

**THE BLACK FEMALE SLAVE TAKES LITERARY REVENGE: FEMALE  
GOTHIC MOTIFS AGAINST SLAVERY IN HANNAH CRAFTS'S *THE  
BONDWOMAN'S NARRATIVE***

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**ABSTRACT.** *The Bondwoman's Narrative is a novel that functions as a story made up from Hannah Crafts's experiences as a bondwoman and thus merges fact and fiction giving a thoroughly new account of slavery both committed to reality and fiction. Following and taking over the Gothic literary genre that spread in Europe as a reaction toward the Romantic spirit, Crafts uses it to denounce the degrading slavery system and, mainly, to scathingly attack the patriarchal roots that stigmatize black women as the ultimate victims. It is my contention that Hannah Crafts uses the female Gothic literary devices both to attack slavery and also to stand as a proper (African) American citizen capable of relating to the cultural outlets that American culture offered aiming to counteract the derogatory stereotypes that rendered African American women at the very bottom of the social ladder.*

*Keywords:* Slavery, Female Gothic, African American, woman, Hannah Crafts, Bondwoman.

## LA VENGANZA LITERARIA DE LA ESCLAVA NEGRA: MOTIVOS DEL GÓTICO FEMENINO CONTRA LA ESCLAVITUD EN *LA NARRATIVA DE UNA SIRVIENTA DE HANNAH CRAFTS*

**RESUMEN.** La Narración de la Esclava es una novela que funciona como una historia surgida de la experiencia como esclava de Hannah Crafts, mezclando así realidad y ficción, en un intento de ofrecer un completo testimonio de la esclavitud con elementos reales y ficticios. Siguiendo y adaptando el género gótico que surgió en Europa como reacción al espíritu romántico, Crafts lo galvaniza para denunciar el degradante sistema de la esclavitud y, en concreto, para lanzar una crítica mordaz a las raíces patriarcales que estigmatizan a la mujer negra como la víctima por antonomasia. En mi opinión, Hannah Crafts utiliza el género Gótico femenino tanto para atacar la esclavitud como para auto-erigirse como ciudadana (afro)americana capaz de hacer servir los elementos culturales que la cultura americana ofrece para contrarrestar los feroces estereotipos que sitúan a la mujer afroamericana en la parte más baja de la escala social.

*Palabras clave:* Esclavitud, Gótico Femenino, Afroamericana, mujer, Hannah Crafts, Esclava

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Tremble not before the free man, but before the slave who has chains to break.  
Margaret Fuller

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Bondwoman's Narrative is not properly a slave narrative, though it uses many of the literary devices that comprise this genre and thus acts as such. Rather, it is a novel written by a fugitive black female slave trying to come to terms with the years spent under captivity<sup>1</sup>. In fact, I agree with Williams Andrews

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<sup>1</sup> Discovered in 2001 and edited in 2002, The Bondwoman's Narrative became the center of a literary controversy as some critics (Baym, Parramore) were adamant to believe that the novel had indeed been written by a black female slave. Despite its editor, the noted black scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr., did his best to prove Crafts's slave status, the doubts over the author's identity and the reticences towards the text pushed The Bondwoman's Narrative aside from the African American literary productions. However, a front-page article in The New York Times in september 2013 ignited a new wave of interest in The Bondwoman's Narrative as Winthrop professor Gregg

when he states that “The Bondwoman’s Narrative reads like a hybrid of the fugitive slave narrative and woman’s fiction” (2002: 31). The novel functions as a story made up from Hannah Crafts’s experiences as a bondwoman and thus merges fact and fiction giving a thoroughly new account of slavery both committed to reality and fiction because eventually, as Toni Morrison argues, “the act of imagination is bound up with memory” (1995: 119). Hence, Crafts’s multilayered tale follows the three kinds of experimentation with the narrative voice that African Americans created in what William Andrews assesses as “the black literary renaissance of the 1850s” (1990: 24).

Attempting to search for new ways to authorize themselves, black slaves experimented with the “idea of sincerity”, the “dialogization”, which helped them to foster a dialogue that began “to make an autobiography read like a novel”, and eventually led them to create and work with “the fictive voice” (Andrews 1990: 24). In this light, Crafts’s novel functions as a direct attack to the slavery system aiming to arouse moral outrage as well as the sympathy of readers. Hannah Crafts’s tale dwells on the ills of slavery since it attempts at the dehumanization of the oppressors just to prove the humanity of the oppressed.

Following and taking over the Gothic literary genre that spread in Europe as a reaction toward the Romantic spirit, black authors used it to make a denounce against the degrading slavery system. In *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* Crafts also uses the conventions of the Gothic because, as Teresa Goddu exposes in her insightful work *Gothic America: Narrative, History and Nation*, the Gothic serves to “focus on the terror of possession, the iconography of imprisonment, the fear of retribution, and the weight of sin” and provides “a useful vocabulary and register of images by which to represent the scene of America’s greatest guilt: slavery” (1997: 133). Moreover, being a black woman’s tale, Crafts’s text criticizes the patriarchal roots that stigmatize women, and especially black women, uttering the female Gothic to complete her literary attack. In doing so, Crafts follows the literary conventions that prevailed in mid-nineteenth-century America but through a black female slave’s point of view. It is my contention that Hannah Crafts uses the female Gothic literary devices both to attack slavery and also to stand as a proper (African) American citizen capable of relating to the cultural outlets that American culture offered.

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Hecimovich claimed to have found evidence of Crafts’s real identity. He asserted that Hannah Crafts stands as the pseudonym of Hannah Bond, a fugitive slave who did write *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. Hecimovich is meant to publish a book in which he gives account of Hannah Crafts’s story and whereabouts. It is supposed to be launched in 2016.

There are different Gothic motifs that can be singled out in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. In my reading of the novel, I distinguish five motifs that complement each other and offer the reader a full picture of the different intensities of horror, fear but also hope that the author endures through the story. Tellingly, I single out these five motifs from the whole narrative simply because they appear embedded in gothic tones in a literary attempt to highlight the social critique that the black slave wanted readers to understand. They are: (1) the mansion and/or the plantation, (2) the curse and its supernatural power, (3) the condition of the black woman and the trope of the "Sins of the Fathers", (4) Mr. Trappe as a white Gothic villain, and (5) the concept of race and the strategy of passing. These motifs that the author fills with Gothic terror are used plainly to convey a harsh denunciation against the slavery system of the nineteenth-century North America.

## 2. THE MANSION/OR THE PLANTATION

The first motif appears when stepping into the traditional realm of the Gothic, Crafts walks through the mansion and notices "something inexpressibly dreary and solemn in passing through the silent rooms of a large house, especially one whence many generations have passed to the grave" (BN: 14-15)<sup>2</sup>. The mansion itself is a gothic tenet which serves the author to expose the entrapment that slaves were subjected to. However, this Gothic scenario makes Hannah invert the slave role and act as an active subject. Staring at the pictures of her masters' ancestors, Hannah expresses:

Invariably you find yourself thinking of them, and wondering how they looked like in life, and how the rooms looked in their possession, and whether or not they would recognize their former habitation if restored once more to earth and them. Then all we have heard or fancied of spiritual existence comes to us (BN: 15).

