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## **Kindred and A Canticle for Leibowitz as Palimpsestic Novels**

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*Kindred* and *A Canticle for Leibowitz* as Palimpsestic Novels

By

Sue Vander Hook

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

English Studies

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota

May 2011

*Kindred* and *A Canticle for Leibowitz* as Palimpsestic Novels

Sue Vander Hook

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the thesis committee.

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Title: *Kindred* and *A Canticle for Leibowitz* as Palimpsestic Novels

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This thesis is an investigation of a possible new categorization under the speculative fiction umbrella—a genre called palimpsestic novels. Palimpsestic novels are characterized by layers of time in the past, the present, and sometimes the future. In a fantastical setting, often with nonscientific time travel, the layers illuminate and provide contemporary significance to eras of history that have either become blurred or forgotten through time. The formation of a palimpsestic genre will provide an appropriate categorization for some speculative fiction novels that currently are nebulous mixtures of several genres, have no genre classification at all, or would better fit in a palimpsestic category. This thesis investigates and analyzes two speculative fiction novels—Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Walter M. Miller Jr.’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*—that both prove to have obvious palimpsestic characteristics and would fit nicely into a palimpsestic genre under the speculative fiction umbrella. The palimpsestic nature of both of these novels also makes them compelling social commentaries that illuminate history’s significance in the present as well as the future. Since the term *palimpsestic* invites a metaphorical perspective, the thesis also examines the Archimedes Palimpsest and palimpsests from a variety of disciplines as mimetic symbols of layering.

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## Introduction

*Why did I even want to come here.  
You'd think I would have had enough of the past.  
Butler, Kindred 264*

In my research for this thesis, I first became interested in the underlayer of antebellum history in Octavia Butler's 1979 speculative fiction novel, *Kindred*. I also found that scholars, publishers, librarians, and others have had difficulty placing the novel into a particular genre, since it does not fit neatly into science fiction, fantasy, neo-slave narrative, or other genres under the speculative fiction umbrella. It has been called a hybrid text, but I was curious whether the novel, with its unique historical underlayer in a fantastical setting of nonscientific time travel had enough of its own characteristics to be placed in a category or genre of its own.

As I searched for information about underlying historical layering in literature, I came across several news articles about the discovery of what is called the Archimedes Palimpsest. The articles described the \$2-million sale in October 1998 of a 174-page book at Christie's Auction House in New York City. What appeared to be a nearly thousand-year-old manuscript of a Catholic book of common prayer contained an underlayer of the earliest existing writings of Archimedes, one of ancient history's greatest mathematicians. The Archimedes text had been scraped away centuries before so the parchment could be reused for the book of prayer, but through the years, the ancient ink used by Archimedes faintly reappeared, making the underlayer of perpendicular text

partially visible. The pages of double text were called palimpsest, and the underlying text, which scientists call the *scriptio inferior*, has proved to be some of the most significant mathematical calculations of all time.

I also discovered that palimpsestic layering is found in a variety of disciplines, including architecture, archaeology, medicine, and literature. In general, the term *palimpsest* means any object or idea with embedded underlayers that hold vestiges or remnants of the past. Thus, the palimpsest (specifically the Archimedes Palimpsest and generally the term *palimpsest*) provided an ideal metaphor for the layering I noticed in *Kindred*. With its two layers of time separated by more than a century, *Kindred* epitomizes a palimpsest. In her novel, Butler skillfully embeds history—events and settings taken from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*—beneath a contemporary setting that includes fantastical time travel. Butler’s underlayer also reveals a compelling social commentary and illuminates history’s significance in the present and in the future, just as the Archimedes text provided invaluable mathematical calculations for present-day mathematicians.

The idea of the palimpsest provided a possible categorization for *Kindred*, a speculative fiction genre that I call palimpsestic novels. If the characteristics of *Kindred* indeed matched the metaphorical foundation of the Archimedes Palimpsest and palimpsests in other disciplines, then *Kindred* could be placed in this genre, and the novel could shed the old hazy classification as a nebulous mixture of genres or as fitting into no genre at all. My research included a thorough investigation of *Kindred* to discover whether it had sufficient characteristics to be called palimpsestic and whether it could be categorized as a palimpsestic novel under the speculative fiction umbrella. After thorough



analysis, I found that *Kindred* definitively has palimpsestic characteristics and fits nicely into my description of palimpsestic novels.

As I continued my research, I searched for other speculative fiction novels that are palimpsestic. My research led me to Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s 1959 novel, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. In *Canticle*, there are multiple rich layers of history—from the beginning of recorded time to the 1950s—entrenched in three settings that span 1,800 years into the future and even beyond in an other-planetary setting. Miller's layers include extremely sardonic, acerbic text that mocks recurring generations that repeat and recycle history and perpetuate the errors brought about by incomplete knowledge of the past. But more notable than the satires and parodies of the novel are its clearly palimpsestic layers with contemporary and future relevance—characteristics that definitely place *A Canticle for Leibowitz* alongside *Kindred* as an excellent example of a palimpsestic novel.

