part, scholars concur that the novel was written by an African American woman. I contend we gain a richer understanding of the book if we examine how Crafts used the sentimental genre. Specifically, I refer to her insistence that the only way out for women, black and white, to escape the oppressive forces of patriarchy and slavery is through death and madness. Employing the sentimental genre, rather than the slave narrative, as was first suspected, enabled her to underscore her message.

¹⁸ Sanchez-Eppler borrows this quote from Michel Foucault’s 1984 essay “What is an Author?” (271).

Genre of the Slave Narrative

To understand how *The Bondwoman's Narrative* fits (and does not fit) with the genre of the slave narrative, it is important to know the conventions of the genre. The first half of the nineteenth-century is the time period most clearly associated with these narratives and America the most common location, though scholars have established that slave narratives did exist earlier and in other places. James Olney¹⁹ estimates the number of existing known slave narratives to be around 6000. According to Charles T. Davis²⁰ and Henry Louis Gates Jr. in the introduction to their collection of essays, *The Slave's Narrative*, the genre arose from the claim that African Americans were not human. According to Davis and Gates, "The slave narrative represents the attempts of blacks to write themselves into being ... Accused of having no collective history by Hegel in 1813, blacks responded by publishing hundreds of individual histories" (xxiii). Hazel Carby²¹ concurs in her essay, "'Hear My Voice, Ye Careless Daughters': Narratives of Slave and Free Women Before Emancipation," that the purpose of the slave narratives was to illustrate the "slaves' own perception of their experiences." It was necessary for these experiences to be factual rather than imaginative.

Factual writing was privileged. Slaves tended to include as many verifiable facts as possible to protect themselves from claims that they had never really been slaves. Marva J. Furman notes, "Because of their roles as advocates for the anti-slavery cause, the narrators

¹⁹ James Olney is the co-editor emeritus of *Southern Review*. His books include *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (1972) and *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature* (1973) ("Selected Stories").

²⁰ Charles T. Davis (1918-1981) worked at a number of universities like New York University, Princeton, the University of Iowa, and Yale throughout his career as an influential literary critic. *The Slave's Narrative*, which he co-edited with Henry Louis Gates Jr., was significant in that it expanded the study of the slave narrative ("Charles T. Davis").

²¹ Hazel Carby is the Charles C. and Dorothea S. Dilley Professor of African American Studies, Professor of American Studies and Director of the Initiative on Race Gender and Globalization. She has written numerous articles and books including *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987) and *Cultures in Babylon* (1999) ("African American").

themselves were constantly challenged by pro-slavery forces. Thus, the former group purposely published letters, trial manuscripts, and other documents supporting their claims” (120). Risks were generally not taken with these publications for fear of being discredited.

Despite these precautions, Davis and Gates observe that actually defining the genre of slave narrative is difficult because there were many books published at the same time as the narratives that were in fact fictitious. They assert that “Though an anathema to the historian, these are the very delight of the literary critic, since they enable him to more readily discern both the repeated structure of the genre itself and the pervasiveness of these texts as literary models” (xxii). Scholars writing on *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* tend to agree that this book falls into the category of the author who “imitates the form of the slave narrative.”

History of the Slave Narrative

Andrews, well-known for his scholarship on the genre of slave narrative, has contributed to the critical discussion of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* by tracing the roots of the American slave narrative. In “The First Fifty Years of the Slave Narrative, 1760-1810,” Andrews observes that the early slave narrative from the 18th century is noticeably different from the slave narrative of the 19th century. He agrees with Davis, Gates, and Carby that it was generally thought that African Americans were not capable of reading and writing and were only able to verbally relate their stories:

The actual subject of the autobiography, the narrator himself, reported the basic ‘who-what-where’ of his past experience. An amanuensis-editor took down these facts, ‘improving’ diction and style according to his or her own standards of taste and decorum. More importantly, the job of selecting, arranging, and assigning

significance to the facts of the narrator's life rested in the hands of the editor.

(Andrews 7)

These early slave narratives were predominantly cast in a male perspective with little shaping of his story for the audience. The white editor decided what material to include and how to present it. While this situation improved somewhat in the 19th century, white editors still played a heavy role in delivering the product to the audience. This is why Gates became so excited upon finding the unpublished manuscript, because he believed it offered an opportunity to see what a slave really felt like before a white editor became involved.

Perhaps because of the heavy editing hand of early editors, the purpose of the slave narratives of the 18th century was quite different from those of the 19th century. The overwhelming purpose for slaves to tell their story was to use Western literary tradition to write themselves into existence. However, on a smaller scale, the purpose of the 18th century slave narrative, according to Andrews was "primarily to celebrate the acculturation of the black man into established categories of the white social and literary order" (8). Many of what are labeled early slave narratives can also be called black criminal confessions. These narratives follow the tradition of talking to a criminal before execution to provide an opportunity for confession. These African American criminals told their stories to a white author who then wrote down the tale, thus asserting considerable editorial influence. Andrews notes that these early tales do not establish why the African American man ran away or why he got into trouble in the first place. None of these editors attribute the problem to slavery as later narratives in the 19th century do and they imply that the African American is "at home in bondage" (Andrews 11). Andrews argues that in these early tales, "the slavery of sin received much more condemnation than the sin of slavery" (12). After 1810,

coinciding with the rise of abolition in the United States, slave narratives began to shift to those like Frederick Douglass's who are trying to fulfill a political purpose with their work. Despite the differences in purpose, these slave narratives share a similar form.