Through her perception Crafts starts reading the masters and, more importantly, questioning them. The roles have been reversed. According to Christopher Castiglia, "[p]utting possession in the eyes of the beholder, this scene tellingly inverts slavery's usual dynamic, making the owners the viewed, slaves the viewers" (2004: 239). Slavery equates ownership and Crafts, albeit through thinking, is wondering why. These imaginative doubts, only expressed in the Gothic mansion, stand as a theoretical critique to the dark and evil institution. Echoing the Gothic tradition Hannah recounts the terror the house exhales. The mansion serves as a central symbol and acts as a site

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<sup>2</sup> Further quotations from Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* will refer to the edition that appears in the work cited and will be identified by the initials BN and page numbers included in parenthesis in the text.

of terror where “There is a shadow flitting past through the gloom. There is a sound, but it does not seem of mortality. A supernatural thrill pervades your frame, and you feel the presence of mysterious beings. It may be foolish and childish, but it is one of the unaccountable things instinctive to the human nature” (BN: 15, emphasis added). Through the haunted mansion, the supernatural devices, and the use of the second pronoun Crafts spreads the horror-like atmosphere directly to the readers placing them in the position of the slave. In Gothic fiction, the house contributes to slavery as it evidences the white men’s control over African Americans. Among the portraits of the white masters that used to rule the plantation, the shadow, representing Hannah herself as a black slave, shatters the calm of the aisle bringing in the darkness and a sinister aura. *Othered* as a black woman in a white society, the description of the room exemplifies Crafts’s reality in the plantation just to serve as a mirror for the reader. An antebellum society in which there is “gloom”, “mortality” and “mysterious beings” for its African American population. Strolling through the galleries of the house Mrs. Bry informs Hannah about the founder of the mansion. She learns that Sir Clifford de Vincent was a “nobleman of power and influence in the old world” who “fled for safety to the shores of the Old Dominion, and became the founder” (BN: 15). Thus, the foundation of Mr. de Vincent’s mansion points directly at the transatlantic slave trade<sup>3</sup>, something Hannah wants to emphasize and denounce while engaging with notions of cultural hybridity and transnationalism. In the Gothic literary genre the past can never be left behind for it brings forward the dark reality of the present. A foregone idea that is explicit in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*.

Her literacy surpasses the ability of reading just texts and shows Hannah’s capacity to also read reality--her reality. Remaining oblivious of a black slave sense of interpretation, Mrs. Bry discovers Hannah gazing at the pictures to blurt out “as if such an ignorant thing as you are would know any thing about them” (BN: 17). Conversely, Crafts does know everything and Mrs. Bry’s attempt to debunk Hannah epitomizes the racial superiority that characterized the southern antebellum society. A female black slave was meant to be ignorant and it was inconceivable to give Hannah the credit to have ideas of her own. By proving the intellectual capacity of a black slave Crafts tries to counteract and deconstruct a series of derogatory and racist assumptions that fostered the denial of the humanity of blacks and defended slavery as a natural state of being for African Americans. In fact, Crafts shuns Mrs. Bry’s harsh remark sentencing that “Those

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<sup>3</sup> Bridget H. Marshall affirms that “Crafts’s novel, like the Gothic, engages in the study of the slave trade and the legal System that enabled it” just because “(t)he importance of translanticism is nowhere more apparent than in the study of the slave trade and the legal system that enabled it” (2011: 151).

to whom man teaches little, nature like a wise and prudent mother teaches much” (BN: 18). The aesthetics of Crafts’s maxim fixes on the slaves’ subjectivity and, again, relates to their humanity and intellectual capacities.

In an avowed purpose to suit white expectations and appeal to their sympathies, Crafts offers another vision of a white household. So, when she is rescued after an accident with Saddler, her new master, by Mrs. Henry, the author gets the opportunity to witness a real home. Crafts admires and cherishes a home like Mrs Henry’s as it embodies the perfect collective buffer to counteract the injuries of racism. Although the Henrys possess slaves themselves, the “countenance beaming with soul and intelligence” of their home fits Crafts model of a society from which black people can climb up the social ladder. Aware of the social inequalities of the antebellum North America, Crafts is constantly keeping an eye in her readership and thus the portrait of Mrs. Henry’s family and home offers her the chance to be applauded by the white public for contributing to the improvement of race relations.

Contrary to the abolitionist atmosphere that Crafts finds at Mrs. Henry’s, when she is sold to the Wheelers and travels down to their Southern plantation the exposure of real slavery adopts a tougher but more realistic terms. Hence, on her arrival at the Wheelers’ plantation in North Carolina, Crafts offers a thorough portrait of the life of field slaves. In fact, Henry Louis Gates Jr. admits that “Crafts’s description of living conditions in the slave quarters is “one of the most vivid in black literature” (BN: 273). These living conditions of black people are described in a grotesque manner:

They say that many of these huts were old and ruinous with decay, that occasionally a crash, and a crowd of dust would be perceived among them, and that each time was occasioned by the fall of one. But lodgings are found among the rubbish, and all goes on as before... If the huts were bad, the inhabitants it seems were still worse. Degradation, neglect, and ill treatment had wrought on them its legitimate effects (BN: 200).

However, the Wheelers possess a variegated range of slaves and Crafts also informs that “the family residence was stocked with slaves of a higher and nobler order than those belonging to the fields” (BN: 202). So, in Crafts’s tale, the Wheelers’ plantation epitomizes the social order of the slave world and runs the gamut of the different categories of slaves.

### 3. THE CURSE AND ITS SUPERNATURAL POWER

The curse is the second Gothic motif that takes central stage and is somehow linked to the mansion and the plantation as these elements act as a direct attack to the plantation system. Founder Sir Clifford de Vincent invoked a malediction

advising his descendents not to remove the paintings and add a self-portrait when married in a Gothic-based threat that instills a racist and patriarchal imagery. As Robert Levine notes, with the “conjunction of names and blood, Clifford wants the display of husbands and wives to attest to the untroubled transmission of the founder’s avowedly white blood through successive generations” (2004: 282). However, Sir Clifford will be the first heir to break the tradition by haunting his portrait prior to marry. This uncouth move that leads to the family tradition betrayal sets off the founder’s curse haunting the plantation as well as the life of Hannah’s master. Using the Gothic lens, Crafts’s use of the foreboding and malediction carries out a sharp critique toward the slave system and, extensively, to the patriarchal families reigning in the southern region because, in Anne Williams’s words, “the Gothic myth itself is the patriarchal family (2009: 87).

Crafts’s announcement of the foreboding comes when she describes her master’s portrait. Breaking the family tradition, Sir Clifford’s portrait is doomed from the beginning and the malediction spreads all over the plantation advancing its disastrous ending. Hannah notes that her master’s portrait “seemed to change from its usually kind and placid expression to one of wrath and gloom” (BN: 17), an insight which proves her as a rational being in a Gothic mansion. This represents Crafts’s move towards the recognition of the black slaves’ subjectivity and contests the racist nineteenth-century American idiosyncrasy. This female Gothic assumption allows Hannah to show a (black) woman’s emancipatory message. As Wald aptly affirms, due to “a manifestation of her artistic agency, her authorship becomes a figure of her liberation” (2004: 219).

Proving the perversity of the slavery system on black women, Sir Clifford punishes an old black female slave, called Rose, as a perfect example of what this cruel system is capable of. However, Rose, just as Hannah does in a literary way, fights back through cursing and maledicts the plantation, and thus the whole system. The curse on Sir Clifford’s house is the curse on slavery and on the patriarchal southern society. By cursing the house which “has two meanings relevant to Gothic fiction - it refers both to the building itself and to the family line” (Williams 1995: 45), Rose wages an attack against the patriarchal system upheld through slavery by using the tree, an element crucial to the seamless continuity of that corrupted system. Martha J. Cutter rightly submits that through the linden curse, “Crafts implies that white savagery, not black inferiority, in fact underlines and is ‘the curse’ at the nation’s foundation” (2014: 124). Thus, Crafts draws on the female Gothic strategy to smash the white patriarchal slavery system. Robert Levine links the malediction with the blood because, he contends, “Rose ‘appears’ as the blood that remains veiled by the portraits” and the old slave woman’s blood gets entangled with the tree as her “blood is drawn into its roots” (2004: 284). Fact and fiction get fused in Crafts’s recreation of the legend of the

linden tree, mixing real violence imposed on women with supernatural devices and omens, proving the tale to be a novel which stems from slave narratives but also from the gothic fiction that was being produced in the nineteenth century.

