

Early American Need for Christ

In her book, *Captive's Position: Female Narrative, Male Identity, and Royal Authority in Colonial New England*, Teresa A. Toulous states that in recent years “literary scholars have argued for a broadly Puritan Base to early colonial captivity narratives, a base that becomes increasingly less religious” (Toulous 5). While this statement may not be the basis of her thesis, it still demands attention. While reading captivity narratives and slave narratives with a secular eye is valuable, the religious natures of the America’s earliest settlers should not be brushed aside. In order to fully understand the mindset of the people, their strongest and most governing belief system must be taken into account, else there is a risk for misunderstanding and a risk for a loss for a deeper and more important reading of the narratives: redemption by the Grace.

Some of the early colonists of the Americas were driven to the New World because of the desire to worship God in the way that they desired. Because of England’s teetering changes between different religions and the blood baths that followed, a large group of Puritans decided to make the arduous and potentially dangerous voyage to the Americas in hopes to escape this political tug of war under the guise of a holy war. These early colonists, Puritans, were ruled by the Protestant Christian religion and relied upon their belief of a redeeming Christ to save them from their sins and from the evil surrounding them. Even though they sought to escape war, they found war against the Native Americans, against other colonists from their mother England, or other countries fighting for the land around them. Because of these wars, many villagers, whether or not they were directly involved with either of the opposing sides, were taken captive as prisoners of war, usually by the Native Americans. Even though the early American settlers relied upon the ideas of Christ and the promise of redemption of their souls in the afterlife, they craved a Christ-like figure that could stand in the place of Christ in his immediate absence.

Mary Rowlandson and Hannah Dustan and the writings about them are considered classic captive narratives from this era because of their context of the virtuous Christian woman being taken, by Native Americans, and then restored to her family with her chastity intact. To reference Toulouse, she astutely states that aspects of the captive narrative were “about colonial women who had been ripped from their families by ‘savage’ men and forced to undergo extraordinary physical and spiritual trials in the wilderness” (Toulouse 1).

With this definition, Olaudah Equiano, even though aptly considered a slave narrative, still falls within the captivity narrative and therefore is a candidate for Christ-like figure in the eyes of his audience. Even though he is male as opposed to female, he is taken away from his people by savage men and is taken upon a journey across unfamiliar terrain. He describes them in his narrative that they “looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty; and this not only shown towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves” (Equiano 696) and he describes them very similarly to how early colonialists described the Natives “white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair” (Equiano 695). He is also later redeemed, even though it may not be within the stereotypical ideal of restoration.

Each of these characters—Rowlandson, Dustan, and Equiano—embodies an aspect of Christ in addition to following a similar path that He followed: Death in the form of captivity, blood spilt, their death results in the redemption of others, and finally resurrection in the form of restoration. In addition, these stories gave hope to those who came into contact with them, just like the stories of Christ found in the Bible. In spite of the fact that it can be argued that these characters are humanly flawed with prejudices, rage, and unnecessary violence, this humanity

and the absence of a perfect Christ figure draws attention to the fact that even with these Christ-like figures, even they are in need of the all encompassing redemption of Christ.

Mary Rowlandson began her Christ-like journey when she was captured during King Phillip's war in 1675. After a surprise attack upon her village, she figuratively dies as she is abducted by the enemy Native Americans. Her blood is metaphorically spilt as her children and family members are murdered before her eyes in the battle and later in captivity. Even after her death and blood spilt, just like Christ, she sustains a wound in her side, but her wound is from a bullet as opposed to a spear (Rowlandson 258). During her eleven-week captivity, she interacted with her captors, the Native Americans, but not very many interactions were positive. She make an account of her dealings with the Natives and how they threatened to beat her when she wouldn't work on the Sabbath (Rowlandson 265), or when a squaw threw ashes into her face and into her eyes for no apparent reason (Rowlandson 272), stealing her clothes or threatening to tear them (Rowlandson 273),

Hannah Dustan followed a very similar path to Mary Rowlandson in the sense of the way she came about captivity, but she reacted in a very different way to her circumstances.

