

“God’s Own Image Bought and Sold!”: Analyzing the Intersection of Christianity and Slavery in

Brown’s *Clotel*

Samantha Covais

English

As the first novel published by an African-American, William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* explores the devastating effects of slavery as the institution pervades a relatively young United States of America. The novel follows the perils and subsequent suicide of Clotel, an enslaved, mixed-race woman fathered by Thomas Jefferson and raised by Jefferson’s slave. An introduction in which Brown novelizes his own experiences with slavery precedes the actual narrative of Clotel herself, in which he asserts that “Were it not for persons in high places owning slaves, and thereby giving the system a reputation, and especially professed Christians, Slavery would long since have been abolished” (3). His use of the word “professed” implies that these Christians, who were at minimum complicit but often active participants in the too commonplace enslavement, rape, and murder of Black people in the United States, fail to recognize and adhere to the true virtue of Christianity. Brown’s *Clotel* examines the ways in which Christianity operates both as a tool of White people to oppress and as a gift of Blacks people to maintain hope. These diametrically opposing roles that Christianity plays in the United States of America parallels the insidious nature of slavery and how no people, Black as well as White, were left unscathed by its pernicious effects.

*Clotel* explores the nature of truth and its place among the various forms that Christianity takes in the novel. The novel situates its characters in a nation of people who have branded themselves as Christians but fail to recognize that their dealings in slavery directly contradict the core teachings of Christianity. For consideration to historical integrity, this

article will reference the King James Version of the Bible, a widely utilized version of the Bible at the time of *Clotel*'s publication in 1853. To begin any conversation about Christianity and slavery in *Clotel*, one must first turn to from where the various characters draw their scriptural insight. Later in the narrative, a preacher poses a question on the matter of the morality of a slave master beating a slave, to which the automatic response is "oh, no! He is only doing his duty as a Christian!" (81). The inspiration for this response possibly comes from the oft referenced passage in Exodus 2:20-21 that states if a man whips his slave, "he shall not be punished: for he is his money." Likewise, Ephesians 6:5 commands slaves to "be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ." These passages, selectively chosen, are just two places in the Bible that depict slavery as an acceptable endeavor. Some interpretations, such as those of the Ephesians passage, even go as far as to equate slave owners with God himself, a narcissistic take on the tenets of Christianity of an immense magnitude that crosses the border into heresy. Historian Paul Gutacker asserts that Christian slave owners "mined the past for examples of Christian slaveholding" (1), using not only the Bible but also Christian tradition itself to support the institution of slavery. However, abolitionists and the enslaved craft their own narrative. Lemuel Haynes, the first Black minister in the United States, develops in the late eighteenth century what John Ernst calls a "liberation historiography" that separates the corrupted Christianity associated with slavery from the uncontaminated Christianity of the early Church that God had intended (255). This explicit distinction between these two variant forms of Christianity indicates a desire of the enslaved and abolitionists to reclaim Christianity and once again make it into a religion of human equality.

The novel presents two different versions of Christianity: one that affirms slavery as a divinely sanctioned institution and one that maintains the sanctity of universal human equality. Alongside this dualism of nineteenth-century Christianity, the ubiquitously ruinous nature of slavery corrupts both Whites and Blacks in the novel. As seen in *Clotel*, slavery results in the moral decay of the Whites who validate it and the ruination of Black families, Black prosperity and wellbeing, and Black agency. The novel opens, as many slave narratives do, at a slave auction. Slave traders wrench apart mothers and children, husbands and wives, and families with a “degree of indifference... unknown in any other relation of life, except that of slavery” (48). Per the *partus sequitur ventrem* laws that Virginia adopted in 1662, Clotel follows the enslaved status of her mother, one of Jefferson’s slaves, and after Jefferson’s death, Clotel, her mother, and her sister are sold to the highest bidder. Clotel’s beauty fetches her the highest price of the day, fifteen hundred dollars, and she is sold to Horatio Green, a White man who takes her as a common-law wife. Brown concludes this chapter, in which a human being has just been sold on the promise of her being a “devoted Christian, and perfectly trustworthy” (50), with the anonymously published poem “The Slave Auction - A Fact”:

O God! my every heart-string cries,  
 Doest thou these scenes behold  
 In this our boasted Christian land,  
 And must the truth be told?  
 Blush, Christian, blush! for e’en the dark,  
 Untutored heathen see  
 Thy inconsistency; and lo!  
 They scorn thy God, and thee!