Rose's foreboding seems to be taking its toll and, as Hannah notices, looking through her master she finds out that "he was striving to obliterate some haunting recollection, or shut from his mental vision the rising shadows of coming events" (BN: 29). As Walds rightly asserts, "Crafts takes control of the term 'haunting', which she uses to describe earthly rather than supernatural" (2004: 224), and, though expressed in Gothic motifs that help her convey her message, the haunting of white antebellum America was that of the ills of slavery. The foreboding gets confirmed through "the ominous creaking of the linden tree", which links it directly to Rose's curse, and when due to the spooky storm Hannah notices how "the portrait of Sir Clifford had fallen to the floor" (BN: 29). At this point, both Rose's and the founder of the mansion's curses intersect and are triggered to bring forward a reality that is doomed to tumble "like decay" (BN: 30).

The curse is present when the white men who find Mrs. de Vincent and Crafts hidden at the forest after escaping from Lindendale inform both women that Mrs. de Vincent cannot be brought back to Sir Clifford because he is dead. The mistress understands that the foreboding has come true and so she states: "There is no use battling against fate. Henceforth come what will I am resigned" (BN: 70). Although literary historian Nina Baym expresses her puzzlement over "the absence of references to the Fugitive Slave Law" (2004: 320) in a novel written by an African American woman in mid- nineteenth-century America, I find a veiled reference to the Fugitive Slave Law when Crafts explains how, after the retention, she eavesdrops the white men negotiating "something about a large reward" (BN: 71), something which expands Baym's reading and proves Crafts's acute awareness of the ills of her society.

The death of Sir Clifford is the first step of the malediction invoked by Rose and the original founder of the Lindendale plantation and it comes to be completed through the villain Mr. Trappe. It is the white gothic villain who informs Sir Clifford about the true race of his wife and by doing so he triggers off the wave of destruction, an act which demonstrates that "(t)he evil his presence always brought with it had been accomplished there" (BN: 73). The whiteness of Mr. Trappe and the gothic aura surrounding him join the sound of "the linden creaking beneath the window" (BN: 73) at the very same time Sir Clifford is putting an end to his own life. As Robert Levine acutely notices, the master's death is linked to old slave Rose's death by the amount of bloodshed proving to which extent blood "is important to this curse" (2004: 284) because it indicates the correlation existing between sexual violence and slavery which ends up in the spilling of tainted blood that actually makes

amends with the violence inflicted on black women and teaches a literary lesson of how in a country haunted by slavery destruction is scattered everywhere.

Finally, the curse haunts back in the novel when Crafts learns from Lizzy that Mrs. Cosgrove, the new mistress of Lindendale suffers an accident when she discovers a harem of female slaves that acted as her husband's concubines. When Mrs. Cosgrove wakes up to realize she is to stay in bed until her dying days her husband sobs: "I only ask that you will not curse me" (BN: 193). Yet, Lilly watches how "a deep mysterious shadow was only slowly falling over her mistress, that her breathing grew labored and difficult, and that her brow was bathed with a cold and clammy sweat" (BN: 193). The curse seems to have been taken its toll and, eventually, Mrs. Cosgrove dies haunting her husband with grief because "from the hour of his wife's death he had never seemed like himself" (BN: 137). In the end, Lizzy's story acts and serves to wrap up the Lindendale's curse that was uttered by the founder and Rose which, after sweeping away the Cliffords, also do away with the Cosgroves. The plantation has taken its toll, and so:

the Linden with its creaking branches had bowed to the axe, and...great changes had been wrought inside the house as well as out; that some of the ancient rooms, whose walls veiled with oak were brown with age, had been newly renovated, and now shone in all the glory of fresh paint and plaster. Above all that Sir Clifford's portrait and its companions of both sexes, had been publicly exposed in the market and knocked down to the highest bidder (BN: 194).

The Gothic Lindendale plantation has offered a portrait of the Southern lifestyle and its deep implications with slavery. Crafts's literary revenge is served when she has the portraits that stand for the white southern patriarchal and racist society sold just in the same way that slaves were sold at a public auction. Reversing the roles is another relentless message to her readership, just as it was the exposition of the fragile nature of racial categories, to convey how easily the social change can be. To this end, and setting out to alter the corrupted nature of the country, Crafts underpins the chapter with the Latin phrase "Sic transit gloria mundi" (BN: 194).

#### 4. THE CONDITION OF THE BLACK WOMAN AND THE TROPE OF THE "SINS OF THE FATHERS"

The female Gothic nature of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is the key to understand one of its author's blatant denunciations. Women, and especially black women, are the victims of a system that relegates them to the furthest margins of society. The brutalization of black women, whether they are aware or not of their race, is Crafts's major complaint in her novel and stands as the fourth element

covered with Gothic features. The first example of such atrocities is embodied in the old black female slave named Rose, who was the nurse of Sir Clifford's son and had her own children sold into the slave trade but keeps her daughter's dog, an animal "full of intelligence, and bearing a strong resemblance to those of a child" (BN: 21). The dog stands as an extension of her own offspring and keeps her wounded maternal love alive. As a typical slave narrative literary convention, the writer plunges deep in the slavery system Gothic horror preparing the reader for the tyranny to come. In fact, the narrative steps in the classic trope that defines the slave narratives written in the nineteenth century: the merging of the black women's physical and sexual exploitation perpetrated at the hands of the white man. Levine asserts that the talk of "black blood mixing with the family tree points to the sexually violative nature of the entanglement between Clifford and Rose" (2004: 284). Furthermore, when Rose is about to be hung Crafts admits that she "knew so well to make its wants understood that it became to her what a grandchild is to many aged females" (BN: 22), which indicates the sexual intercourse overtly practiced in the plantation and, as Levine points out, talking about her grandchild she suggests "the possibility that Sir Clifford had raped not only Rose but also her daughter, thereby producing a granddaughter" (2004: 284).

Sir Clifford requires Rose to kill the dog but the old female slave refuses to do so as the animal acts as "her treasure, and sole possession" (BN: 22). Hemmed in a society that relegates her as property, Rose's refusal infuriates the master who orders: "take this old witch, and her whelp and gibbet them alive on the Linden" (BN: 22). The cruel torture applies both to Rose and her dog in a reminder call of how slavery brutalizes black adults and their children. The whole scene is thoroughly described prodding white readers to witness the torture and terror that white antebellum America inflicted upon slaves and, especially, upon female slaves as the weaker link of society. Just as other slave narrators, Hannah uses black women to show the moral perversion of slavery. In this vein, the female Gothic conventions attached to the exploitation and abuse of black women can be extensible to fully display America's racist exploitation. In slave narratives, when a black male author focuses on the black women's body there could be room to think that it was a literary strategy that allowed them to keep some sense of masculinity. Yet, when a black woman voices the brutalization impinged on black women she is giving a message in terms of feminist ties to openly vilify a society that permits such atrocities. Thus, acting deliberately, Hannah, as a Gothic heroine, deepens into Rose's procedures of torture engaging her readership into the darkest side of their corrupted society while empathizing with the pain of her fellow female slave: "An iron hoop being fastened around the body of Rose she was drawn to the tree, and with great labor elevated and secured to one of the largest limbs. And then

with a refinement of cruelty the innocent and helpless little animal, with a broad iron belt around its delicate body was suspended within her sight, but beyond her reach" (BN: 23). In so doing, Crafts corroborates that "the main task of the Gothic heroine is to uncover and name the horrors that fill her world" (Winter 1992: 12). In addition, this Gothic and grotesque transcription of staged violence completely turns upside down and reverses the racist claim linking the slaves with animals and not with humans. To Hannah, and black female slaves, white civility is tantamount to violence, rape and racism.