In researching this thesis, I have found two extremely representative examples of palimpsestic novels, thus validating the need to consider a new genre under the speculative fiction umbrella. Future research is necessary to discover other novels that will fit into this genre called palimpsestic novels.

## Chapter One

### The Palimpsest

As fiction authors continue to embark on increasingly unique, imaginative narratives, the number of genres and subgenres continues to increase. Highly imaginative fiction novels, once classified under one genre—science fiction—have become distinctly diverse, warranting a variety of categories in a collective group, an umbrella under which those novels can be categorized as similar yet distinctive. The speculative fiction umbrella serves the purpose of collective grouping, allowing for diverse narratives. For some literary scholars, the umbrella satisfies their concerns over the limitations of science fiction as a narrow genre that pigeonholes novels into conventions of imagination primarily grounded in either real or out-of-the-ordinary science and technology. As differences were noted among fiction that was purely fantastical or futuristic and fiction that used real or imagined science and technology to navigate the tale or postulate the future, clear distinctions were drawn and genres were added. Since highly imaginative novels still share many similarities, it is appropriate to place them under one umbrella called speculative fiction or speculative literature. However, it is also important to call attention to their differences by categorizing them into types of speculative fiction.

The term *speculative fiction* was used as early as 1889 in an article in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*. The article referred to Edward Bellamy's best-selling utopian novel, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, as “speculative fiction put in the future tense” (*Lippincott's* 597). Eleven years later, an article in the May 1900 issue of *The Bookman*

stated that John Uri Lloyd's *Etidorhpa, the End of the Earth* "created a great deal of discussion among people interested in speculative fiction" (*The Bookman* 198). In November 1952, an article titled "Ray Guns and Rocket Ships" by science fiction author Robert A. Heinlein appeared in the *School Library Association of California Bulletin*. In the article, Heinlein "argues for calling the [science fiction] field 'speculative fiction'" (Panshin). Heinlein uses the term *speculative fiction* as a synonym for science fiction, but he also makes the "case for the necessity of a wide field of knowledge for the writing and for the judging of science fiction" (Panshin). Heinlein does separate science fiction from fantasy in his article. "Fantasy stories, to Heinlein, are imaginary-but-not-possible, while science fiction is realistic and about the possible. Science fiction can go contrary to theory, but not to fact ... while fantasy is always contrary to fact" (Panshin).

The speculative fiction umbrella has proved quite effective as a general grouping for a variety of imaginative fiction novels. The increase of genres under the umbrella has opened up the field to a much broader audience and increased the appeal of imaginative fiction. Genres that fall under the speculative fiction umbrella typically include science fiction, fantasy, utopias, and dystopias. Also included as speculative fiction genres are horror, supernatural, alternate history, apocalyptic, postapocalyptic, and more. Some imaginative novels do not clearly fit into any of these genres, but they do distinctly fall under the speculative fiction umbrella. Some of these uncategorized novels overlap two or more genres under the umbrella or are recognized simply as speculative. Other novels are clearly speculative fiction but do not fit into any genre or subgenre under the speculative fiction grouping.

Some of the novels that do not fall into any clear-cut speculative fiction category do share similarities. These novels typically intermingle and conflate a factual past with a fictionalized present or future. They oftentimes attempt to recover an obscure history by interweaving and mingling it with a fantastical narrative or tale in the present or future. A good number of these novels revisit the era of slavery in the United States and allude to slave narratives. A. Timothy Spaulding, when writing about the postmodern slave narrative in *Re-Forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*, states, “The texts that interest me most ... are those that reject the boundaries of narrative realism in their retelling of slavery” (1). He adds that “many African American writers, particularly in the last decades of the twentieth century, sought not only to recover these stories, but also to redefine the way we narrate the slave experience” (1–2). Authors he mentions include Octavia Butler, Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, Samuel Delany, and Jewelle Gomez. Spaulding later aptly calls their novels a “highly fictionalized form of history” (2).

There are some highly fictionalized novels that belong under the speculative fiction umbrella but have remained essentially unclassified for several decades. Butler’s 1979 novel *Kindred* is such a novel that falls under the category of speculative fiction but does not fit neatly into any one genre, subgenre, or combination of genres. In a 1988 interview with Butler, Larry McCaffery comments to Butler that it is interesting that *Kindred* was published as nonscience fiction. Butler replies, “Yes, and that was one of the things reviewers complained about. The idea of time travel disturbed them. Their attitude seemed to be that only in the ‘lower genre’ of SF could you get away with such nonsense, that if you’re going to be ‘realistic,’ then you must be *completely* realistic”

(McCaffery 65). In a later interview in 1990, Randall Kenan asks Butler, “Do you prefer to call your work speculative fiction, as opposed to science fiction or fantasy?” (495). Butler answers, “No, actually I don’t. ... *Kindred* is fantasy. I mean literally, it is fantasy. With *Kindred* there’s absolutely no science involved. Not even the time travel. I don’t use a time machine or anything like that. Time travel is just a device for getting the character back to confront where she came from” (496). Kenan praises *Kindred* for “its uncannily successful blend of fact and fantasy” and says that Butler’s strong women and multiracial societies “lift it beyond genre” (495).