Much like Brown’s statement in the novel’s preface, the poem comments on the unstable moral integrity that comes with calling oneself a Christian while simultaneously upholding the institution of slavery. Brown’s conclusion of the first chapter with this poem sets up the rest of the novel to be a constant pleading with a White audience to reevaluate the inconsistencies

within their own Christian morals. He calls upon them to recognize that even in “a city thronged with churches,” these proclaimed Christians will still continue to trust that “slavery is a God-ordained institution” (50). Slavery persists as a politically accepted institution even as the nation’s supposed Christianity, when practiced in its “true light,” challenges and condemns its horrors.

In *Clotel’s* fictional narrative and in the historical realities of the novel’s publication, religion and slavery exist alongside each other so seamlessly that it is difficult at times to divorce the two. From this point in the novel, the audience is introduced to several slave owners and Christian preachers, many of whom use Christianity as evidence in their argument for slavery. Clotel marries the man who purchased her at the auction. Theirs is a marriage “sanctioned by heaven, although not recognized on earth” (65), but it still remains an unbalanced marriage rooted in slavery and treating human beings as property, not Christianity. For a man who purchased Clotel on the grounds that she was a Christian woman with pristine morals, Green pays very little attention to these theological ideations. Clotel considers herself content in her common-law marriage, especially after the birth of their first child together, but grows restless and frustrated with Green’s constant separation of her and her child from his public life. She nearly manages to convince him to take their family to France, a place that promises a freer life for them, and he says he would have done so with “little questioning” (65) had it not been for his burgeoning political career. His spurning of his family further decays what little rectitude Green possesses. No matter how benevolent and Christian his intentions or how loving he acts towards his ‘wife,’ Green still legally owns a human being and refuses to free her, foregrounding his ensuing immoral actions.

Green's ever weakening morality further signals that slavery not only results physical, mental, and emotional devastation for Black people but also a moral abasement of the White people who vindicate the system. When his political career begins to gain traction and he becomes more entrenched in a White, Christian society, he marries a White woman who in a fit of jealousy forces him to sell Clotel. He acquiesces and never sees the mother of his child again. His wife subsequently forces Clotel's child to work as a slave in their household. Green's willingness to forsake his Black wife and mixed race child, a situation not singular, for the sake of political gain and satisfying a woman who participates slavery out of spite indicates a larger, national moral decomposition. Abandoning one's family goes directly against the moral teachings of the Bible itself; according to 1 Timothy 5:8, by "not provid[ing] for his own," Green "has denied the faith and is worse than an infidel."

This blatant hypocrisy in Green's claim to Christianity also manifests itself in Reverend John Peck, who manages to purchase Curren, Clotel's mother. Before Peck had acquired her, Curren had served as a laundress, giving her wages to Jefferson. Peck uses her domestic skills largely in the same manner, assigning her to household and kitchen affairs and thus continuing her life of hard labor. Considering himself an authority on religious matters, Peck engages in a spirited conversation with an old school friend, Miles Carlton, on the correlation between slavery and Christianity. Carlton, a lukewarm abolitionist, claims that as a student studying Rousseau and other like philosophers, he cannot identify "difference[s] between White men and Black men as it regards liberty" (73). In attempting to appeal to Peck's sense of reason, Carlton points Peck to the Declaration of Independence with its ideals of self-evident human equality. Peck rebuffs him: "The Bible is older than the Declaration of Independence, and there I take my stand... Those who say that religious instruction is inconsistent with our peculiar civil

polity are the worst enemies of that polity” (73). Peck’s acknowledgement of the possibility of an inconsistency in his own line of thinking only makes him more stalwart in his beliefs.