Coded in African American Gothic terms, Rose's punishment epitomizes the savagery of white America toward its black female slaves:

suspended between heaven and earth in a posture the [sic] most unimaginable painful both hung through the long days and the longer nights. Not a particle of food, not a drop of water was allied to either, but the master walking each morning would fix his cold cruel eyes with appalling indifference on her agonized countenance...her rigid features assumed a collapsed and corpse-like hue and appearance... (BN: 23).

These vivid descriptions reveal a crystal clear message: the institution of slavery is the one to blame for these nauseating practices. In Hannah's tale, it is a black female slave who breaks the Gothic legend of the linden just as she explains that being hung for a few days suddenly "(t)hrough the din and uproar of the tempest could be heard all night the wail of a woman the howling of a dog, and the creaking of the linden branches to which the Tibet hung. It was terrible" (BN: 24). Rose, illiterate but strong willed, challenges her punishment and, consequently, defies the slavery system as she "gives meaning to the creaking of the linden, exacting her revenge by creating a legend that speaks to the horror of the institution of slavery and the particular cruelties that it enables" (Wald 2004: 224). The linden, representing the slavery system, cracks when Rose refuses to surrender and opts for resistance and, despite the "servants all knew the history of that tree" (BN: 20), the old black slave gives a new meaning to the linden by challenging the "peculiar institution". When the master accepts to take her down thinking she has already learned a lesson, Rose shows her dignity openly out-facing slavery by wanting to be kept hung. In a Gothic tone she impends: "I will hang here till I die as a curse to this house, and I will come here after I am dead to prove its bane" (BN: 25).

I agree with Bridget Marshall when she indicates that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* details "a cycle of horror that continually re-inscribes a narrative of rumored, imagined, and exaggerated stories on top of a history of very real horrible events" (2011: 131). This is precisely its uniqueness regarding other narratives written by black women in the nineteenth century. In fact, in this moment of

her novel, Crafts empties “slavery of history by turning it into a gothic trope” (Goddu 1997: 135) and presents herself as a novelist who signifies against white narratives of gothic fiction in an open transposition to revamp the blueprint of a male dominated literary establishment.

This Gothic tenure receives the arrival of the new mistress who comes with “bridal company” which happens to be an “entire troop of slaves, all arrayed in the finery of flaming Madras handkerchief and calico blazing with crimson and scarlet flowers” (BN: 26). The description of this scene serves to inform readers about the great amount of enslaved people who were held in bondage in the nadir of slavery. Refuting again the idea that slaves were ignorant beings, when introduced to her new mistress, Hannah decides to “inspect her appearance” (BN: 26), finding some glooming feeling around her and reckoning that “there was mystery, something indefinable about her” (BN: 27). Crafts’s first impressions when describing her mistress are evinced in racial terms and, according to Karen Sánchez-Eppler, the “question of race stands as the center of Crafts’s ambivalence over the Gothic” (2004: 265). Hannah claims that she was “a small brown woman, with a profusion of wavy curly hair, large bright eyes, and delicate features with the exception of her lips which were too large, full, and red” (BN: 27, emphasis added). The racialized features of Mrs. Vincent are disturbingly linked with the Gothic for they reveal her African American heritage which connects her to a fatal destiny. Linking her race to the African folklore and religion Hannah admits: “I am superstitious, I confess it; people of my race and color usually are” and thus exposes that her mistress “was haunted by a shadow or phantom apparent only to herself, and perhaps even the more dreadful for that” (BN: 27). Crafts weaves a typically Gothic web of suspense between Mrs. de Vincent and the mysterious man, named Mr. Trappe, and explains how “each one was conscious of some great and important secret on the part of the other”, and specifies that her mistress “would give worlds to know what the old man knew” (BN: 28). The disturbing secret that Hannah’s mistress and Mr. Trappe bring along amounts to an already dark and Gothic scene in which an odor of catastrophe springs up.

In fact, it is through a sister of race, the quadroon Lizzy, Mrs. de Vincent’s first maid, from whom Hannah learns the extent of the relationship that bonds her mistress to Mr. Trappe. Although described as “almost white” (BN 33), it is a black woman who helps Crafts dig into the mystery that revolves around her mistress. Lizzy comes from a “good family”, possesses a “great beauty” and still has endured the atrocities of slavery being “many times under the hammer of the auctioneer”, passing “through many times, and experienced all the vicissitude attendant on the life of a slave” thus suffering “the extreme’s of a master’s fondness, a mistress’s jealousy and their daughter’s hate” (BN: 34). Lizzy is beautiful, intelligent and light-

skinned, as Hannah herself, but white America defines her as property because, in Hazel Carby's explanation, "the cult of true womanhood drew its ideological boundaries to exclude another definition of black women from 'woman'" (1987: 39).

Crafts posits in the bounty of the African American women's oral tradition the revelation of the dark and Gothic secret that torments and haunts the mistress and presents it as a source of power and sisterhood because even "when slavery was the common way of life and white male dominance appeared absolute, women found power in knowledge" (Winter 1992: 77). Echoing the African American call-and-response oral tradition, Hannah and Lizzy's conversation help to make clear that the founder's foreboding takes place with the arrival of the new mistress for in a southern plantation supported by slavery on which black people are treated as chattel, the revelation of Mrs. de Vincent as a black woman is nothing but a tragedy in Lindendale. The mistress treats her slaves "rather as companions than servants" and "shuns Mrs. Bry" showing support to her black servants as clues of her racial heritage, even indulging Hannah to read (BN: 36), despite Sir Clifford's ignorance of this very "great misfortune" that "was on her mind" (BN: 35), an ignorance that, once more, demonstrates the "pleasure and insight belongings to blacks" and "invasive prying and metaphoric blindness to whites" (Castiglia 2004: 236).

Linked to the situation of women in the antebellum South and also observed in the Gothic motifs that organize Crafts's novel, is the trope of the "Sins of the Fathers" which focuses on how the African American Gothic delves into the disintegration of the families, both black and white, due to the slavery and its consequences. Slavery contradicted the egalitarian democratic ideals of a nation which relied on the (patriarchal) family as the perfect unit to preserve the American exceptionalism. Consequently, in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* the "Gothic... served Crafts as a lens through which even the most subtle traces of honor could be brought into view" (Ballinger *et al.* 2005: 218).

Knowing that "no woman is free in a patriarchal society" (Winter 1992: 95) the social status gets broken when Hannah and her mistress can relate to each other as racial sisters thus blurring, and denouncing, the fragile line that separates race and status in antebellum America. Mrs. de Vincent's secret evinces how race and a patriarchal society are the greatest resorts to destroy women and, especially, black women. Completely at a loss and facing her truthful nature, the mistress accepts that "her mother was a slave then toiling in the cotton fields of Georgia" (BN: 44) and completes this Gothic labyrinth explaining:

one thing is wanting to complete the chain of evidence, and that is the testimony of an old woman, who it seems was my mother's nurse, and who placed me in her lady's bed, and by her lady's side, when that Lady was to[ol] weak and sick and delirious to notice that the dead was exchanged for the living (BN: 44).