In a 2004 interview with Butler, John C. Snider of *SciFi Dimensions* discusses with her the kind of novel *Kindred* is. In that interview, Butler characterizes *Kindred* as “a dark fantasy novel that drills down into the prickly core of American history” (Snider). Butler adds, “I was trying to get people to feel slavery. ... I was trying to get across the kind of emotional and psychological stones that slavery threw at people” (Snider). However, “Butler’s description of her text as a ‘grim fantasy’” or even a dark fantasy “belies *Kindred*’s precarious generic status” (S. Wood 85). Indeed, *Kindred* is often simply labeled fiction, science fiction, or African-American literature. Although the novel is fantastical, it does not fit the definition of fantasy—a capricious, unrestrained fancy. It is not science fiction because neither science nor technology is used for time travel or the protagonist’s nearly supernatural feats to save the life of one of her ancestors. Although the novel portrays history, it is not historical fiction, because the entire novel is not set in a particular period of history with recognizable historical figures; rather, the two main characters in *Kindred* live in the 1970s and time travel back to the

early 1800s. Spaulding describes *Kindred* as a novel that uses “elements of the fantastic to occupy the past, the present, and, in some cases, the future simultaneously” (5).

Although *Kindred* focuses on the vileness of slavery and mirrors Frederick Douglass’ autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Butler’s novel is neither a slave narrative nor a neo-slave narrative, which is typically described as a tale of slavery written in contemporary times. Butler discusses her research in slave narratives and how she used a new type of time travel to make her main character, Edana (Dana) Franklin, return to an era and a setting of slavery in the early 19th century. Although Butler sets the novel on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, where two famous African-Americans, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, were enslaved, *Kindred* transcends a slave narrative and a neo-slave narrative because of its time travel and fantastical nature.

The composition and style of the novel are unique. It is neither science fiction, fantasy, slave narrative, nor neo-slave narrative. Nor is it a dystopia or historical fiction. Rather, it is interhistorical, interlayered, overlapping, and stratified; it merges and layers elements of history with contemporary and historical characters and, in the process, gives modern significance to the past and historical import to the present. Butler admits that *Kindred* is a completely different kind of book, not science fiction like her previous novels. She recognizes at least three audiences for *Kindred*: readers interested in African-American history, readers interested in women’s issues, and science fiction fans. Butler’s novel unequivocally falls under the speculative fiction umbrella, but it transcends the current genres under that umbrella and necessitates and deserves a more specific type of speculative fiction categorization.

*Kindred*, with its layers of time and its bizarre intermingling of the present with history, fits neatly into what I call palimpsestic novels, or fiction characterized by an interhistorical makeup and multiple layers of time that traverse past, present, and sometimes future. Palimpsestic novels, as I define them, illuminate and provide relevance to a particular era or eras of history; time is typically fluid, overlapping, shifting, or blurry; and characters find themselves in historical as well as contemporary settings. This nebulous nature of time, however, results in a paradoxically clear illumination of a particular event or era(s) in history and provides subtle observations on its significance and its effects on the present as well as the future of humankind.

The blending of time and layers of history are metaphorical, implying that layers of history build on each other and that all history is interrelated and mixed together as a conglomeration of events. Interhistorical layers imply that civilization builds on what has come before and that the past will always have an effect on the present as well as the future. The typically dark nature of palimpsestic novels generally presents a pessimistic view of civilization. However, palimpsestic novels go a step further than presenting the futility of history; they pull memory out of the shadows, shed light on its meaning, and reveal a present that has learned, or not learned, something from the debilitating scars left by the past.

### *The Archimedes Palimpsest*

Because of the layering of time in this type of literature, the adjective *palimpsestic* is quite appropriate. *Palimpsestic* is a metaphorical adjective that refers to a palimpsest. One example of a palimpsest is an ancient manuscript, usually parchment prepared from

animal hides, that has been written on more than once (“The Palimpsest”). To understand the appropriateness of labeling certain speculative fiction novels palimpsestic, it is important to first clearly understand the palimpsest, one of the concrete metaphors from which this term derives. In antiquity, when parchment was costly and time-consuming to prepare, manuscripts were often recycled. The words of a text no longer considered useful were scraped off the parchment with a pumice stone or washed away with a weak acidlike lemon juice or a solution of milk and oat bran (Turner 163). The word *palimpsest* aptly derives through Latin from the Greek *palimpsestos* (παλιψαω), which means to “scrape again” (“The Palimpsest”).

Once scraped or washed clean, the refurbished parchment was used to write new text, which was typically written perpendicular to the old text. Through time, however, the original words reappeared faintly, allowing readers and archaeological researchers to decipher some of the former text, which scholars called the *scriptio inferior*, or the “underwriting.” The appearance of the *scriptio inferior* complicated the reading of the newer text, which scholars called the *scriptio superior*, but the history and information exposed and preserved in the underwriting was often found to be extremely significant and invaluable to later scholars.

