

A Biblical Struggle Against Oppression: Religious Archetypes in Contending Forces

Since the Great Awakening of the 18th century, when slaves adopted the religion of their oppressors, African American authors have tailored Christianity to the needs of the race through biblical allusions and references. In *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*, Allen Dwight Callahan argues that African-American literature is fundamentally impacted by African Americans' interpretation of the Bible. He states that African American literature does not "begin with writing", but instead that it "begins with religion [Christianity]" (236).

Allusions to the Bible in African American literature and abolitionist literature often appear through biblical archetypes. Biblical figures such as the Christ figure were introduced as literary devices long before the introduction of African American literature. However, African American authors have signified on the biblical tropes, developing them into a means of "making direct, and at other times subtle statements about slavery and freedom" (Page, 384). Associations between a black character and a biblical character are commonly utilized to display to Whites the hypocrisy of racism and slavery.

Similar to many African American writers, in her novel, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*, Pauline Hopkins develops a religious subtext through signifying on religious tropes to relay messages of racial equality. Many scholars like Siobhan Somerville have read Sappho in a classical context as the Greek poet Sappho, neglecting the significance of her character in a Biblical context (Somerville, 145-149). As a result scholars are missing out on the

messages conveyed through this biblical subtext and disregarding how Hopkins is attempting to depict black issues through Sappho's identity as a biblical archetype. This essay will identify religious archetypes represented through Sappho and their function in revealing messages within the novel. Hopkins utilizes biblical archetypes such as the Virgin Mary and Christ to define Sappho Clark's character. Sappho's ability to identify with biblical figures enables Hopkins to convey messages to the African American community, as well as emphasizes Sappho's humanity, contradicting White society's animalistic perception of the black race. It is through Sappho's divine character traits that Hopkins is able to directly deconstruct the perception of racial supremacy, while also encouraging black racial pride.

Throughout the novel, the most prominent biblical association made is that of Sappho Clark with Christ. Her character is best defined as a "Christ Figure", a character who possesses many of the same experiences and traits as Jesus Christ's portrayal in the Bible. Parallels between Sappho's character and Christ are evident and include: suffering for others' sins, being betrayed, resurrection, and dual identity. African Americans have identified with Christ's struggle since being introduced to Christianity, reading "their own collective experience into the agony and exaltation of Jesus. The story of the Christ child, blessed by God yet born in the shadow of poverty and violence, was their story. Jesus' humble birth in antiquity signified the humble origins of African peoples in modernity" (Callahan, 236). By evoking the idea of Christ through Sappho's characteristics, Hopkins is conveying a message about the nature of the black race as a whole.

The universal attribute of a Christ figure is that he or she has a “cross to bear” that is the result of others’ sins. In the Bible it is written that Christ “hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh” (*The Holy Bible, King James Version*, 1 Peter 3:18). His death for the sins of the world is echoed in the suffering of the Christ figure. In the case of Sappho, she is forced to bare the shame of the sins of her rapist and her subsequent pregnancy. Whilst living with her family in New Orleans at the age of fourteen, Sappho, then Mabelle Baubean, was kidnaped by her uncle, raped, and then left to live in a brothel. Within the novel, Dora directly refers to Sappho’s suffering as “a crucifixion for a proud spirit like hers!” (Hopkins, 330). As a female during the era, Sappho is blamed by society for losing her virtue despite her lack of choice in the matter. Although it is her uncle who commits sinful acts against Sappho, she is forced to live with the consequences of his actions. It is a direct result of her race, that her uncle reasons he is able to abuse Sappho saying, Sappho “is no better than her mother or her grandmother. What does a woman of mixed blood, or any Negress, for that matter, know of virtue? It is my belief that they were a direct creation by God to be the pleasant companions of men of my race” (Hopkins, 261). Ignorant racism against the black race subjects Sappho to the sins of her uncle, and black people as a whole to the sins of white people. Similar to Christ, Sappho and the black race in general are predestined by society to bare the burden of others actions, despite being innocent. Through relating the black race to Christ, Hopkins is conveying that black people are the innocent victims of others’ crimes, writing “with

shoulders bent and misshapen with heavy burdens, the Negro plods along bearing his cross—carrying *the sins of others*” (Hopkins, 332).