Although the mistress was received in society as the daughter of her master's "legitimate wife" (BN: 45), as a grown woman she rejected her father's solicitor, that is Mr. Trappe, which "made him an enemy" (BN 45) holding thus far her deepest and more dangerous secret: her black DNA.

In his groundbreaking *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), Frederick Douglass made use of the rhetorical scheme of chiasmus to ponder: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (1982: 107), yet in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* the chiasmus rhetoric is reversed to exemplify how in a racist patriarchal realm a female slave can be turned into a woman only to be returned into a slave, as it is the case of Mrs. de Vincent. In many a way, Crafts's ultimate goal is to drag into the light the fragility of African American women regarding their identity, their autonomy and their social role in and outside the plantations evoking, alongside other female slave narrators, an "ideal of sisterhood between themselves, their enslaved sisters, and their white female audience" (Winter 1992: 105). Knowing her real race leaves Mrs. de Vincent "half mad, half-wild" (BN: 47) and the Gothic undertones reverberate in her traumatic assumption of her identity when she confesses "the terrible foreboding" rendering her own existence "a curse" (BN: 48) which applies to Teresa Goddu's assertion that defines "the use of gothic effects at key moments to register cultural contradictions" (1987: 10). The cultural contradiction that lies at the core of nineteenth-century American society has to do with its volatile conception of identity and race.

As Toni Morrison perceptively notes, "(n)othing highlighted freedom--if it did not in fact create it- like slavery" (1992: 38) and following suit Crafts does not hesitate to advise her mistress: "You must fly from this house, from this place, from this country, fly immediately" (BN: 48). The reverse scheme of chiasmus takes a step further when Mrs. de Vincent demands Hannah to accompany her and when Crafts accepts the former admonishes her: "Call me mistress no longer. Henceforth you shall be to me as a very dear sister" (BN: 48). In fact, from the very precise moment Mrs. de Vincent accepts herself as an African American, she starts sharing Crafts's social status and, consequently, the only way out of the plantation is escaping. Far from offering a static picture of black women, Crafts tells the story of a loyal and empathic black slave capable of following her mistress until the end. Yet, when Hannah and her mistress proceed to escape Crafts makes clear that her attempt is not caused by her personal desire of freedom but rather to accompany her mistress as a loyal servant

Ushered by a "benevolent-looking middle-aged Lady" (BN: 59), Crafts and her mistress find release in a loving family house where the members take no notice of her real racial status what allows them to make themselves at home. The author

admits that there is “a charm about this house and its appointments” (BN: 60) and relishes each detail because in her opinion “(i)t was the sanctuary of sweet home influences, a holy and blessed spot, so light and warm and with such an abiding air of comfort that we felt how pure and elevated must be the character of its inmates” (BN: 60)

Disempowered and abandoned, both women spend their time day-dreaming and having nightmares when Crafts realizes that at a certain point the nightmares can turn into reality in the very same moment in which she wakes up: “in horror and grasped a rat that was nibbling my neck” (BN: 79). The rat<sup>4</sup>, dark and cruel, seems to represent the evil of slavery that makes them wake up from dream to reality biting them fiercely and reminding them with its presence what is at stake in the American South. Victim of a system in which black women are constantly ill-treated, Crafts shows how fake and real horror can be fused and “stokes the anxiety engine of the Gothic, elevating imagined terrors into real ones, and making real terrors worse because of runaway imaginations” (Marshall 2011: 132).

To reinforce the brutality of the southern reality, a new woman is jailed with Crafts and Mrs. de Vincent and will help them, and the readers, realize how slavery disrupts both blacks and whites alike in a country that boasted of being the cradle of freedom and democracy. The white woman is named Mrs. Wright and along the mistress seems to be “the victim of mental hallucination” because she thinks that the dungeon has “palace halls” (BN: 80), which accounts as the proof of how the patriarchal and racist antebellum America can also destroy a white citizen. Crafts links the white woman’s status to that of the black female slaves because Mrs. Wright admits to “have now neither friend, nor lover, nor child, nor husband” (BN: 81) and engages in a one-on-one conversation with Hannah.

Crafts, in a teachable way, explains how the white woman had tried to smuggle a black female slave named Ellen out of the country and being discovered she had been sent to jail. The Gothic dungeon acts as the country’s room of penalty where to discard the women who misbehave by missing out of the role that America has assigned them. However, in this Gothic tenure Crafts finds inspiration of a new escape method she had never heard of before: disguising as a man. Cross-dressing was a strategy that some African Americans used to escape

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<sup>4</sup> Curiously enough, the rat seems to have evolved into a literary motif to expose the violence and burden of slavery and its aftermath for some black writers. In the 20th century, the rat gains a symbolic place representing Bigger Thomas’s entrapment in a Chicago slum in *Native Son* (1940), the masterpiece of African American writer Richard Wright. In the same vein, in the 21st century, the rat also stands as the symbol of the scarcity and violence inflicted upon black people in *George & Rue* (2005), the debut novel of African Canadian poet, professor and writer George Elliott Clarke.

from slavery. The famous couple William and Ellen Crafts popularized this tactic among the black community, as the author knew. Mrs. Wright, whose name stands as the woman who knows and does what is 'right', helps the black slave to flee the country using a subversive method for she "cut off her long beautiful hair, and disguised her in the garments of a boy" (BN: 83).

Female Gothic moments ooze and seep in *The Bondswoman's Narrative* and, after the mistress's death, Crafts is informed that she has finally been sold to Saddler. Displaying a horrific scene that is so sadly common to many slaves, Crafts displays the real nature of a slave auction when Saddler is not so sure about her latest human purchase. Referred to as something akin to chattel, Crafts reenacts the conversation between these two evil white Gothic villains talking about her to reveal Trappe's words: "You won't find a nicer bit of woman's flesh to be bought for that money in old Virginia. Don't you see what a foot she has, so dainty and delicate, and what an ankle. I don't see how in conscience you can expect me to take any less. Why you'd make a small fortune of her at that rate?" (BN: 103). Saddler's answer elucidates to which extent the slave trade was important for the white patriarchal South: "I have lost much in that way myself; probably ten thousand dollars wouldn't cover the amount. If the business in general had not been so lucrative such things have broke me up long ago" (BN: 104). By disclosing this apparent blithely conversation between two slave traders, Crafts explains how the southern patriarch had to be reaffirmed trampling black slaves and, concretely, at the expense of black women.

The American South is represented as a site of terror with a dark shadow haunting black slaves wherever they go. In fact, Crafts is warned by Saddler not to runaway because if she felt the need to do so her future the outcome is thoroughly detailed using a gothic shakedown:

You would almost certainly be caught, and if not, you would be certain to perish miserably, perhaps, hunted and torn to pieces by dogs, or perhaps eaten alive by the vultures when reduced by famine and privation to a dying state. You must bear what you have to bear, and that's the long and short of the matter (BN: 108-109).

Fear is necessary in any state of bondage to assure the victim not to rebel and to keep on carving the "mental torture" (BN: 108) that will lead the final destruction of the self. However, Crafts has never considered escape and the bad omens and threats of the slave trader get reversed in a very gruesome manner. Heading to the new plantation, Crafts and Saddler crash with another wagon and the impact kills the new master. After the accident the writer explains that all she remembers is "a loud noise, a spinning whirling motion and then all was darkness" (BN: 114). Negotiating between its power and its danger, in this female Gothic darkness the victim is the white man who gets his punishment for his participation in the slave

trade. Ironically, a “white as sheet” (BN: 115) master is engulfed in the ultimate darkness of death and it is the black woman who survives. In Crafts’s literary hands, the Gothic not only serves as the perfect asset to denouncing America’s greatest sin but also as a punishment to those white patriarchs contributing to the corruption of a society so far off its democratic goal.