The Slave Narrative Form

In "I Was Born": Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," James Olney observes that if one were to read a great deal of the 6000 known slave narratives, he or she would be struck by how similar and formulaic they are. It has been established that this repetitiveness was necessary at the time. Of the slave narrative's form, Olney notes:

. . . The slave narrative is most often a non-memorial description fitted to a pre-formed mold, a mold with regular depressions here and equally regular prominences there – virtually obligatory figures, scenes, turns of phrase, observances, and authentications – that carry over from narrative to narrative and give to them as a group the species character that we designate by the phrase "slave narrative. (151)

Olney, Andrews, Raymond Hedin,²² and other scholars have established that there is generally a pattern to how the slave narrative is created. Hedin, for example, believes that the construction of a slave narrative is decided upon by the audience and what they deem acceptable, who is predominantly white, rather than the African American authors (25).

Because of this audience, Hedin argues, the narrative is usually preceded and followed by letters of verification. These letters, written by white people, vouched for the white audience that the narrative they were about to read/have read was in fact written by a

²² Raymond Hedin's research interests include the slave narrative and American fiction.

slave. An example is the letter William Lloyd Garrison wrote that was printed before Frederick Douglass's famous 1845 work *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Hedin claims, "The framing letters signal the unavoidable presence of the white audience, the power that resides in that audience's standards of approval (and disapproval) and the fact that form can be both instrument and sign of that power" (25). The letters that frame the slave narrative are not the only distinguishing mark of the slave narrative genre. Hedin and Olney point out other similarities.

Both scholars note the use of many literary forms in the works. In his essay, Hedin observes two "aspects of form used in slave narratives": use of many different traditional genres and the use of closure in their work (25). Olney also observes that the slave narrative is "an extremely mixed production" and notes the use of framing letters. He goes on to point out other external characteristics:

The most obvious distinguishing mark [of the slave narrative] is that it is an extremely mixed production typically including any or all of the following: an engraved portrait or photograph of the subject of the narrative, authenticating testimonials, prefixed or postfixed; poetic epigraphs, snatches of poetry in the text, poems appended; illustrations before, in the middle of, or after the narrative itself; interruptions of the narrative proper by way of declamatory addresses to the reader and passages that as to style might well come from an adventure story, a romance, or a novel of sentiment; a bewildering variety of documents – letters to and from the narrator, bills of sale, newspaper clippings, notices of slave auctions and of escaped slaves, certificates of marriage, of manumission, of birth, and death, wills, extracts from legal codes – that appear before the text itself, in footnotes, and in appendices;

and sermons and anti-slavery speeches and essays tacked on at the end to demonstrate post-narrative activities of the narrator. (151-2)

Olney observes that internally, the narrative is so formulaic that one might imagine a rough outline of the actual tale. He lists 12 distinguishing characteristics of the actual narrative itself that are not listed in the paragraph above:

1. Beginning with “I was born ...” and mentioning a locale but not a birthday
2. A description of parents, most often a slave mother and white father
3. A detailing of a cruel mistress or master complete with severe punishments like whippings with women most often being the victim
4. A portrayal of a hard-working, rule-abiding slave who refuses to be punished when there is not a reason for it
5. A depiction of how difficult it was to acquire reading and writing skills
6. A description of a Christian slave owner and the claim that these owners are worse than those that do not profess religion
7. A record of the small amount of food and clothing allotted to slaves, the miserable pay, and what kind of work they were required to do
8. Inclusion of the slave auctions and how families were continually being split up on the owner’s whim
9. A detailing of attempts to escape and the pursuit of these slaves
10. A description of a successful escape attempt where Quakers, the North Star, or sleeping during the day all attributed to the attainment of freedom
11. Ending with taking a new last name
12. Musings about slavery

With this list, it is easy to see that many slave narratives are indeed similar. For example, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Booker T. Washington's²³ *Up From Slavery* all begin with the phrase "I was born ...". Douglass describes his slave mother and his white father of whom he does not know and includes terrible scenes where female slaves are whipped, most notably his aunt while he is hiding in a closet. Douglass meets criteria number four as well when at age 16 he refuses to let Covey hurt him any longer. By detailing how he tricked the white children into teaching him to read and write and how his masters did not like his learning, Douglass fulfills number 5. In Chapter IX of the narrative, Douglass describes Captain Auld's conversion and how he was a worse man after than before (#6) and most of the book details the work that Douglass did and what he received in exchange for it (#7). At the beginning of the book, Douglass describes being separated from his mother and how she had to travel all night in order to see him for a very short time (#8). All of this leads up to Douglass's decision to escape, his plans, and his successful run. He ends with describing his new last name and his thoughts on slavery. Thus it seems as though Olney used Douglass' work when compiling this list.