Given the metaphorical nature of palimpsestic novels, it is appropriate to discuss and review the archaeologically focused literature on the Archimedes Palimpsest, an extraordinary ancient document currently housed in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland. This manuscript serves as an ideal metaphor with its *scriptio superior* of Roman Catholic prayers and its *scriptio inferior* of the ancient mathematical calculations of the extraordinary Greek mathematician, physicist, and astronomer



Archimedes (287–212 B.C.). Both literally and figuratively, the Archimedes Palimpsest is a concrete example of the type of novel that superimposes one or more layers of time over another and reveals significant information about the past.

The Archimedes Palimpsest was first discovered in 1906, when a small thirteenth-century Roman Catholic prayer book written by scribes on goat skin parchment was found to have an underlying text. Scientific methods of the time revealed a *scriptio inferior*, the once-erased text identified as the only copy of two dissertations of Archimedes. Since Archimedes is by and large considered one of the greatest mathematicians of all time, the discovery was extremely significant. William Noel, Curator of Manuscripts at the Walters Art Museum, states that the Archimedes Palimpsest was “erased text, in terrible condition, impossible to access, and yet foundational to the history and science of the West” (Noel). The manuscript subsequently disappeared for nearly a century but was rediscovered in 1998.



*The Archimedes Palimpsest is a small Catholic prayer book with a perpendicular underlayer of mathematical calculations of the ancient mathematician Archimedes (Walters).*



*The Archimedes Palimpsest shows a scriptio superior (vertical text) and a scriptio inferior (horizontal text) (Walters).*



*Technicians view an enhanced and enlarged image of the Archimedes Palimpsest (Walters).*

Sarah Dillon describes the second discovery of the Archimedes Palimpsest in her book *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*: “On 29 October 1998—amid considerable Greek and American media attention, and despite attempts to gain a court injunction to prevent the sale—a small, mouldy and scorched 1,000-year-old manuscript was sold at Christie’s Auction House in New York for a staggering \$2 million, double the expected price” (11). In “Archimedes: The Palimpsest and the Tradition,” Oxford Professor of Classics Nigel Wilson, who wrote the Christie’s catalogue description for the manuscript, explains why it sold for such an astronomical price:

The present manuscript is a Greek liturgical book, probably written in the second half of the 12th or conceivably in the first half of the 13th century, and as such has no obvious claim to be regarded as possessing special significance; but almost all the leaves are palimpsest, and most of them are derived from a uniquely important manuscript of Archimedes. This fact makes the volume one of the most valuable of surviving documents for tracing the history of Greek mathematics and engineering. (89)

Since the second find took place in the late 20th century, there were more sophisticated scientific methods for detecting a *scriptio inferior* than in 1906. These new techniques made it possible to expose nearly all of the Archimedes text.

In the article “Unveiling the Secrets of Archimedes,” Manisha Turner writes that most likely the Archimedes text on goat skin parchment was erased with a weak acid such as lemon juice and then scraped with a pumice stone (163). The *scriptio superior*, the prayer book, was then written perpendicular to the Archimedes text (163). Turner explains that since Archimedes used ink made partially of iron, scientists in the late

1990s were able to use x-ray radiation to make more of the Archimedes text visible (164). Once about eighty percent of the Archimedes text was exposed, the images were sent to Greek scholars for translation.

Although the focus of Turner's article is the materials and fascinating methods used to reveal the Archimedes text, Turner also comments on the importance of the palimpsest, calling the pages "invaluable copies of Archimedes' work" and stating that the purpose of the experiments was "to safely and effectively read what lies beneath the soot from centuries of extreme damage" (163). Metaphorically, the palimpsestic novel is not only a palimpsest because of its layers of text and time, but it is also palimpsestic because it serves as an "x-ray" by which history, often buried under "the soot from centuries of extreme damage," is revealed and interpreted, often as important social commentary for today.

In the article "Reading between the Lines" in the March 2007 edition of *Smithsonian* magazine, author Mary K. Miller calls the Archimedes Palimpsest a "ghostly image" (58). She quotes Museum Curator Noel, "What we've been finding with the Archimedes Palimpsest is that this book never ceases to give up its secrets ... you're made to think of things in new ways" (64). Such is the palimpsestic novel; it never ceases to give up its secrets or its blurred or forgotten history, and it makes the reader think of history and its sociological import in new ways.

### *The Palimpsest as a Literary Concept*

The palimpsest thus serves as an ideal metaphor for the type of literature that has an interhistorically layered structure and reveals, illuminates, and provides modern-day

and sometimes timeless relevance to history. The *scriptio inferior* of palimpsestic novels is the layer of faint or blurred history that the author wishes to expose, usually in order to expound on an idea or principle that may be beneficial to humankind in a contemporary setting. The social message is exposed through a multilayered fantastical text that consists of a complex present, a convoluted past that is skillfully revealed either in whole or in part, and often a future affected by both. These present and futuristic elements of the novel are its *scriptio superior*. The palimpsestic novel is thus a speculative fiction approach to exploring history, usually obscured and sometimes forgotten, within a complicated, fantastical text set in both the past and the present and sometimes the future. Palimpsestic novels speak to the significance and relevance of the past in a contemporary or futuristic setting.