Dustan was taken into captivity during King William's War in 1697, her blood was spilt through the death of her newborn child and she figuratively died by being taken into captivity. However, during her forced stay among the Natives, she was much more opportunistic in finding a way to escape. While her captors slept, she fiercely attacked. Her attack resulted in the death of ten Natives. She later came back for their scalps to trade them for money. While this may not seem the way a Christ-figure would be personified, Christ can be seen in the New Testament, John chapter 2, in a rage over the money changers outside the temple who are taking advantage of the worshippers. He creates "a scourge of small cords" (John 2:15) or a whip and proceeds to

over turn tables and release animals. Christ did have rage, He did sometimes threaten violence, and He did sometimes become violent. Christ wasn't always the benevolent Savior that is commonly taught. But His rage was always in the face of hypocrisy or blaspheme and therefore was a purifying fire against sin. With her bravery, Dustan not only saves herself, but redeems Mary Neff and the young man Samuel Lennardson (Sewall 111).

Olaudah Equiano was born in what is now labeled to be Nigeria. He, along with thousands of others before and after him, was from his home to be a slave in his native Africa for a time. He was later shipped to the Americas to continue his life in slavery. Like Rowlandson and Dustan, he is taken from his homeland, separated from family, but in addition he was beaten, humiliated, and subject to several other tortures that were part of the slave trade. His figurative death comes when he is taken, just like the Rowlandson and Dustan, but what is added is the imagery of the tomb as he and others are transported by boat. The careful diction that Equiano selects gives the impression of being buried alive during the voyage to the Americas “the shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, render the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable” (Equiano 697). When they finally dock, it is revealed that hundreds died before making it to the end of their journey.

Through his life as a slave, facing both kind and cruel masters, he experienced similar situations that Christ did close to His crucifixion, including whippings or floggings (Equiano 696). But most importantly he, like Christ, observed the hypocrisies of the ruling religion. For Christ it was the Jews, for Equiano it was the Christians. Even though Equiano was not born into the Christian religion, he converted after he experienced several miracles such as surviving the voyage to the Americas and receiving more profit for some fruit even though most of it had been stolen (Equiano 712). Because he became a Christian in his own right, he was knowledgeable of

scripture and what Christ and Christianity was truly intended to do and to be. It is interesting that Equiano, a man who was not white and who was originally uneducated and who was originally not a Christian, understood more fully the teachings of the Christian faith, even more than the Christians themselves. Christians that whipped and beat people. Christians that treated people like they were property. Christians that claimed to follow a god full of love. Equiano's plea to the Christians echoes that of Christ's towards the Jews.

“O, ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you—Learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends, to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice? Are the dearest friends and relations, parted from each other, and thus prevented from cheering the gloom of slavery, with the small comfort of being together, and mingling their sufferings and sorrows? Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely, this is a new refinement in cruelty, which, fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery” (Equiano 699).

This cry is very similar to Christ's plea against the Jewish scribes and Pharisees:

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye devour widow's houses, and for a pretense make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation” (Matthew 23: 14).

Equiano also argued that “the belief that sentiment linked all human beings and . . . argued for the universality of human rights—Equiano spoke for the countless disenfranchised and exploited workers whose labor fueled the new mercantilism” (Olaudah Equiano, Norton Anthology 687). Both Equiano and Christ spoke out for those who were trodden down within the modern society,

demanded more of those who possessed greater power, and believed that all men were equal in spite of the popular belief of their society. Both were unique beings that brought about the redemption of others even when others believed they could not.

But what is redemption? A modern definition of redemption is to “purchase [or take back] something that has been lost by payment of ransom” (BibleGateway.com). However, to fully understand redemption as the Puritans understood it, look to the Bible. Within the New Testament in the book of Acts 20:28, it reads “Take heed therefore of yourselves . . . which he hath purchased with his own blood.” In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 it reads “What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body . . . and your spirit, which are God’s.” There are several other scriptures that claim that Christ has purchased or redeemed mankind from their sins with His blood: Galatians 3:13, Ephesians 1:7; Col. 1:14; 1 Timothy 2:5-6; Titus 2:14; Hebrews 9:12; 1 Peter 1:18-19; and Revelations 5:9 to name a few (BibleGateway.com).

Each of these characters, in their own ways, represented this aspect of redemption, dying so that others could live, the most. Hannah Dustan’s blood is spilt through the loss of her child and figuratively dies when she is taken into captivity. In her fight for freedom, she aids in the restoration of Mary Neff and Samuel Lennardson (Sewall 111). Dustan is very active in achieving redemption for others. She takes the original risk, fully knowing the dire consequences of her life, and the life of her fellow captives could be taken if she failed. Even if Hannah Dustan was not captured along with Mary Neff, it would have been harder for Neff to escape without Dustan’s courage in taking the initiative to take their freedom into their own hands.