Especially important on this list is number five, the difficulty in learning to read and write. Other scholars have also commented on the immense difficulty slaves faced acquiring these skills. Martha K. Cobb,²⁴ when looking at slave narratives from around the world rather than just in the United States, has noted that most spend a lot of time detailing their acquisition of literacy skills. She points out, "In their narratives, slaves like Juan Manzano [a

²³ Booker T. Washington published three versions of his autobiography. The first two were both entitled *The Story of My Life and Work* (1896, 1900) and the third was entitled *Up From Slavery* (1901) (Gibson).

²⁴ Martha K. Cobb's books include *Harlem and Havana – A Comparative Critical Study of Langston Hughes, Jacques Roumain, and Nicolas Guillen* (1979) (Sekora and Turner 148).

slave from the Carribean] describe in considerable detail the obstacles they overcame to master reading and writing and how that knowledge intensified their passion for freedom” (38). Davis and Gates also comment on the importance of learning to read and write in the slave narrative:

Almost all of the narratives refer to literacy in three ways: they recount vividly scenes of instruction in which the narrator learned to read and then to write; they underscore polemical admonishments against statutes forbidding literacy training among black slaves; and they are prefaced by ironic apologia, in which the black author transforms the convention of the author’s confession of the faults of his tale, by interweaving into this statement strident denunciation of that system that limited the development of his capacities. (xxviii)

It was literacy that allowed the slave to be more than just an oral transmitter of his story, so it follows that there would be considerable time spent convincing the white audience that he or she did in fact know how to read and write and that the story was the truth.

It must be said that this formula, while it can be applied to slave narratives by women as well as men, does not focus on the differences between male and female slaves. Hedin, however, does note some difference between the sexes: “For the most part, male narrators show themselves heroic by suggesting and then resisting the amoral possibilities of the literary picaresque; women narrators like Linda Brent and Mattie Griffiths (though she turned out to be a white woman), by contrast, show themselves truly women by embodying and intensifying the sentimental heroine’s plight” (28). These women resist slavery, but not the obstacles they face, something valued in sentimental fiction.

The Slave Narrative and The Bondwoman's Narrative

Clearly, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* does not fit the criteria of slave narrative as neatly as Douglass, though Crafts did borrow from the tradition when composing her tale. When applying the above list to *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, it is easy to see similarities. Hannah is not sure of her parentage like slaves in other narratives, and she does describe witnessing cruelty, though she is never herself the victim. She details the example of Rose, the slave who refused to inflict pain unto her dog. Rose and the dog are hung from a tree as a consequence for her disobedience. She writes:

Not a particle of food, not a drop of water was allowed to either [Rose or the dog], but the master walking each morning would fix his cold cruel eyes with appalling indifference on her agonised countenance, and calmly inquire whether or not she was ready to be the minister of his vengeance on the dog. (Crafts 23)

Rose always refused and she and the dog end up dying.

The most obvious adherence to slave narrative tradition is when she relates her escape. In slave narratives, which essentially work as before-and-after narratives, the escape is the climax, the point toward which the story has been heading. All slave narratives included this (or an explanation of how they became free such as Booker T. Washington's narrative – he is freed by Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation). Crafts includes two escape attempts in her work, one successful, the other not. Her first escape attempt leaves her wandering in the woods with her mistress, Mrs. Vincent who is informed by Trappe that she is fact a slave. The second is when Hannah successfully makes it to New Jersey. Neither attempt is caused by the desire for freedom. In her first attempt, Hannah is doing her duty by accompanying her mistress and the second she is threatened with marriage. Had Mrs.

Wheeler not imposed marriage on Hannah, she may never have desired her freedom. But Mrs. Wheeler does try to force marriage upon Hannah and she escapes. Crafts includes a brief mention of Hannah's life after slavery that is full of unbelievable coincidence: she is reunited with her mother, Charlotte and William happen to live next door, and she is able to marry a minister.

In addition to her parentage, discussion of violence, and escape, Crafts explains, albeit briefly, how she learned to read. Unlike other slave narratives, Hannah did not face major obstacles to obtain her skills. She happened to be in the woods with a book when she meets Aunt Hetty who offers to teach her to read before she can even ask. “. . . I interpreted her [Aunt Hetty's] looks and actions favorably, and an idea struck me that perhaps she could read, and would become my teacher. She seemed to understand my wish before I expressed it” (Crafts 7). The only real obstacle Hannah faces in acquiring her education is that she must find a way to sneak out of the house and since Crafts spends little time detailing how she goes about this, one would infer that it was not difficult to slip away.

Whereas Douglass explains that learning to read and write made him less satisfied with life as a slave, this does not have the same effect on Hannah. She claims instead to always “look on the bright side of things” (Crafts 11). She says, “‘I am a slave’ thus my thoughts would run. ‘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 eternal reward’” (Crafts 11). This statement is indicative of the novel's sentimental status rather than the slave narrative. Out of twelve items on Olney's list, Crafts's novel partially adheres to only half of the criteria, thus proving that it is not best described as a slave narrative. Its classification lies elsewhere.