There are various examples of novels that fit the definition of palimpsestic novels under the speculative fiction umbrella. Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* provides a principal example of a palimpsestic novel and will be analyzed in depth in the following chapter. It will be examined for its palimpsestic nature, characteristics, and structure, as well as how it provides contemporary significance through a complex and interwoven text with an interlayering of history with the present. Another example that will be covered in the third chapter is Walter M. Miller Jr.'s 1959 novel, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Hugh Rank, in his article "Song out of Season: *A Canticle for Leibowitz*," calls it "a curious book, which defies narrow categories, ... contain[ing] elements of satire, science-fiction, fantasy, humor, sectarian religious propaganda, and an apocalyptic 'utopian' vision" (qtd. in Olsen 135). Walker Percy, in his book *Signposts in a Strange Land*, calls *Canticle* a challenge to futuristic fiction. He writes that "the uni-axis time line

of futuristic fiction has never been challenged before. ... Miller lays the old coordinates over the uni-axis—like one of those clear plastic overlays in mathematics texts” (232–233). This thesis will show how *A Canticle for Leibowitz* fits nicely into the palimpsestic category of speculative fiction novels with its underlayers and its overlays of history and text.

Other possible palimpsestic speculative fiction novels, not analyzed in this thesis but worthy of further investigation, include Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*, Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker*, and others that are yet to be discovered. Although *Kindred*, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *Flight to Canada*, and *Riddley Walker* are currently placed under the speculative fiction umbrella, they have their own unique characteristics and deserve consideration to be placed in a palimpsestic category.

Palimpsestic novels enhance the meaning and value of history in a fascinating, complex package of imagination and supposition, and capture the interest of readers in a unique, memorable way. It is worth noting that these novels clearly share enough similar conventions to naturally be grouped together in their own palimpsestic category of speculative fiction. Categorizing them together will draw attention to their unique palimpsestic characteristics and increase their literary and historical merit and significance. Grouping them together will also draw attention to their pedagogical value and their importance as an educational tool to teach history through literature.

The metaphorization of the palimpsest in literature goes back to at least 1845, when English author Thomas De Quincey wrote an essay titled “The Palimpsest” that was published in the June issue of *Blackwood’s Magazine*. It was the first known instance of a paleograph being used metaphorically as a literary concept. De Quincey used the

palimpsest figuratively, marking “the beginning of a consistent process of metaphorization from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day” (Dillon 1).

After De Quincey’s article was published, the palimpsest came to be used as a metaphor in literature as well as architecture, archaeology, geography, geology, and many other sciences, including, more recently, computer science. In her book, Dillon clearly presents the metaphorical nature of the Archimedes Palimpsest as a figurative model for a variety of layers of literary criticism and theory in a single text. Dillon sums up the palimpsest’s metaphorical nature:

The palimpsest has not drifted into the past and never could. In its persistent figurative power and its theoretical adaptability it determines how we view the past and the present, and embodies within itself the promise of the future: ‘To invoke a word is to recall a history. To use a word is to set history on its way again.’ (9)

Dillon discusses the Archimedes Palimpsest literally as well as figuratively, applying it metaphorically to literature and summing up the palimpsest’s overall ability to evoke and recall history in the juxtapositioning and layering of the past, the present, and the future. Dillon also discusses the layering of texts and time in a metaphorical, literary palimpsest, describing how the underlying script and the new text are interconnected and involuted:

Although the process that creates palimpsests is one of layering, the *result* of that process, combined with the subsequent reappearance of the underlying script, is a surface structure which can be described by a term coined by De Quincey—‘involuted’. ... The palimpsest is thus an

involved phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other.

(3–4)

In his 1997 book *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (first published in French in 1982 as *Palimpsestes*), Gérard Genette describes the literary concept of the palimpsest as intertextual, characterized by “a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts: that is to say, eidetically and typically as the actual presence of one text within another” (1–2).

The palimpsest is not only an ideal metaphor for literary criticism and theory, as Dillon suggests, and an intertextual text within a text, as Genette implies, but it is also an ideal metaphor for the plot and narrative of a novel that layers time and superimposes the past, present, and future to reveal historically significant events. In his article “Why *Palimpsest*?” Walter Henry describes palimpsest “both as metonym and as real object, carrying traces of its own history as signs, scars, accretions, adornment. . . . an analog of all texts, which carry with them the traces of their past, their dialogue with past texts” (Henry). Henry also compares the palimpsest to a periplum, a term that originated in Ezra Pound’s poetry and referred to a map that depicts land from the sailor’s perspective out at sea. Metaphorically, the periplum means a new point of view; Henry explains it as “the vertical (deep, down into layers) and horizontal (wide, exploring outward, sideways through the physical or virtual world) axes by which knowledge and understanding are navigated” (Henry). Such is the palimpsestic novel.