Like the Betrayal of Christ by Judas, John Langley, a member of her own community, betrays Sappho. Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve Disciples of Christ, tempted by thirty silver coins, betrayed Christ to the Sanhedrin, a governing assembly, with a kiss (*The Holy Bible, King James Version*, 1 Luke 22). Sappho experiences similar treachery when John Langley, like Judas, reveals her true identity and threatens to expose her to the Smith family as a form of manipulation. Out of greed, he seeks to gain her as a mistress at the expense of loyalty to their shared race, declaring “I betray my friend, and worse than that, the girl who holds my promise; but my excuse is that my passion is stronger than honor” (Hopkins, 319). Similar to Christ’s death on the cross, Langley’s treachery forces Sappho’s hope of happiness with Will Smith to die as well. It is by likening the treachery of Langley to that of Judas that Hopkins is able to emphasize the duty of black people to remain loyal to their own race. Those who betray the race are villains identical to Judas. Only through loyalty to the race may black people succeed in overcoming societal oppression and racism.

Another commonality Sappho shares with Christ is that she has a dual identity. In Christianity, Christ is deemed the Holy Trinity, “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (*The Holy Bible, King James Version*, John 1:1). The Christ figure in literature has both an identity as a common man and a divine identity. Sappho’s identity as a character is divided between her past self, Mabelle Beaubean, and her present self. Her identity as Mabelle Beaubean is considerably more common than

her alternate identity, Sappho. While Sappho is an aloof and mysterious entity, Mabelle represents the common man who suffers from human problems like rape and self-loathing. Taking on an alternate identity as Sappho enables her to seemingly transcend her worldly problems instead of confronting them. Like Christ, little is known about Sappho's young life. As a result, people's interest in her spans beyond her beauty, and is drawn to her peculiar nature. It is this dual identity that alienates Sappho from others. The concept of having a dual identity can be applied to the black race in general. Society during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age saw being colored and being human as two different identities. While a black person is evidently human, society segregated the race deeming it less human than the white race. The black community was forced to except the idea thrust upon it by society that it was somehow more animal like than human, while still maintaining their identity as humans. Hopkins's portrayal of Sappho as a Christ figure fights against the misconception that blacks are not humans, while also encouraging blacks to defend their status as human beings.

Resurrection is also a common experience of the Christ figure. Either emotionally or physically, the Christ archetype is brought back to life, echoing the death and return of Christ. After being crucified, it is the Christian belief that Jesus rose from the dead on Easter, two days after his death and appeared to his followers before his ascent to heaven (*The Holy Bible, King James Version*, 1 Corinthians 15:5). Sappho's resurrection is emotional instead of physical, like Christ's was. Her first resurrection of spirit came with Will Smith's marriage proposal when "something of life that was dead leaped again into existence and loosened the icy hand that had for

years locked up the fountain of youthful joy” (Hopkins, 312). However, the resurrection of her spirit ultimately failed when John Langley threatens to expose her true identity, Mabelle Beaubean, to the Smith family. The purpose of this dashed resurrection is instead to lead Sappho on a path of a more transformative resurrection. Leaving her transcendent identity behind and accepting her responsibility as Alphonse’s mother spiritually resurrects Sappho as the Virgin Mary. Hopkins’s distinctive choice to do this comes from her intention to end the novel with Sappho as an embodied woman rather than a transcendent soul. However, although Sappho was reborn into a Virgin Mary archetype, Hopkins intends to impart a Christ related message. Despite racism, the black race has the ability to triumph over oppression and excel morally and intellectually, like Christ triumphed over death two thousand years before.