The places where Crafts does not adhere to slave narrative tradition are the most fruitful in determining how to categorize a novel that appears to refuse categorization. No letters accompany Crafts's manuscript before or after the text. It could be argued that this was due to the fact that the manuscript was never published. Had it been published surely a white editor would have written something by way of a preface or introduction. While this could be true, the fact remains that we have no documents verifying the authenticity of this work as a slave narrative, a common feature of slave narratives of Crafts's time period.

There are no letters of verification with the narrative and it does not begin with "I was born ..." like a majority of other slave narratives. Instead, Crafts begins, "It may be that I assume to[o] much responsibility in attempting to write these pages. The world will probably say so, and I am aware of my deficiencies. I am neither clever, nor learned, nor talented" (5). Later on the same page, Crafts's does address the issue of Hannah's parentage, though she spends little time doing so. Little time is spent detailing her childhood, as well, another departure from slave narrative tradition.

Authenticity is another issue where Crafts does not remain true to the slave narrative tradition. Scholars agree that the book is highly fictionalized. Gates himself points out in his introduction to the book that slave authors often used the real names of people in the narratives for fear of accusations of fraud. Crafts only felt it necessary to include two real names out of the numerous names she shares with readers, which indicates the fictitious nature of the text, thus making attempts to locate the Wheelers in the census records seem superfluous.

In addition to names, Crafts did not share specific details of her escape route with her readers. Douglass had warned fugitive slaves to keep the details of their escapes to

themselves so others could use the same path, but most did not, again for fear of being accused of not being authentic. Despite Douglass's warning, Andrews argues in "Hannah Crafts's Sense of an Ending" that "the fact remains that slave narratives, with the remarkable exception of Douglass's, provide a great deal of detail about when and where escapes began, what towns and rivers the fugitives traveled through, and where and when the escaped slaves got to freedom" (36). Hannah does not elaborate on her escape path, a critical departure from the slave narrative formula. Andrews argues that not only does the description of the escape deviate from the norms of slave narrative, the ending itself is also a move away from the tradition. Andrews claims that the happy ending Hannah receives at the end is unlike anything in "the entire pre-Civil War African American slave narrative" (35). This ending is more suited for the sentimental fiction that was popular at the time this work was written.

The Bondwoman's Narrative *and* Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

It can be argued that comparing Crafts's work to that of Douglass's does not offer sufficient proof that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is actually an example of sentimental fiction rather than a slave narrative or a hybrid of the two. Some might argue that men and women experience slavery, and life in general, quite differently so it makes sense that texts by Douglass and Crafts would have little in common with each other. Although a valid argument, a comparison of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*²⁵ reveals that texts by women also differ markedly.

²⁵ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was originally published in 1861 (shortly after it is suspected that Hannah Crafts wrote *The Bondwoman's Narrative*) with the help of white abolitionist Lydia Maria Child. It was commonly thought that Child wrote the narrative until Jean Fagan Yellin discovered otherwise.

An obvious external difference between the two is that Jacobs's narrative comes with a letter by white abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, a key feature of the slave narrative genre. As noted, *The Bondswoman's Narrative* comes with no such letters. This may be due to the fact that the manuscript was unpublished, but it remains a difference none the less.

But perhaps the most striking differences come in comparing internal differences. One of the most obvious differences between the two texts is the issue of morality and sexual slavery. Hannah neither wants to get married nor have children while in slavery. At Charlotte and William's wedding, as happy as she is for the couple, negative thoughts of marriage find their way into her head. Crafts writes, "Then I thought of the young couple, who had so recently taken the vows and incurred the responsibilities of marriage – vows and responsibilities strangely fearful when taken in connection with their servile condition" (120). She has no desire to be married while in slavery.

Not only does Hannah not marry, she also is not subjected to the sexual advances of any of her masters, as was a common fate for many slave women. In fact, Hannah never even witnesses the repercussions of sexual slavery. Significantly, this abuse is discussed in chapters 14 and 15 but it is told through the character of Lizzy who relates the tale of the women that served as concubines to Mr. Cosgrove at Hannah's old plantation.

This is in marked contrast with Jacobs's narrative. The story of Linda Brent (as Jacobs calls herself in the text) is a chilling account of sexual harassment that lasts for many years. Dr. Flint pursues her relentlessly and Linda suffers at the hands of Mrs. Flint for it. Linda relates a time when she was sixteen that Dr. Flint contrived to get her alone. She had been sleeping by her great aunt at night, knowing that the doctor would not make any unwelcome advances in the presence of others. Linda relates:

But he resolved to remove the obstacle in the way of his scheme; and he thought he had planned it so that he should evade suspicion. He was well aware how much I prized my refuge by the side of my old aunt, and he determined to dispossess me of it. The first night the doctor had the little child in his room alone. The next morning, I was ordered to take my station as nurse the following night. (Jacobs 33)

Despite repeated attempts, Dr. Flint is unable to make Linda his sexual slave. She decides instead to sleep with another white man in the area, in hopes that this will decrease Dr. Flint's desire. Linda's decision brings her two children, making her story drastically different from Hannah's.

Hannah had made the decision early in her life to make the best out of all situations and to accept her position in life because she was still allowed to behave in the way she believe God wanted her to. She only escapes when her virtue is in jeopardy, a marked characteristic of sentimental literature and a direct contrast with the narrative of Jacobs whose decision to sleep with Mr. Sands was a difficult one:

I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others. (Jacobs 60)

This situation is completely absent from *The Bondswoman's Narrative*. Hannah is always able to maintain her virtue, a characteristic more suited to the sentimental genre than the slave narrative.