In his 2008 thesis titled ‘*Style upon Style: The Handmaid’s Tale as a Palimpsest of Genres*’, Taylor J. Boulware uses the palimpsest as a metaphor for the layering of



genres in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Boulware points out the variety of genres the novel encompasses, including futuristic dystopia, historical novel, postmodern novel, and satire. He claims that the reader gains "greater insights into this significant work" because the genres function concurrently (11). Boulware explains:

I explore the ways in which this futuristic novel operates as historical fiction and how fiction incorporates history and historical thinking, focusing on the way in which Atwood incorporates particular historical moments into the Republic of Gilead and the method by which she ultimately casts Offred's tale as a historical one. (11)

Boulware also points out that Atwood uses a palimpsestic technique in the text to layer and intermingle the past and the present: "Palimpsestic images abound in *The Handmaid's Tale* as Offred describes her present life in the Republic and her past life in 1970s and 1980s America. Offred's continual layering of the present with the past works to establish the palimpsestic effect of the narrative" (9–10). Atwood uses the word *palimpsest* in the first chapter of her novel when she describes the narrator's experience in what once had been a high school gymnasium. The narrator explains the passage of time that took place in that building: "I thought I could smell, faintly, like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in miniskirts, then pants, then in one earring spiky green-streaked hair. Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound" (9).

Boulware suggests that the full complexity of the novel is realized "by peeling back the layers of the palimpsest that Atwood has created" (12). Boulware also indicates

that *The Handmaid's Tale*, although it is a futuristic dystopia, “can be read as a historical novel for the ways in which it negotiates the past, the present, and the future” and that historical novels are more effective when they are more complex (13).

David Cowart, in his book *History and the Contemporary Novel*, discusses the more complex novels that he calls a “new historical fiction” that emerged after World War II and “seems to differ from that of calmer times” (1). He suggests that in a world of increasing chaos, literature—specifically the historical novel—also grows increasingly chaotic or complex, embracing “the task of historical analysis, the task of gauging the historical forces responsible for the present” (2). The palimpsestic novel, through its unique fantastical approach to embracing historical analysis, is able to comment on and imply the impact that history has on the present. The inherent complex nature of the palimpsestic novel, with its layers of time that transcend the characteristics of historical fiction and often overlap and seem to confuse, thus fits well into a world that progressively becomes more complicated and sometimes more detached from the implications of its past. Categorizing certain novels as palimpsestic is appropriate as well as timely in a modern era and atmosphere of complexity that requires unique methods of illumination in order for people to understand the contemporary significance of an increasingly convoluted, blurry past that has left its scars on the present as well as the future.

## Chapter Two

### Palimpsestic Layers in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

The primary characteristic of a palimpsestic novel is its layering, two or more layers of time that coexist and main characters who live in or reflect all the layers. Another key characteristic of a palimpsestic novel is its blurring—the fuzziness of the historical underlayer that seeks to be revealed and understood more clearly. In *Kindred*, Octavia Butler writes a complex text with two layers of time and a blurred historical layer that is eventually exposed to provide contemporary significance.

*Kindred* takes place in two eras and two settings—antebellum Maryland in the early 1800s and Los Angeles, California, in 1976. The main character in *Kindred*, a contemporary black woman named Dana Franklin, lives in both layers, time traveling swiftly by unknown means from the present to the past and then back again six times. On two of these journeys, her white husband, Kevin, comes along with her but one time stays longer than Dana. *Kindred*'s two layers correspond to the *scriptio inferior* and *scriptio superior* of the palimpsest, and the task of the novel is to make the *scriptio inferior* (the past) “readable” or understandable. But the *scriptio inferior* does not exist independently of the *scriptio superior*; the novel's dual layering allows readers to consider both eras, separately and combined, learning about the forgotten or unclear past (i.e., Frederick Douglass' life as he told it in his slave narrative) and interpreting its effect on Dana, a symbol of contemporary society.

*Frederick Douglass in Kindred*

If Dana had been transported into a fictional past, *Kindred* would not have fit so neatly into a palimpsestic categorization, since the *scriptio inferior* of its metaphorical counterpart, the Archimedes Palimpsest, is a layer of real events; in this case, actual mathematical calculations with contemporary significance. It can thus be assumed that a palimpsestic novel should contain an actual historical underlayer with contemporary importance. We know that Butler bases *Kindred* on actual history since she studied *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* thoroughly while she was writing her novel. In an interview with Randall Kenan in 1991, Butler says, “I also went to the Eastern Shore to Talbot County, to Easton actually, and just walked around” (496). Levecq notes about *Kindred* that “the novel’s engagement with history does not take place at the thematic level exclusively. It also comes out of the novel’s rewriting of its literary ancestor, the slave narrative” (526).