The “unwelcome notoriety” (BN: 170) of the masquerade episode that blackens Mrs. Wheeler’s face if only for a while with some tainted powders prompts the Wheelers to leave the city and the day before of the departure Crafts comes across Lizzy, her fellow slave at the time when she was in service of the Lindendale plantation. She informs Crafts about the whereabouts of the plantation, Mr. Trappe and about “Mr. Cosgrove, her present master and the owner of Lindendale” (BN: 170) who “is getting crazy” because of “his being haunted” (BN: 171). Lizzy is presented, once again, as the griot that stitches up the stories Crafts needs to know to go forward. The story-within-story that Lizzy recounts to Hannah is a “fearful one” (BN: 170) deeply embedded with Gothic and female gothic overtones that prove the Lindendale plantation to be a haunted and hopeless place. The first trait that Lizzy singles out about her new master is his “great fancy to beautiful female slaves” (BN: 173) and so she adds how “More than one of these favorites gave birth to children” (BN: 173). In his article “The Erotic South: Civilization and Sexuality in American Abolitionism”, Ronald Walters explains how “some human beings”, especially slave masters, “have always turned tyranny into erotic pleasure” (1973: 186).

Voicing her tragedy and explaining the violence African American women were confronted with, Crafts sets out a way to shape up a new black female conscience. She aims at redefining “a discourse of black womanhood which would not only address their exclusion from the ideology of true womanhood but, as a consequence of this exclusion, would also rescue their bodies from a persistent association with illicit sexuality” (Carby 1987: 32). When Mrs. Cosgrove, a refined English lady, finds out that her husband has a harem of slaves to appease his sexual rush she boasts to him: “I am perfectly well aware in what relation you stand to those hussies and they to you. I have heard that in this detestable country such things are common” (BN: 175). As a lady “with English and aristocrat blood in her veins” she foams with “Rage, jealousy, hate, revenge” (BN: 175) as she cannot understand that such acts are common in antebellum America. Thus, showing off her real power she demands the slaves to be sold far off immediately.

Mixing the sentimentality with the Gothic terror of the abuse and slavery that precede the female slaves’s reality, Crafts, through Lizzy’s recounting of the story, tells how a little child, who happens to be Mr. Cosgrove’s out of wedlock offspring, begs: “Why, pa you won’t sell, will you?” (BN: 177). What follows this is a brutal act of violence for the little baby’s mother who stabs her own son to

prevent him from being taken back to slavery and afterwards she also stabs herself to death in “an act directed by her wildest despair” (BN: 178). The gruesome tragedy is related to expose the blatant brutality slavery can cause. Crafts seems to imply that worse than the act of killing yourself and your baby is the whites’ act of violating and desecrating African American women. In fact, Karen Sánchez-Eppler rightly notes how “Crafts makes a marked effort to place it [the episode of Mr. Cosgrove’s harem] here after the account of Mrs. Wheeler’s blackening, as if to emphasize the sexual meanings of this face, how the rape of slave women and the degradation of slaves mistress intertwine” (2004: 269).

Nevertheless, Mrs. Cosgrove, the evil mistress, is not satisfied with the departure of the slaves and keeps on thinking that her husband is concealing something of the same nature. The Southern gothic house stands as the hideaway of many evils to arise and as the perfect nest where horror and grotesque episodes can take place. Finally, Mrs. Cosgrove discovers a secret chamber inhabited by a black female slave, Evelyn, and her twins who, she soon notices, are her husband’s babies. Infuriated and out of control, the mistress throws Evelyn and her offspring out of the house to Mr. Cosgrove’s astonishment who, not content with the outcome of the situation and, again, showing no sign of respect toward his wife, shelters the black slave and her kids in a place characteristic of a Gothic setting called Rock Glen. Suspicious about her husband’s behavior and haunted at the impossibility “to rid her mind of the image of the slave women” (Marshall 2011: 136), Mrs. Cosgrove finds out the truth allied with Lilly, her slave assistant, and results to finally end with the situation that she feels humiliates her and her social status. Intending to go and reveal the whole secret Mrs. Cosgrove and Mr. Cosgrove entangle themselves into a battle on horseback that winds up in tragedy as the mistress has an accident that leaves her impaired forever. Again, and applying to reprehend the trope of the “Sins of the Fathers” that appears to be inextricably attached to the women’s condition, Crafts endeavors to show how black and white women alike become the victims of a patriarchal system which diminishes the notion of womanhood. As Kari Winter openly explains, “female Gothic novelists in Britain and feminist-abolitionists in the United States represented imprisonment and slavery as the central paradigms of woman’s condition in patriarchal society. More than any other literary genres of the period, the female Gothic and slave narrative genres focused on the terrifying injustices at the foundation of the Western social order” (1992: 2).

##### 5. MR. TRAPPE AS A WHITE GOTHIC VILLAIN

One of the most intriguing and horrific Gothic devices in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is the presence of Mr. Trappe, which constitutes the fifth motif to tackle. Always close to any racial mystery, the white Gothic villain is fundamental to the

progress of the novel as well as to Crafts's stark critique. From the very first time the author sets eyes on Trappe, the Gothic aura surrounding him gives nothing but a feeling of despair and tragedy. Crafts soon figures out the secret that both her mistress and the villain hide. Cognizant of the power of words, at the arrival of a suspicious letter Hannah witnesses a tug-of-war between the mistress and Mr. Trappe, regarding a subject she has no idea of but that hides an apparently dangerous secret according to the words of the mysterious and scary lawyer: "There is no use for equivocation or denial...You well know and I know that our agreement being broken, the engagement terminated. That we are placed in a new position, and that you can have no further claim to forbearance on my part" (BN: 37). The extortion comes to light since Mrs. de Vincent could manage to pay him the "monthly allowance" (BN: 38) and Mr. Trappe, epitomizing the white Gothic villain, exhorts their contract establishment:

I wished of course to turn my knowledge of your birth to my own advantage. Had I betrayed what you really were I should have gained nothing by it. Had I opposed to your marriage it would have been a barren speculation, but as you offered me a snug little sum to keep the first safe I consented to do so under certain stipulations (BN: 38, emphasis added).

Underneath these series of warnings there floats the secret that conceals the mistress's race. Mrs. de Vincent's blackness could have only been kept secret had she accepted to marry Mr. Trappe as he declares: "Had you treated me in a different manner, your fate would have been different - remember that I have seen the time when I could have stooped to kiss the hem of your garment", and admitting to her: "once you were the leading star of my destiny, the light of my life, and I may yet possess you on my own terms" (BN: 40). Again, through this act of retaliation Crafts witnesses and expounds how the Gothic family relationships are centered on the white male supremacy and defined by the act of possession and thus "evil does not appear as a cosmic mystery in female Gothic but as a human production grounded in men's social position, a position that allows them to pursue, without fear of women's reprisal, their own greed, lust, and ambition" (Winter 1992: 71).

The white Gothic villain showed evidence of Mrs. de Vincent racial past by showing her a portrait of an almost-white-skinned slave named Susan in whom the mistress reflects her own image in a ghost-like manner just proving, in Priscilla Wald's words, that "(g)hosts and hauntings are dangerous" (2004: 214). Hence, this genealogical connection informed the mistress the trap she had engulfed in and wound up accepting that she was under Trappe's control. In this tale, slavery haunts Mrs. de Vincent, as a newfound slave, just as it haunts antebellum America

arguing that the peculiar institution haunts “more by what it evokes for the future than by what it summons from the past” (Wald 2004: 225).