As Olney notes in his list of characteristics of the slave narrative genre, Jacobs begins her narrative with the phrase, "I was born in ..." and discussion of her family and childhood.

She describes her mother and father, a brother, and maternal grandmother. “They [her parents] lived together in a comfortable home; and, though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment” (Jacobs 1). This stands in stark contrast with the first page of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. It does not begin with the phrase “I was born in ...” and does not describe any of her family. She says, “I was not brought up by any body in particular that I know of. I had no training, no cultivation” (Crafts 5). In fact, she quickly begins discussing the work that she is required to do. It is evident that though both texts discuss a female slave’s escapes, there are many more differences than similarities, illustrating that Crafts’s work is better defined as a sentimental novel.

Sentimental Fiction of the 19th Century

Although the genre of the slave narrative influenced Crafts when she was writing *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, it is also evident through the significant deviations from this tradition that other genres were also at play. For example, aspects of sentimental fiction, which Baym claims is fiction about women by women, can be seen throughout the text. In fact, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is more appropriately labeled a work of sentimental fiction.

History and Form of Sentimental Fiction

Students at the beginning of the 20th century did not study American female authors other than perhaps Emily Dickinson. In 1941, F.O. Matthiessen published *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* in which he detailed the five major literary artists of American culture: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Books such as *The Bondwoman's Narrative* would certainly have been deemed unimportant. It was not until female scholars like Baym felt that something was missing from the traditional literary “canon” that texts from authors like Catharine Maria Sedgwick²⁶, Fanny Fern²⁷, and Susan Warner²⁸ were rediscovered. Critics discovered that the old system of classifying works from the 19th century as either romantic or realist did not necessarily apply to these new texts. Thus, works by women from the 19th century can also be classified as either sentimental or

²⁶ See *A New England Tale* (1822) Hope Leslie (1827)

²⁷ See *Ruth Hall* (1854)

²⁸ See *The Wide, Wide World* (1850)

regionalist, the former occurring mainly during the first half of the century and the latter during the second half of the century (similar to the split between romanticism and realism).

A good working definition of sentimental literature appears in an essay on the genre by Mary Louise Kete,²⁹ who links the genre to national identity. As she notes:

Sentimentality expresses the utopian impulse to abolish boundaries and expand community upon which the ideological force of American identity depends. In other words, it is a term for a discursive mode, not a genre nor a historical period that is used to construct a shared or common sensibility that hides the traces of its invention under the cloak of tradition. (545)

Kete identifies three “signal topics of sentimentality: lost homes, lost families, and broken bonds” (545). The presence of these topics alone is not enough to signal a sentimental text, Kete argues, but rather “the sentimental mode also depends on the use of a distinctive vocabulary and rhetoric to present these topics” (545).³⁰

Baym, a major contributor to the reclamation of these important works by women, expands on this working definition in her book *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America 1820-70* published in 1978. In the introduction to the second edition of the book, she describes the 1978 book as “the first (and so far, the only) academic

²⁹ Mary Louise Kete is the author of *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth Century American* (2000).

³⁰ In the 20th century scholars responded negatively to the sentimental tradition. In his essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” James Baldwin identifies Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as racist and an example of “a very bad novel” (14). He argues, “Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty” (14). In response, Kete argues that the recovery of more texts written by women and African Americans in the 70s and 80s and a move from formalism to poststructuralism helped ease this aversion to sentimental fiction somewhat. To a certain degree, this is still an ongoing debate and the effects of Baldwin’s words can still be felt. This may be why some scholars prefer the term “domestic fiction” as opposed to “sentimental fiction.”

feminist survey of the culturally and literarily significant material, considers 130 novels by forty-eight women, focusing on works by twelve especially productive and successful writers” (ix).

Despite differences in plot and setting, sentimental works detail a young woman orphaned (or on her own for some reason) who receives no emotional or financial support that struggles but eventually learns to take care of herself (Baym ix). Susan K. Harris³¹ in her book *19th Century American Women’s Novels* summarizes Baym’s hypothesis. “Briefly, this overplot mandates that the heroine of any given work will be left destitute – usually financially; will struggle for physical subsistence; and, in the process, will learn to value independence” (9). Baym and Harris note that most sentimental novels have a happy ending for the heroine that has spent much of the book in despair.

In her study, Baym describes the cultural work that these women were doing “as professionals making a product desired by their clients rather than artists making an object expressing their own genius and talent” (xvi). These women were writing about women for women and were popular during the time period. Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (which Baym does not include in her study) illustrates this clearly as it was the best-selling novel of the 19th century. These sentimental novels, Baym argues, were trying to teach their readers a lesson:

Shaped as novels of education, they aim to forward the development, in young female readers, of a specific kind of character. The protagonists represent instances of the character that the authors want their readers to become, while the grippingly affective reading experience is meant to initiate or further the resolve of readers to change themselves. (xix)

³¹ Susan K. Harris specializes in American culture and literature (“Susan K. Harris”).