Upon examination of *Kindred*’s *scriptio inferior*, it is clear that Butler is referring to the life of Frederick Douglass, a slave who escaped to freedom in 1838 and later became a strong leader in the abolitionist movement. Seven years after his escape, Douglass wrote his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, in which he chronicled the events of his life as a slave and his burning desire to be a free man. Subsequently, 134 years later, in 1979, Butler, in a sense, resurrects the *Narrative* in *Kindred*, loosely reconstructs Douglass’ account of slavery, and uniquely reintroduces antebellum Maryland where he was enslaved. Douglass’ story is not presented as such; rather, it is the basis for a contemporary 1970s tale of a modern black woman who is forced to confront her past and her heritage. Through fluid time

travel, Butler melds Douglass' story with the present and closely intersects Maryland's history with contemporary Western society. In his "Critical Essay," the afterword in *Kindred*, Robert Crossley calls the novel a "'neo-slave narrative,' a fictional mutation of the autobiographies of nineteenth-century Americans who lived as slaves" (265).

It is also worth noting that the *scriptio inferior* does not precisely follow the autobiography of Frederick Douglass. Butler's intent was not to retell history and thus make it a historical novel or a neo-slave narrative, but rather to provide hints of history that merge with the present in a fantastical setting to compel the reader "to re-examine the past in a way that acknowledges its impact on the present. Part of that process requires that we place the postmodern slave narrative in a historical context—one that examines its foundation in the original slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (Spaulding 7–8).

Dana mirrors Frederick Douglass in much of the novel. Dana and Douglass are both half-black, half-white, and, like Douglass, Dana finds herself caught in difficult situations because of her determination to flee the world of slavery by using her intelligence and ability to read. Douglass also knew how to read and had his own copies of an old Webster's speller and *The Columbian Orator*. He used them to secretly teach as many as thirty slaves how to read. In *Kindred*, Dana teaches Nigel, a young slave, to read from a stolen primer. Nigel, in turn, teaches other slaves to read.

The setting of *Kindred* along Maryland's Eastern Shore directly corresponds to Douglass' description of his birthplace. The buildings, the river, the huge tree, the cookhouse, and particular events all mirror the experiences of Douglass, his mother, and his siblings, who were owned by plantation owner Edward Lloyd. Douglass lived during

his early childhood in a meager cabin along the Tuckahoe Creek in Tuckahoe, Talbot County, Maryland, a setting that Butler clearly describes in *Kindred*. Dana's first journey lands her by a "wide tranquil river" (Butler 13), most likely the nearby peaceful Wye River that branches from the Chesapeake Bay on the Eastern Shore of Maryland where Douglass lived.

The Maryland setting and the many characters Dana encounters correlate with the experiences in Douglass' life, including the cook and a mute girl named Carrie. There is also a reference to Douglass' early childhood in Dana's description of children eating with their hands on the floor. Dana says she is glad they are not eating from troughs, a clear reference to Douglass' *Narrative*, which describes a huge common food trough surrounded by children scooping up food with their hands (38–39). Douglass writes in his *Narrative*, "The children were then called, like so many pigs, and like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush" (39).

Butler also makes reference to the small slave children who do not yet understand they are slaves. In his *Narrative*, Douglass recalls how he grew up oblivious to the fact that he was poor and did not know what slavery meant until he got older. Before he understood what it meant to be a slave, Douglass described himself as "a spirited, joyous, uproarious, and happy boy, upon whom troubles fall only like water on a duck's back" (*My Bondage and My Freedom* 42). The *Kindred* text also alludes to Douglass' description of dirt floors, inadequate food, and garden vegetables the slaves tend to but are not allowed to eat. Dana's experiences become the connection to Douglass' life and the catalyst of Dana's understanding of history. They are the x-rays, so to speak, that

illuminate the *scriptio inferior* and make it translatable and relevant. Dana tells Kevin she is “drawn all the way into eighteen nineteen” (Butler 101).

Nigel, a Weylin plantation slave, also correlates to Douglass; in many ways, Nigel is Douglass’ male counterpart. Nigel is beaten often, just as Douglass was beaten and whipped by a cruel slave master. Nigel’s connection to the young boy Rufus mirrors Douglass’ real-life relationship with Daniel Lloyd, the young son of Edward Lloyd, plantation owner, slave owner, U.S. senator, and once governor of Maryland. Before Douglass was old enough to toil in the fields, he worked in the Lloyd mansion, called the Wye House, as young Daniel Lloyd’s playmate as well as his servant. The two boys became true friends, without the prejudice that normally divides adults of different color. They played together, and Douglass asked unceasing questions about Daniel’s privileged way of life. On hunting expeditions, Douglass went along and retrieved the birds Daniel shot; Daniel, in turn, became Douglass’ protector, keeping the other boys on the plantation from bullying him. In *Kindred*, the slave boy Nigel also befriends the slave owner’s son. But later in life, both Nigel and Douglass realize that their white friends do not view them as equals and that prejudice grows stronger as they grow up.