Though Brown presents Peck’s myopic view of the two institutions in an unfavorable light, he also criticizes Carlton’s views by saying that the abolitionist had spent too much time delving into the intrigues of abstract philosophy “to place that appreciation upon the Bible and its teachings that it demands” (74). Like Peck’s, Carlton’s stance is unsatisfactory. What Brown argues for here is a dialectical approach to the two arguments. Combining the practicality of philosophy and government with the transcendental hope and comfort that only religion can provide allows for a synthesis of the best of the two ideals.

This synthesis comes in part from the character of Georgiana Peck, who positions herself as a different kind of preacher than her father. Georgiana has an active abolitionist spirit that ignites a fire of change in many of the people she encounters, including her future husband, Carlton, and Peck himself. Like the other preachers in the novel, she is unafraid to draw on the teachings of the Bible. She relies on her own interpretations of the same text to argue on the topic of slavery, this time against the institution. She presents the first rhetoric in the entire novel in which racial liberty and Christianity are not opposing forces but are synonymous with one another. She justly claims that “Whatever... destroys, abridges, or renders insecure, human welfare is opposed to God’s will, and is evil... True Christian love is of an enlarged, disinterested nature” (75). This declaration diverges from anything that the audience has heard thus far. Brown uses the character of Georgiana and her morality to speak directly to his audience. Georgiana’s words, as author Dawn Coleman asserts, “affirm color-blind love as a core Christian principle” (185). This troubles Peck’s rigid understanding of

Christianity and with his daughter's words, he is able to view "Christianity in its true light" (75).

The slaves on Peck's plantation seem to have their own understanding of Christianity, a Christianity in this "true light." When Peck has Hontz Snyder, a missionary, speak to the slaves for their Sunday meeting, Snyder continues this cycle of bastardizing the Bible in order to further the idea that slavery is a divinely ordained and integral part of American society. He purports that "it is the will of God" that Black people exist in enslavement because he "knew that condition would be best for you" (77). Not only does Snyder excuse the horrors of slavery but he also postures as if its mental and physical anguish that debilitate the Black population is beneficial to them. "Any discontent..." he continues "is quarrelling with your heavenly Master" (77). Here, Snyder refers to God as "Master," a title only the proponents of slavery in the novel use to reference God. Moreover, he manipulates the theological belief in God's omnipotence and omniscience in order to maintain these systems of oppression. The enslavers' take on Christianity remains incredibly punitive and corrective, whereas the slaves draw on Christianity as a source of hope and liberation. Brown uses John Greenleaf Whittier's prose to solidify this hypocrisy:

What! preach and enslave men?  
Give thanks-and rob thy own afflicted poor?  
Talk of thy glorious liberty, and then  
Bolt hard the captive's door? (5-8)

Snyder also forces the slaves to answer the question of why Whites cannot be enslaved in the manner same as Blacks, to which the answer is "Because the Lord intended the Negroes for slaves" (81). This claim to possess insight to God's thoughts has no Scriptural foundation. Sylvester Johnson maintains that the Bible does not racialize slavery (231-32), assigning no specific race to the enslaved. Instead, the interpreters of the Bible corrupt the theological

integrity of the Scripture, using Christianity “merely as a screen on to which ... [to] project their racial attitudes, fears and fantasies” (Kidd 3). By hiding behind the label of Christianity, many enslavers sought to justify their actions.