When Baym introduced a few sentimental novels into her classroom, she found this to be true and saw the impact these works had on the women in the class. She quotes one of her female students as wanting to be more organized after reading Maria Cummins' 1854 *The Lamplighter* (xix).

In her introduction, Baym admits that she has not found a book equivalent to some of the works of the "canon" that she has been trained in such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, a statement that Harris takes issue with. Whether or not Baym is biased due to her training in Matthiessen's school of thought, she does offer valuable insight in to what form the sentimental novel took. She does admit that turn of the century writers took up more diverse issues than the writers of sentimental works. She says:

But, even so, many woman's fictions are long, complex, densely plotted novels containing numerous characters, experimenting with dialogue and dialect, developing set pieces of lush nature description, deploying rhetorical and oratorical strategies whose terminology we have forgotten and which we no longer have the skill to recognize, and finally, alluding constantly to literary figures – to Milton, Shakespeare, Spenser, Byron, Wordsworth, Bryant, Longfellow, as well as Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Felicia Hemans (all highly regarded in that era). (xvii)

Baym continues her description of the characteristics of a sentimental novel by pointing out that usually the author will attempt to pull strong emotions from the reader by creating scenes where everyone is crying. These blatant appeals to emotion as well as addresses directly to the reader are distinct aspects of the sentimental novel and are characteristics that many slave narrators borrowed when writing their tales.

These sentimental tales are aimed at the white middle class on which the nation's well-being rests, a characteristic, Baym proposes, that may have contributed to the genre's immense popularity during the time period. She says, "Perhaps woman's fictions achieved such stunning popularity in part because they bolstered the character-forming ethos that was supposed to create patriotic public women" (xxx1). As an example, she cites the hope expressed in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that appealing to the sentiment of the nation would result in the immediate abolition of slavery.

On the subject of slavery, Baym argues that when addressed, sentimental female authors tended to take a pro-slavery approach. "In fact," Baym reports:

[M]ost of the woman's fictions that registered the existence of sectional conflict took an implicitly pro-slavery position, suggesting either that blacks in America were destined to be perpetual minors best off as wards of sentimentally enlightened masters and mistresses or that the immediate undoing of the great evil of slavery would create far greater evils, so slavery had to be stoically endured and tempered by sentimental affect. (xxxii)

Even *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which clearly did not take a pro-slavery approach, did not foresee that war would be the solution to the conflict between the north and the south, Baym points out. This makes Gates's find even more interesting as it has the unique position of being an example of a sentimental novel that does not have a pro-slavery intention.

Kete cites Jacobs's narrative, which clearly did not advocate slavery, as an example of an African American woman using characteristics of the sentimental genre in her work. She argues:

Harriet Jacobs's 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* also demonstrates the degree to which the conventions of the sentimental mode allowed black women authors simultaneously to claim middle-class values and to appeal for sympathy because of the degree to which racialized slavery prevented them from acting on these values. (552)

Jacobs does implore readers to refrain from judging slave women the same way white women were because of slavery's limitations. What Kete does not acknowledge is that Jacobs's narrative was a slave narrative that borrowed from the sentimental tradition. She had more in common with Douglass than with Sedgwick so although black female authors have used sentimental features in their work, Crafts is one of the first to write a book more suited for sentimental categorization.

Sentimental Fiction and The Bondwoman's Narrative

The Bondwoman's Narrative holds a unique position in literary history. Though it borrows from the tradition of the slave narrative, it does not neatly fit that genre. There are simply too many deviations from the formula that scholars agree was necessary when these works were created. Although, the book borrows heavily from the genre, it would better be classified as an early example of a sentimental novel by an African American woman because it adheres more to the tenets of this genre. One of the first examples of an anti-slavery sentimental novel, it is unique within this genre as well. As noted earlier, sentimental authors tended to shy away from the topic of slavery or to address it in a pro-slavery manner.

Within this sentimental novel, however, it is Crafts's use of themes of death and madness (originally thought to be associated solely with white women) as commentary on

the destructive nature of slavery and patriarchy that make this book a truly unique find. The majority of female characters within Crafts's work go mad or die. Mrs. Wright, Mrs. Vincent, Mrs. Cosgrove, Ruth, Jacob's sister, and arguably, even Mrs. Wheeler all meet fates of this nature. Although this can be indicative of the gothic literary tradition, the way in which Crafts depicts scenes of death and madness are designed to move the reader to tears, another key element of sentimental fiction. Death or insanity were the only methods of escape for women trapped with the patriarchal system, a theme played out in the pages of many sentimental novels of the time period. It seems as though Hannah is the only female character that truly meets a happy ending.

This extremely happy ending based on coincidence, concludes the novel, and is yet another characteristic that aligns this text with sentimental fiction. Hannah meets her mother, who suddenly shows up out of nowhere, and mother and daughter are tearfully reunited. Charlotte and William live next door to her. Hannah, herself is married to an African American minister and is content in the (white) domestic bliss that she has been striving towards throughout the novel.