Mary Rowlandson redeems herself, but also restores the hope of others who were later captured in subsequent wars and also gave hope to their families. In 1 Peter 1:3 it says “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Christ from the dead”. In her resurrection, just like Christ, she brings hope to others.

In addition to bringing hope, in a way, she represented the redemption of the land from the Native Americans. The negotiation of her return was upon a “flat-topped granite ledge” (Trustees.org) that was later named Redemption Rock. Before this negotiation, the rock, and therefore the land, was corrupt because the Native Americans owned that land. Mary Rowlandson with her redemption began the redemption of the land for the future colonists and settlers that would come into the Americas.

At least in the view of the Puritans and the early colonists, the Native Americans were not actual people but devilish beings that belonged to the land, on the same level of the animal life that was found. The belief in the idea manifest destiny fueled these ideas. The manifest destiny, coined by John L. O’Sullivan, was the idea that Anglo-Saxon Americans and settlers had the divine right and mission to redeem the land for themselves and to reclaim it from its fallen state. Redeeming and purifying the land could, and often did, include the extermination of the Native people because of the belief that they were simply part of the land as opposed to real people (History.com).

However, what is interesting, is that in spite of the belief that those not of Anglo-Saxon decent were somehow inferior, Equiano became extremely educated, traveled the world, and became a successful writer. It is also interesting that he encapsulates the aspect of redemption as a Christ-like attribute the most. Ironic since he is the one who would have been seen as the most

evil or devil-like by the Puritans because of his skin color. However, he redeems his entire race, and by extension, other races of color because he is living proof that people of color are not evil incarnate and are worth more than the slavery that is thrust upon them.

All three characters, Dustan, Rowlandson, and Equiano are themselves changed through their Christian journey. Even though the narratives Dustan and Rowlandson seem to indicate that their lives continued as normal, their lives as they were, were not fully redeemed. Children, family, and homes are gone and cannot be returned, at least not in this life. And Equiano did not return to Nigeria and did not locate his family, he instead chose to live in England and continued to travel. But even Christ was changed through His death and resurrection: He became a new being, something purer and holier than human. Through their trials, each of these characters became refined through a refiners fire and came to understand something new about themselves whether it be courage that they didn't know they had, a real understanding for the need for Christ, or a burning desire to create a brighter world for others in the face of impossible odds.

Despite all of these aspects of Christ, they are not perfect Christ figures. Each of them, in a very human way along with literary ways, is imperfect. Dustan doesn't seem to call upon Christ at any time during her narrative, but because she does not speak for herself and instead her narrative is given through several other authors, it is difficult to discern. However, her largest flaw that disqualifies her from a perfect Christ figure is that of unnecessary violence. Even though she mirrors the idea of a vengeful God and she is able to redeem herself and others, she is still unnecessarily violent. Perhaps it was necessary to kill her captors in order to secure freedom, but she returns for their scalps in order to sell them for a bounty on Native American scalps. She leaves, and then she returns for the intent of money. She meditated upon her previous violence and committed greater brutality through mutilation of the corpses, including children's bodies.

As for Mary Rowlandson, because she writes in the first person about herself, it is easier to see her human flaws. Because she wrote this narrative after as opposed to during her captivity, she was able view her past trauma through a glass darkly. She views herself as an almost perfect saint throughout her captivity and the Natives as bloodthirsty demons. Even when she receives kindness from the Natives, even though she may give gratitude to divine providence, she brushes by the recognition of the human behind the label of enemy. In one instance when she sat by the riverside crying, her captors asked her why she wept. She eventually told them that she was afraid that they would kill her “‘No,’ said he, ‘none will hurt you.’ Then came one of them and gave me two spoonful’s of meal to comfort me, and another gave me half a pint of peas; which was more worth than many bushels at another time” (Rowlandson 267). In another instance, after she found out that her son was ill, she was wandering within the Native American village looking for something to sate her hunger “[she] gave me a piece of bear . . . I asked her to let me boil my piece of bear in her kettle, which she did, and gave me some ground nuts to eat with it” (Rowlandson 269).