This interpretation leads directly into the next Biblical fallacy. Benjamin Braude correctly claims that “the treatment of Jews, Blacks, and [indigenous peoples] in the early modern world arose despite, not because of, theological acceptance of a shared genealogy” (105). In the seventh chapter of the book of Genesis, God sends a flood to cleanse the world of sin by killing all of humanity save for Noah and his immediate family members, leaving them responsible for repopulating the Earth without the corruption of the other human beings. Biblical interpretation remained largely literal during the nineteenth century, so this narrative, when coupled with the unquestioned authority of the Bible, leads to the logical conclusion that all humanity shares a single ancestor in Noah. Christianity had, at this point, accepted this collective ancestry, and any attempt to claim superiority over a group of people who shared in this genealogy is logically unsound.

Christianity thus remains an unstable entity throughout the novel. What ensues after Snyder finishes his lecture is another performance of Christianity, this time manifesting in a call and response similar to Black spirituals that forces the slaves to recite answers to questions avowing that God intended for Blacks to exist as slaves. The slaves answer without any resistance but with no trace of vigor. In a collection of interviews on the very subject of these Sunday sermons, former slave William Ward affirms what Brown depicts in his fictional narrative, saying that:

On Sundays the slaves were permitted to have a religious meeting of their own...They sang spirituals which gave vent to their true feelings...There was one person who did the preaching. His sermon was always built according to the master's instructions which were that slaves must always remember that they belonged to their masters and



were intended to lead a life of loyal servitude. None of the slaves believed this, although they pretended to believe because of the presence of the White overseer. (129)

This blatant subversion affords the slaves agency over their own private religious beliefs without further invoking the wrath of their enslavers. Christianity as a religion comprises of both interior belief and external fellowship with other believers, so the enslaved people's need for an authentic Christian community is only satiated after the overseer leaves and they are free to speak and practice their religion as desired. Simon, an older slave, hushes the disgruntled murmurings of the others who question their participation in a religion that appears implicit in their systemic oppression. He tells them that "thars more in de Bible den dat, only Snyder never reads any other part to us...thar was more den what Snyder lets us hear" (82). Instead of eschewing Christianity entirely, Simon seems to propose a reassessment of the religion's position in the nation. He knows that the Bible goes beyond the stunted interpretation of the enslavers. One of the most basic tenets of Christianity and a commonly cited biblical passage, Matthew 22:39, dictates that Christians "love thy neighbor as thyself," an accomplishment rendered impossible when one enslaves, beats, and murders one's neighbor.

Georgiana in part shares this knowledge as well. She and Carlton impart their Christianity on the enslaved they had received as part of an inheritance from her father. Their slaves "appreciated the gospel when given to them in its purity" (138), a tribute to their desire to view Christianity in this "true light." They not only enjoy a mistress who forgoes whippings but also encouragement to practice Christianity in the way they see fit. As Georgiana dies, her altruistic Christianity is exemplified in her deathbed words to her slaves: "If ever there was a people who needed the consolations of religion to sustain them in their grievous afflictions, you are that people. You had better trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man" (157).

In Georgiana's words and actions, she does not use Christianity to validate the system of slavery. She manages to convert her husband "from infidelity to Christianity, from the mere theory of liberty to practical freedom" (159). She recognizes that Christianity without just actions cannot rightly call itself Christianity, which at its very core calls its believers to undertake the task of ensuring that all of God's children are protected from suffering. However, her affirmation of the Christian faith as one of hope and liberation is troubled by her status as a slave owner. As Brown writes, "the evils consequent on slavery are not lessened by the incoming of one or two rays of light" (179). Even as she grants liberty to the enslaved people and speaks to the "true light" of Christianity, she herself participates in the very institution she attempts to dismantle. Georgiana's moral ambiguity mimics the complexity of the nation itself. At the time of the novel's publication, the United States, with its self-proclaimed title of being a Christian nation, upheld the institution of slavery that left no citizen of any race, Black, White, or otherwise, unharmed. Though Christopher Stampone argues that Georgiana "represents Brown's idealized version of the White abolitionist heroine *par excellence*" (79) and that she indicates the possibility of a new generation characterized by abolitionist vigor, Georgiana remains a morally complex character that destabilizes the settled idea of a moral dichotomy that critics and historians alike are fond of projecting on this period of American history.