Crafts and Mrs. de Vincent are sheltered by an old lady who nourishes them at her home. Kari Winter explains how in “patriarchal culture, of which the antebellum South is an extreme example, families are perhaps as often the locus of hatred, violence, and destruction, as of love, nurture, and support” (1992: 87) and though it seems this house is an example of the latter, Crafts wants us to realize how evil can be found in the most peaceable locations and soon she notices that “(t)here were voices in an adjoining room” (BN: 61), which causes the mistress’s distress thus revitalizing the gothic haunting. The bad omen is embodied in the white gothic villain figure of Mr. Trappe because the old lady informs that the sound is caused by her brother who “is a layer, and has a room here” (BN: 61). Aware that “an evil presence was near” (BN: 62), Crafts recognizes: “some evil eye was noting our doings and that evil plans were concocting against us” (BN: 62). The suspense filling that petrifying moment comes to an end when finally the mistress cries out: “It was his eyes, it was him. We are discovered” (BN: 63). It is clear that both black women cannot find peace in a system that keeps on pushing them to the margin over and over again, and although, if only for a while, they thought they had found some love who brought them some peace of mind, Crafts reminds us how the female gothic “aligns love with feelings of justified horror” (Smith and Wallace 2009: 5) to convey the harsh reality that black women had to face. Crafts makes clear the difference that lies between the tyrannical Trappe and his adorable family but it can be read that the difference is stated in terms of race for the white gothic villain’s family ushered the two black women because, due to her almost-white skin, both passed for white and so they posed no threat whatsoever to their patriarchal social values.

Trappe finally discovers both black women and imprisons them in a jail as they await to be sold back into slavery. Handcuffed, shackled and emaciated, both women are brought to a cottage resident where they are met by the new master’s overseer. Apart from his filthy looks, Crafts moans that “it was the expression of his countenance after all that made me shrink from and fear him. It was so dark, so sinister and sneering. It told so much of malice, of hate, of dislike to the beautiful the good and true” (BN: 92). The author soon realizes that they “had only been transferred from one prison to another” (BN: 93), a new southern Gothic scenario where the new master is revealed to be a professional slave trader. After a month enslaved in the new prison both women meet their new master in person to find themselves in the hands of Mr. Trappe. Knowing that both women depend on the white villain’s will destabilizes Mrs. de Vincent and “it became necessary to support her to a seat” (BN: 97). Mr. Trappe informs the mistress that he is to be

his master and hammers her with the reality she is unable to face using a perverse irony so common of the evil nature he represents: "You have long known the condition of life to which your birth subjected you, and you ought by this time to have become reconciled to it" (BN: 97). Perceptively, the mistress has not been reconciled with her new status and this would be the case of her tragic ending. Trappe stands as a figure of terror in white supremacist culture and as such he goes on reciting the thoughts of a white Gothic villain in the corrupted South blurting out to Mrs. de Vincent: "You are not the first fair dame whose descent I have traced back- far back to a sable son of Africa, and whose destiny has been in my hands as clearly and decidedly as you must perceive that yours is now" (BN: 98).

Mr. Trappe shows the competitiveness and jealousy that patriarchal culture fosters at the expense of black women. As a slaveholder who "routinely beat, raped, and terrorized slave women in attempts to break their will" (1992: 113), in Kari J. Winter's words, it is not Mr. Trappe's economic reputation what is a stake but his honor. Purchasing Mrs. de Vincent seems to be the perfect asset to put things back in shape and follow the southern patriarchal culture regarding the relationship between a white men and a black woman. However, when the mistress learns that she can be sold back into slavery her act of resistance goes as far as her own death. The mistress's death is the last step of the chiasmus that turned a slave-born woman into a white woman to eventually turn her back into a slave and so when Mrs. de Vincent finally understands that her fate is to be enslaved she passes away as the only possible way to be definitely "free" (BN: 100). Through her death, Mrs. de Vincent refuses to become a projection of Trappe's villainy and her latest Gothic pitfall underscores her role not as a victim but as a resistant.

Mr. Trappe's presence is omnipresent until the very last part of the narrative when once free and on the train bringing her to the African American community of New Jersey, Crafts overhears two gentlemen talking about a man "that thrilled ever nerve of my body" (BN: 231). Mr. Trappe. She learns that the white Gothic villain has had a "violent death and assassination" (BN: 232) due to his dark business regarding the selling of slaves. The gentlemen agree that Trappe was "a man of no principle" (BN: 232) who "would not have hesitated a moment to sell his own mother into slavery could the case have been made clear that she had African blood in her veins" (BN: 232). Just as he did with Mrs. de Vincent, Trappe tries to sell back into slavery a woman and her offspring when he found out they were really black and they were about to inherit a great sum of money after the death of the wealthy planter. The planter and the woman were married due to the former's ignorance of his wife's truly racial status. However, one of the children, who were "well educated for stations of honor and usefulness" (BN: 233), finally fires Trappe and kills him just ending with the malediction of race and free to escape to

the North. Mr. Trappe's death comes full circle and leaves the story to finish with a happy ending. The Gothic tones that characterized Crafts's life and tribulations come to an end with the white Gothic villain's tragic ending.

## 6. THE CONCEPT OF RACE AND THE STRATEGY OF PASSING

Intricately linked to Mr. Trappe's figure is the next Gothic motif that revolves around the concept of racial status and the act of passing. In a literary move toward self-assertion, Crafts presents passing and the possible blurring of the racial identities in Gothic terms. Likewise, Crafts implies that passing, which ultimately is possible if there is miscegenation, evolves in a dangerous practice that ends up leading to trouble and destruction for black women. In this episode, once again hidden and haunted like animals, black female slaves stand little chance to succeed in her quest for freedom and Crafts responds to this ideological assault by "representing the social system as thoroughly corrupt" (1992: 68) to put it in Winter's words.

Crafts unfolds "the power of the gothic scene to relay the experience of horror" (Goddu 1997: 137) especially when it comes to signify the suffering of black women. In fact, when both women are finally discovered by a handful of white men after fleeing Lindendale, the first thing that strikes them is their racial status. This moment in time serves Crafts to poignantly dissect her critique toward the act of passing. For this purpose, racial passing in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is linked to the gothic horror that surrounds slavery as it is attested by this scene in which the group of white men find and inquire on the two women's identity, and Crafts admits that she "was or had been a slave" (BN: 69). Having lost her mind, Mrs. de Vincent remains silent so Hannah presents her as her mistress and thus allows her to pass for white. I would state, along with Martha J. Cutter, that in Crafts's tale "passing can destabilize identities" (2014: 121) because, despite the effort, the "denial of blackness...is equated with enslavement" and eventually, as it is exemplified in Mrs. de Vincent's own case, "becomes a living death" (Cutter 2014: 122). Taken as a counterfeit that contradicts the very essence of what it is to be a proper (African) American citizen, passing equates social death and eventually, in the mistress's experience, a physical death that is linked to the patriarchal South and its policies of miscegenation and violence against black women. Crafts's gothic heroin remains loyal to her racial identity and this saves her from being engulfed within the gothic trope of craziness by the blurring of her social status and thus by getting discharged of any social role. The author seems to prevail the commitment to one's identity against the blurring of identities as an outcome of passing and thus refocuses her critique pointing it inside the African American community weaving a message to empower them through self-acceptance and honesty. So, Crafts's act of self-acceptance backlashes slavery, an invention of white patriarchal supremacy which sunders the

life of black men and women, and counteracts the rendition and decay of black slaves offering a new way of resistance according to the abolitionists' move.