This domestic happiness comes at the end of a novel where Hannah has felt isolated and alone most of the time. In most slave narratives, the narrator can relate some particulars about his/her family (though they are vague) even if the family is separated shortly after the narrator's birth. Frederick Douglass describes his mother by name even though he only saw her four or five times before her death. Booker T. Washington lovingly recalls his mother in *Up From Slavery*. Hannah says of her family, "I was not brought up by any body in particular that I know of ... Of my relatives I know nothing. No one ever spoke of my father or mother, but I soon learned what a curse was attached to my race ..." (Crafts 5-6). Hannah

is orphaned and left to fend for herself, similar to many heroines of the sentimental novel. She learns to depend on God to guide her through the obstacles she faces such as her excursion into the wilderness with her mistress, Mr. Trappe, the wagon accident, Mrs. Wheeler, and her escape. Hannah's reliance on God is similar to that of Jane, the heroine of *A New England Tale* by Catharine Maria Sedgwick. Jane, too, finds comfort in the Bible and God to overcome obstacles in her life. She attributes her happy ending to her unshakable belief in God. Scholars have commented on Hannah's deep Christian faith that God will get her through any obstacles she faces, as Andrews notes in his essay about the ending of the novel. He claims the novel must end on a happy note in order to reward Hannah for all of the good decisions that she made, including waiting to run away from slavery until her virtue is at stake, an important aspect of the sentimental novel.

Death and Madness as Methods of Escape in Sentimental Fiction

The time in which Crafts was writing was a time of unrest for women in the United States. In 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott helped organize the Seneca Falls Convention where women gathered to discuss their rights (or lack thereof). Women writers of the time period explored these issues with the pages of their work. The only escape that women could find both in the real and literary world was through death or madness. In their 1979 book, *Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note the propensity for these endings for female characters. They point out that during this time period, frail, weak women were held up as the ideal of womanhood. “Surrounded as she is by images of disease, traditions of disease, and invitations both to disease and to dis-ease, it is no wonder that the woman writer has held many mirrors up to the discomforts of her own nature” (Gilbert and Gubar 2033). It is important to note that this was thought of as primarily a white woman’s dilemma. African American women were not generally included in this discussion. Crafts’s use of death and madness illustrates the unique position that her book holds and that her work is more aptly placed with the genre of sentimental fiction.

One of the clearest examples of a female character afflicted by madness is the character of Mrs. Wright that Hannah encounters during her time in jail. She is imprisoned for attempting to help a slave girl escape. Crafts writes movingly, “Thus the matron was torn from her home, the wife from her husband, the mother from her children for no crime but yielding to the dictates of humanity” (83). Mrs. Wright was not allowed to see her family and was kept in virtual isolation until she slowly went mad as a way of escaping the oppressive patriarchal society that had locked her away for following her “humanity.” Her lack of power and control led her down the path of insanity.

Mrs. Wright, though she lost her faculties, she did not lose her life as many of the other female characters in Crafts work did. Early in the novel, Hannah and her mistress, Mrs. Vincent attempt to escape after Mrs. Vincent learns she is in fact a slave. The duo attempt to flee but male characters, especially Mr. Trappe, interfere and stop this from happening. At one point in the novel, Hannah is literally put into chains by a man. The character of Hayes says to Hannah and Mrs. Vincent:

And just for no other reason in the world than to prevent you being exposed to the temptation of running away, and me from being obliged to shoot you I must put these manacles on your feet. Just thrust them out a little further, hold still. I shall not hurt you.’ (89)

The women are told that they are being chained and imprisoned for their own protection. If chained up, they will not get shot. These chains serve as a metaphor for the greater society. Many men of this time period thought women to be weak and unable to function on their own, a common assumption that led to the abuse of many women, black and white, by systems they were continually told were in place for their own good.

Specifically, the male character of Mr. Trappe is the epitome of the evils of patriarchy and slavery because he is the one who informs Mrs. Vincent of her African American descent. Because Mrs. Vincent is both a woman and a slave, she is rendered powerless. Her only way to escape a situation where she is entirely at the mercy of a man is to escape. She does this with Hannah at her side, but the women find only trouble on the road.

Hannah looks inward and relies on her faith to pull her through the difficult time they spend in the woods and in jail. Her mistress, however, does not have this faith and finally finds escape by slowly drifting into a state of madness before eventually dying. Crafts even

uses the phrase “freedom” to represent her death. She writes, “A gleam of satisfaction shone over her face. There was a gasp, a struggle, a slight shiver of the limbs and she [Mrs. Vincent] was free” (100). Mrs. Vincent asserts power over the patriarchal society that condemns her to slavery by succumbing to death.

Mrs. Cosgrove is yet another example of a woman who finds her escape in death. Readers learn of her through Lizzy’s story of Hannah’s old plantation. She is from England and marries a man from the southern United States and unhappily learns of the practice of sexual slavery. This knowledge slowly drives her mad. Learning of her husband’s infidelities becomes her sole purpose in life and when she discovers these women and their children, she forces her husband to sell them. This incident further illustrates how death is one of the few escapes women in this time period had, especially slave women. Crafts describes the scene in which Mr. Cosgrove informs some of the slave women that they are being sold:

At length one of the youngest and most beautiful, with an infant at her breast hastily dried her tears. Her eyes had a wild phrenzied look, and with a motion so sudden that no one could prevent it, she snatched a sharp knife which a servant had carelessly left after cutting butcher’s meat, and stabbing the infant threw it with one toss into the arms of its father. Before he had time to recover from his astonishment she had run the knife into her own body, and fell at his feet bathing them in her blood. (177-8)

This unfortunate scene does not eliminate the problem from Mrs. Cosgrove’s life. Her husband simply works harder to hide his concubines. Mrs. Cosgrove goes half-mad suspecting that he has done just this.