This anti-slavery sentiment being imparted to a male actor through female intervention manifests itself again in Henry Morton, a White physician. He marries Clotel's sister and subsequently has a personal stake in the abolition of the institution of slavery, taking it upon himself to be "obnoxious to private circles" (151) with his abolitionist leanings. He asks, on the subject of the widespread and federally sanctioned ownership of human beings, "Are we

not then despots—despots such as history will brand and God abhor?” (153). With this question, he appeals to both the theological and political machinations at work in the heart of the nation. The United States’ status as “the land of the free” is innately threatened by the fact that an entire population of its people exists in horrific oppression. By addressing God in the same breath, Morton claims indirectly that this continued distortion of the Bible will lead to the nation’s losing its moral character and its eventual destruction. That, he claims, *will* be sanctioned by God.

The political outrage over the immorality of slave owning does not end with Morton. President Jefferson also addresses this topic of despots and the theological implications of slavery:

With what execration should the statesman be loaded who, permitting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots and these into enemies, destroys the morals of the one part, and the amor patriae of the other!... Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep for ever. (131)

The fact that his own daughter, Clotel, dies as a slave complicates his apparent agreement with Morton’s abolitionist sentiment. This posturing as a proponent of freedom remains hollow and sanctimonious and reflects the ubiquitous attitudes of the slave-owning but claimed Christian nation.

Described in a chapter entitled “Death is Freedom,” Clotel’s suicide also highlights the differences in an enslaver and an enslaved person’s Christianity. After a life of enduring physical and mental abuse, involuntary familial division, and fear, Clotel attempts to escape her life of bondage, only to be cornered on a bridge by slave hunters. Instead of cooperation, she chooses the ultimate form of dissent: “she at the same time raised her eyes towards heaven, and begged for that mercy and compassion there, which had been denied her on earth; and then, with a single

bound, she vaulted over the railings of the bridge, and sunk for ever beneath the waves of the river” (185). The Potomac consumes her body and, within the view of the White House and the physical representation of all the nation’s democratic and Christian ideals, she dies. The description of her death is interspersed with a Christian lexicon: she places her life in the hands of her God, beseeching him for a transcendental peace that, by nature of her race and her status as a slave, had been out of reach for the duration of her life. Here, Clotel recognizes that death signals a certain kind of freedom; an eternal freedom she only obtains through her Christianity. Her Christianity is not the same religion that enslavers manipulate to maintain their position in this network of power. Through a democratically irrational and morally unjustifiable co-opting of Christianity, those who either explicitly or passively sustain the system of slavery morally debase themselves and thus, their proclaimed Christian nation.

Brown’s warning against this moral hypocrisy pervades his novel. In *Clotel’s* conclusion, Brown writes “let no Christian association be maintained with those who traffic in the blood and bones of those whom God has made of one flesh as yourselves” (209). As Jacob Olupona states, Christianity was “deeply culpable in the African slave trade, inasmuch as it consistently provided a moral cloak for the buying and selling of human beings” (95). This moral cloak attempted to shroud the centuries worth of the outward, tangible horrors that slavery produced, including the literal buying and selling of human beings as if they were livestock, the wrenching apart of families, and the rape and murder of men, women, and children. Mary Fitzpatrick maintains that “such marked inconsistency between slavery and the United States' founding ideals severely destabilizes the country's exalted place as the bastion of democracy” (6). Even Thomas Jefferson, the venerated president who penned the famous “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” directly participated in the institution that contradicted his very words by owning slaves. In

political figures like Horatio and Jefferson, the nation's hypocrisy is highlighted, as is the conflict between the slaves' adherence to Christianity and the masters' adherence to the same faith. In tragic heroines such as Clotel and unassuming rebels like Simon, the "true light" of Christianity shines.

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