Even though she does recollect these times of kindness, she still labels the majority of the Natives as devils. In only about three chapters after the kind squaw is recognize, she makes another negative generalization towards the Natives “But the Lord upheld my Spirit, under this discouragement; and I considered their horrible addictedness to lying, and that there is not one of them that makes the least conscience of speaking of truth” (Rowlandson 271-272), “they acted as though if the devil had told them they should have a fall . . . and the *Powwow* that kneeled upon the deer-skin came home (I may say, without abuse) as black as the devil” (Rowlandson 280), “and many times devilish” (Rowlandson 284). Her largest flaw is the failure to recognize fellow human beings and instead labeling them as a whole as a demonic and savage people.

Equiano does not directly address his character flaws other than the apology of perhaps being vain in writing an autobiography (Equiano 688). Perhaps this omission of personal flaws is because he was writing it for the point of critiquing the slave trade and the Christians that participated in it. Unlike Rowlandson and Dustan, it is difficult to assume his character flaws through simply reading. But it is also difficult to assume that because he did not admit to flaws or that his flaws cannot be obviously inferred from within his text, that he did not have any because he is still a human being. But by that same argument, it cannot simply be assumed that he had flaws just because he was human. It is an unfortunate side effect of the autobiography; a very Schrodinger's cat type of situation. It can also be argued that his exemption of his flaws for the sake of an autobiography that critiques the morals of others is perhaps proof of his flawed humility: an attempt to make himself look virtuous while making others to seem wicked. But the fact of the matter is that slavery is inherently wrong, even if Equiano, or his narrative is flawed. But, because Equiano was Christian and his readers were mostly Christian, he and they would have understood that Equiano was human and would have had his own human flaws, even with how perfected he seemed.

Even though Equiano seems like the most perfect Christ-like figure, the absence of a perfect Christ figure acts as its own character: it brings attention to the fact that each of these characters, while good and exemplary, they are not wholly perfect; only Jesus Christ Himself could truly be perfect and completely redeem man. But that does not mean that they were not good vessels of Christ. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus Whom God hath set forth *to be* a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God" (Romans 3:23-25) Only Christ possessed no sin.

Only Christ exercised pure humility and only exercised anger that was turned towards the ultimate good.

Seeing these three narratives through this perspective show that the early Christians recognized that *all* needed redemption, even these exceptional examples of Christian virtues. Even though, as said before, Equiano seems like the most perfect Christ-like figure, he is only a Christ-like figure because he cannot truly redeem himself from slavery. A kind master eventually frees him. The master possesses the name of King. This name of this master is especially interesting because of the Christian connotations behind the words master and king: both the titles of master and king were given to Jesus Christ within His ministry: “and awoke him, saying, Master, master, we perish” (Luke 6:40), “he goeth straightway to him, and saith, Master, master; and kissed him” (Mark 14:45), “Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (Revelation 19), “Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe” (Mark 15:32), “saying that he himself is Christ a King” (Luke 23:2).

In early colonial America, people were defined mainly by their religion, even entire countries were represented by a denomination. For example, “the ‘French’ and their allies become . . . typed as overwhelmingly Catholic, so the ‘English’ become defined by broadly Protestant” (Toulous 3). After their first settlement in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620, their numbers grew to over 10,000 and their colonies expanded to New Hampshire, Connecticut, Maine and outward (History.com). As said before, they were leaving their homelands in search of a freer way to worship God. But instead what they found was more war. King William’s War, King Phillip’s War, and others made great craters in the land. In order to find peace, the religious turn to Christ for hope. But where is Christ to be found in the midst of war or in the midst of

captivity or in the midst of slavery? The Puritans made their own Christ figures through their Mary Rowlandson and Hannah Dustan, while African Americans found one in Olaudah Equiano.

Within the early and modern Christian religions, it is agreed that Christ spent His final years teaching, healing the sick, and correcting or critiquing the wrongs done by those in power. He died upon the cross, rose again, and will return again to redeem His faithful followers. It is not surprising then that many of their early literary figures emulated Christ in some way or were made to seem like Christ. All Christians hope for a better life, a fairer life, a holier life, but sometimes life can become almost too difficult for even the most devout and truly virtuous disciple. It is in those times when Christ seems like too much of a character within a book that is absent from their life, it can be good to see the Christian attributes of those who came before. It can be good to see these characters and how they overcame their trials. These characters, even with their flaws shortcomings, and even when facing the most frightening and horrific circumstances with perhaps not the most propriety or adroitness, act as vessels for Christ. When the human eye cannot perceive Christ, the spiritual eye can distinguish Him through the pages.

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