The metamorphosis of Sappho into the Virgin Mary archetype and simultaneously Alphonse into the Christ Child archetype is intended by Hopkins to be a response to the perception of African American women during the time. Similar to Sappho’s experience as a Christ figure, Hopkins uses her experience as a Madonna figure to communicate a universal truth about African American society. However, the messages being conveyed by way of the archetype are directed at African American women and works to develop Hopkins’s idea of the “new woman of color”. Within *Contending Forces*, Hopkins forms a new position for African American women meant to encourage females to escape the limits imposed through gender and race discrimination (Autori, 2).

Hopkins employs the archetype of the Virgin Mary to transform Sappho from a woman traumatized by sexual abuse and scandal to a divine virgin in order to contradict the stereotype of African American women's sexuality during the Progressive Era. White society held "the belief that practically all Negro women lack virtue and sexual morals", which is derived from the "tigress" myth that black women have a "stronger sexual urge and the superior sexual skill and capacity" (Myrdal, 108). This blame thrust upon Sappho by society is directly voiced by John Langely, who declares "girls of fourteen are frequently wives in our Southern climes, where women mature early," blaming her gender and ripe age for her sexual assault instead of her assailant (Hopkins, 319). Through portraying Sappho as a Madonna figure, Hopkins discredits the perception of Sappho as a "single woman who becomes tainted by sexual scandal and thus read by others as a prostitute" (Brooks, 91). However, by invoking the Virgin Mary archetype, Hopkins is challenging the condemnation and stigmatization of women following rape, as well as the female virtue and capacity of African American women to experience motherhood.

Nearing the end of the novel, Sappho experiences a moment of enlightenment that leads her to accept her role as Alphonse's mother, similar to the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary. The Annunciation took place when the angel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive the Son of God, Jesus Christ (*The Holy Bible, King James Version*, 1 Luke: 26-38). Comparably, while leaving Will to avoid exposing him to the shame of her past, Sappho conducts an internal conversation with God, posing rhetorical questions such as "Dost thou question the providences of God? Know that my ways are not the ways of men. A

tender soul will be demanded at thy hands in the vat eternity. Who art thou, to question the ways of Infinity? Jesus Christ came into the world under the law. Who art thou, to question the wisdom of the Most High?" (Hopkins, 342). The purpose of this pseudo annunciation scene is to represent how African Americans experience the phenomenon of conscience. The dehumanization of black people during the antebellum era persisted into the Progressive era as a method to justify racism and prove the superiority of the white race. Hopkins's portrayal of Sappho as the Virgin Mary is intended to dispel this misconception.

Lastly, Sappho's identity as a Madonna figure is a feminist transformation meant to communicate the new colored woman's role in improving the black race. Hopkins was an active member in the Woman's Era Club, and was determined to inspire other African American women to participate in improving the race (Autori, 1). Sappho is intended to demonstrate that women have the ability to better the position of African Americans in society. As a Virgin Mary archetype, Sappho is likened to the woman who Christians believe to have borne the savior of the human race. As a Christ Child, Alphonse represents a future savior of the black race. By accepting her role as his mother and as a single parent Sappho is able to improve her race while, as a single mother, demonstrating the independent ability of women to create a difference. Hopkins fits Sappho "perfectly for the place she was to occupy in carrying comfort and hope to the women of her race" (Hopkins, 346-347). The feminist interpretation of the Virgin Mary that Sappho embodies is designed to inspire the "New Colored Woman" to work to better the black race and depict the

ability of African American women to equal and even surpass white women in womanhood.

Through religious archetypes such as Christ and the Virgin Mary, Hopkins forms Sappho into a multilayered character with a depth that is meant to represent the black community. Biblical allusions enable the novel to relay several messages about the black race as a whole and specifically black women. Hopkins utilizes the Christ figure and the Madonna figure, both commonly represented in Western literature, and signifies on them in order to disprove the misconception that blacks are sub-human and relay an underlying message directed toward African Americans during the Progressive era. *Contending Forces* is an example of how African American literature molds Christianity to the experiences of the race that has gone unexamined by scholars. Instead, many scholars such as Somerville have focused on Sappho as a classical allusion to the Greek poet of the same name (Somerville, 145-149). As an effect they have missed the racial issues Hopkins is relaying through the character Sappho as a biblical archetype.

Works Cited

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