Mrs. Cosgrove soon finds that her husband has hidden his most treasured concubine in a sealed up room in a different wing of the house. She frantically searches for an entrance

to the room and when she finally succeeds, she sets the woman and her twin babies free. Although Mrs. Cosgrove congratulates herself for her good deed, she nevertheless sends the slave woman to certain death, thereby providing readers with yet another example of how one of the only escapes from patriarchy and slavery for a woman is death.

Mrs. Cosgrove soon meets a similar fate. When her husband learns of her actions, he is furious. The two argue and Mrs. Cosgrove suffers an injury from which she never recovers. Confined to her bed, she soon dies. “She [Lilly] noticed, too, that a deep mysterious shadow was slowly falling over the countenance of her mistress, that her breathing grew labored and difficult, and that her brow was bathed with a cold and clammy sweat” (Crafts 193). Only on her deathbed is Mrs. Cosgrove able to reconcile with her husband. He is a constant at her bedside, but she still dies, further proving that death is one of the few ways to flee an oppressive society.

The three characters of Mrs. Wright, Vincent, and Cosgrove play a more important role in the chapter, but Crafts is careful to include a bevy of minor characters who meet similar fates. Ruth, a slave who appears early in the novel, is hanged because she refuses to harm her dog, must die in order to escape the cruel treatment of slavery. Death is the only way to escape her cruel master who sees dogs and slaves as interchangeable.

Jacob’s sister (who is so minor that Crafts does not even bother to name) meets her death while on route to freedom, which is especially intriguing. For a majority of the female characters, actual escape is not a possibility. Jacob’s sister is attempting an actual escape, but is not successful. Hannah, on the other hand, is successful when she tries to actually escape. Both eventually leave slavery behind, though only Hannah is alive to enjoy it.

Perhaps most important is that the only way Hannah successfully escapes from slavery is to act as a man until she coincidentally meets with Aunt Hetty who convinces her to “resume her female attire, and travel by public conveyances, as she conceived so much time had elapsed and I was so far from the scene of my escape that I could do so with perfect safety” (Crafts 230). Charlotte is the only other female character in Crafts’s work to safely escape to freedom, but she, like Hannah, cannot do it by herself. She is aided by her husband, William. While they have run away from slavery, they find that patriarchy is more difficult to escape since both are married at the end of the novel. Through her female characters, Crafts argues that the only escape for both white and black women is to go mad, die, or have the assistance of a male. Escape is not possible as a female at this point in time.

Conclusion

Many scholars have offered their interpretations as to the identity of the author of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, but no definitive proof has been found that Hannah Crafts is who she says she is: an African American fugitive slave. Nearly every scholar who has written about the book thus far has explored this issue of identity and found it difficult to navigate. Thus, scholarship is at an impasse at the moment because as a whole the critical conversation seems unable to move past Crafts's identity to focus on what the text itself is doing.

This is perhaps due to the belief that some hold that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is an example of a slave narrative. But how can we analyze the work as a slave narrative if we are unsure as to whether the author was in fact a slave? Instead of looking at the actual text, scholars who attempt to analyze the work as a slave narrative end up getting caught in Gates's quest to discover her identity. They also find difficulty because Crafts's work deviates from the standard formula for the genre in important ways. Scholars, however, do agree that the work is a piece of fiction, a major problem for those that believe the work is a slave narrative which values authenticity above all else.

Instead, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is best viewed as a feminist sentimental text. It is an example of a sentimental novel by an African American woman that borrows from the slave narrative genre. Classifying this work as a sentimental text that provides commentary on the destructive characteristics of patriarchy and slavery in the early 19th century for white and black women increases the importance of the text in American Literature and Women's Literature studies.

Scholarship that further investigates the sentimental aspects of the text and how they are working politically is needed to enrich our understanding of this fruitful text. This essay

has not delved into the issue of Hannah's faith in God and the impact this has on Crafts's commentary regarding patriarchy and slavery. Nor has it considered the significance of female relationships in the novel such as those between slave and mistress or female slaves. Mr. Trappe, and the impact of his character, is an abundant source for analysis as well. Further work is needed to fully understand how Crafts employs the sentimental genre to fulfill her purpose.

Hannah Crafts wondered in her preface to the text how her "literary venture" would be received. Scholars are asking the same question 150 years later and the scholarship has slowed due to this confusion over how to receive her work since she left few clues as to her identity. Acknowledging the text as sentimental and further exploring these characteristics and their impact will allow scholars to move beyond the impasse caused by the exclusive attention to the author's identity. Until new evidence of Hannah Crafts's identity comes to light, scholars can look at the cultural and political work this piece attempts to accomplish.

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