Further, in a female Gothic move, Crafts sets forth a "psychologically complex" narrative which "removes the boundaries between world and psyche that characterize 'realism'" (Winter 1992: 97) but, at the same time, portraying the derailed mistress's death as a consequence of slavery and its trauma, she warns the white audience that the unfair punishment of oppression on black people "is not merely a state of mind or a matter of discourse; human flesh- human existence- is at stake" (Winter 1992: 117). The "blood gushed afresh" (BN: 100) that is spread with the death of the mistress is in line with Sir. Clifford's and Rose's just proving that in the slavery system blood is the main source of racial haunting and destruction.

The gothic darkness seems to have unfolded throughout the country and once as a slave in property of the Wheeler family Crafts narrates her stay in "Washington, the Federal City" (BN 156) where she notes "Gloom everywhere. Gloom up the Potomac... Gloom down the Potomac...Gloom on the marshes, the fields, and heights. Gloom settling steadily down over the sumptuous habitations of the rich, and creeping through the cellars of the poor" (BN 156) but she concludes that, as a bondswoman: "(j)ust where the gloom was denser, and the muddy street the muddiest there was I" (BN: 157). Aware of her racial status, Crafts, a black woman, is ironically sent to buy a whiting powder for Mrs. Wheeler so that her skin can "acquire the softness and delicacy of childhood" (BN: 158). The bad omen comes forward when, on her way to the chemist, she accidentally stumbles upon Mr. Trappe revealing a horrific intersection which mingles Washington and Crafts's blackness in direct contradiction with the whiting powder and the figure of Mr. Trappe.

As a harbinger of racial disturbances, the presence of Trappe sets off a comical moment which, again, reveals the inconsistency of race in antebellum America. When Mrs. Wheeler is about to depart to Mrs. Piper's to claim a position for her husband, Crafts reminds her that she has not applied the whiting powder and, when she does, her face turns black due to a chemical reaction. It is Mr. Wheeler who informs her: "Your face is black as Tophet" (BN:166) and fears that "her beauty has gone forever" (BN: 166). This racial masquerade serves Crafts to demonstrate the unstable line that separates the racial categories in nineteenth-century North America<sup>5</sup> and, according to Sánchez-Keppler, the author "uses this tale of cosmetic racial crossover to frame and introduce her fullest account of the illicit sexuality that truly produces racially mixed bodies" (2004: 269). Henry Louis Gates Jr.

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<sup>5</sup> Martha J. Cutter thoroughly discloses how "(r)acial definitions were in crisis within the US during the mid- nineteenth century", and "the time period of 1830-1860...should be regarded as the era of the rise of the 'one-drop rule'; laws regarding racial purity were passed amid the emergence of the plantation economy in the 1830s to provide a reliable source of labor and prevent what Shartstein has termed 'racial migration'"(2014: 116).

assumes that the “powder that turns Mrs. Wheeler black appears to be a product of Hannah’s wit and imagination” (BN: 265) which proves Crafts’s overt and deliberate challenge to the concept of race. Mistaken for a black woman, Mrs. Wheeler is insulted at Piper’s office where they inform her “(t)hat it was not customary to bestow offices on colored people” (BN: 168) and thus proves the importance of social construction regarding race and ethnicity because, as Martha J. Cutter warns, “if a white woman can be turned black (temporarily) and a black woman (such as Hannah’s mistress) can pass easily for white for many years, what does it tell us about the nature of race, if not that it is constructed, artificial, and performative, rather than real?” (2014: 125). More often than not, as Mrs. Wheeler and Mrs. de Vincent carnivalesque racial inversion shows, “choice and performance, not a superior or inferior biological class, create race” (Cutter 2014: 126). This questioning of the racist status quo through a comical literary device will be used in African American literature to counteract the manipulation of racial identity.

Denouncing the terror that slaves had to face on their daily basis Crafts is also despising the racist ideology of the “plantation mystique”<sup>6</sup> and her scathing critique is also addressed to the African American community. When Crafts is punished to become a field slave and to marry Bill she plans to abandon the huts where the field slaves live and where she is attacked by a woman who: “seized me by the hair, and without ceremony dragged me to the ground, gave me a furious kick and made use of highly improper and indecent language” (BN: 209), she manages to hide herself in the bushes and “as the night was fortunately dark” (BN: 209), she makes it to the garret where she masquerades herself as a white man and runs for her freedom.

The fear appears now to be posited in her head and as she advances through freedom she admits: “mental anxiety and apprehension was one of the greatest miseries of my fugitive condition” (BN: 211). Yet, she is aware of her “being a fugitive slave” and thus assumes that: “I cannot describe my journey” (BN: 212). Henry Louis Gates Jr. gives an explanation to such affirmation and explains that “it was common feature of most slave narrators to remain silent or sketchy about their mode of escape, in order to protect the secrecy of their routes and methods from slave catchers. This was specially the case after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850” (BN: 277). Again, this new allusion proves wrong the idea that Crafts neither mentions nor is aware of the Slave Fugitive Act.

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<sup>6</sup> The “plantation mystique” refers to an idealized account of plantation life in which slaves are presented as docile and submissive creatures living happily under their master’s service and accepting their social status. Obviously, this bucolic portrait is deeply attached to the racist code of antebellum America which, down the line, was the perfect prerogative to unblushingly admit that slavery was the natural state of being for African Americans. This is the very idea that Crafts tries to counteract.

Indeed, Crafts manages to arrive in New Jersey where she reunites with her mother, finds a husband and lives happy next to her fellow slaves Charlotte and William as neighbors. One of the last images of the narrative counteracts the Gothic tone that has prevailed throughout the tale. Crafts confesses that her husband sits beside her as she writes “and sometimes laughs saying ‘there, there my dear. I fear you grow prosy, you cannot expect the public to take the same interest in me that you do’ when I answer ‘of course not, I should be jealous if it did” (BN: 238). Besides the fact that writing appears as an act of empowerment and to define her subjectivity, I agree with Castranovo that “her husband’s presence situates her writing amid lived relations just as her book-in-progress confirms the connectedness of husband and wife by providing a material occasion for domestic banter and dialogue” (2004: 209). The domestic atmosphere, the love and the mutual recognition outpace the Gothic motifs for “(w)ife, husband and manuscript work together to ensure that no one becomes a ghost” (Castranovo 2004: 209).

## 7. CONCLUSION

The story of Hannah Crafts’s novel, in which the Gothic aesthetic is arrayed, presents the life of the protagonist ranking from a social outcast in the beginning to a proper citizen of North America in the end. The five Gothic motifs that have been explained and analyzed act as a catalyst of the author’s subjectivity by denouncing a social system that relegates her to the margins. Each of the motifs stand as an outlet used by Hannah to compel readers into a well written literary story of the nineteenth century aiming to make them aware of the social reality, especially when this applies to African American women slaves. As the story of the novel moves forward, and by using the literary motifs so in vogue in antebellum America, Crafts cunningly dissects the traits that dehumanize black women just to prove how, eventually, she succeeds at the shattering of such obstacles and finds the place she so longs through the novel. The various Gothic motifs that Crafts uses to propel her story are ultimately transmuted and turn out to be the barriers she overthrows to acquire the status of human being as a proper (African) American citizen. By showing that slavery is underneath every single motif, Hannah Crafts leads us to the conclusion that the only way for African American men and, especially, women to achieve social recognition is by debunking the slavery system and its moral and human corruption.

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