Alice is a free black woman in *Kindred* who is married to a slave, and she will become Dana’s ancestor. Alice most noticeably correlates with Douglass’ grandfather, Isaac Bailey, who was a free black man married to a slave woman named Betsey. In *Kindred*, Dana repeatedly protects Rufus’ life in order to preserve both Alice and Rufus so they can conceive and continue her family line. In the end, Rufus rapes Alice, one of the unchangeable events in history that will one day lead to Dana’s birth. In preserving the life of a slave owner and a rapist, Dana is preserving her own existence. Yaszek

clearly explains Dana's dilemma, that "either she submits to Rufus's—and history's—demands and thus preserves her family line or she resists these demands and runs the risk of never being born herself" (1058). Dana does, indeed, preserve her lineage and is born about a century later. Her contemporary life, particularly her interracial marriage, further parallels Douglass'—Dana is married to Kevin, a white man; after Douglass gains his freedom, he marries a second time at the age of sixty-six to a white woman twenty years younger named Helen Pitts.

Throughout the novel, Dana does not merely visit antebellum Maryland to rescue her ancestor and thus preserve her own birth. She also becomes part of a society of slaves, like Douglass', a community that "always patches itself back together, drawing from its common suffering and anger a common strength" (Crossley 275). Dana thus parallels Douglass, experiences his slavery firsthand, and becomes part of what Crossley calls "a rich human society" (275) and a part of her own heritage. Dana mixes the past with the present and convolutes two eras of history. Learning about herself from the past and not just observing it reinforces the meaning of a palimpsestic novel. History is not merely revealed; it is interwoven with the present, and its significance is exposed, experienced, and taken full advantage of as it relates to contemporary society.

### *Switching Gender Roles*

Even though many characters in *Kindred* parallel people in Douglass' *Narrative*, it is obvious that Butler quite intentionally jumbles the sexes and who is slave or free in order to blur the boundary between fiction and history and to entwine the implications of the past with the present. She often switches or reverses gender roles, with female



characters mirroring historical male characters and vice versa. Levecq notes, “*Kindred* questions all forms of historical knowledge, by demonstrating the inescapable shaping or silencing of the past by perception, ideology, and language. But this skepticism does not stand in the way of a very realistic account of life under slavery” (527–528).

Sarah Wood, in her article “Exorcizing the Past: The Slave Narrative as Historical Fantasy,” explains this swap or exchange as a challenge to the “stereotypical representation of white and black femininity” (83). Wood further comments that Butler’s text “suggests the importance of history and historical awareness in the formation of black female identity” (85–86). Butler explains her choice of a black female protagonist, “I couldn’t sustain the character [a male protagonist]. Everything about him was wrong: his body language, the way he looked at white people, even the fact that he looked at white people at all. I realized that, unless I wanted to turn *Kindred* into a wish-fulfilment [sic] fantasy, I simply couldn’t make the main character a male” (McCaffery 65). Butler uses a black female protagonist to make a point: strides have been made toward independence and modernity for the modern-day black woman, but those strengths were incompatible with the antebellum South and created difficulties for Dana as she tried to exist as an independent, progressive black female in a slave setting.

On Dana’s first few trips back in time, her modernity forces her to remain an outsider in attitude, dress, and independence, making it challenging for her to get along in her setting. For example, the first time she is confronted in Maryland, a white man demands to know, “Who are you?” (Butler 41). Dana responds with a lie that she lives there and then throws the question back in his face, “What are *you* doing here?” (Butler 41). In her thoughts, she surmises that “he’d be more likely to believe me if I sounded

indignant” (Butler 41). But instead, the man slaps her with one hand and holds her with the other. Modern-day independence and boldness does not prove effective for a black woman in the slave setting. Later in the novel, Dana tries to use sarcasm with young Rufus Weylin. Rufus is upset that Alice has chosen a black man, Isaac, as her husband. Dana responds cynically, “How dare she choose her own husband. She must have thought she was a free woman or something” (Butler 123). Dana’s attitude makes her stand out, and Tom Weylin, the plantation owner and Rufus’ father, notices and comments, “I don’t know any other white man who would put up with you” (Butler 201). In turn, Dana realizes that she has “no enforceable rights” in the antebellum South (Butler 201).

One notable juxtaposition of contemporary and antebellum women’s rights is shown when Kevin and Rufus both want Dana to type or write for them. Long before the time travel begins, when Kevin proposes marriage to Dana, he says, “I’d let you type all my manuscripts” (Butler 109). She has typed for him once, unwillingly, but has subsequently refused. Near the end of the novel, when Rufus Weylin tells Dana to write letters for him, she says, “You’ll never know how hard I worked in my own time to avoid doing jobs like this” (Butler 226). Dana is still a contemporary woman, but she does not have any rights in the past.

Butler’s purpose in retaining Dana’s contemporary female mindset in the 1800s is to bring “the historical past into the present tense, thus conjuring history’s actualities—flesh, survival, and the things people do in the interest of the future. Such texts make readerly identification possible by making manageable the shame of one’s encounter with the past” (Parham 1321). It causes readers to imagine how they may have reacted to

living in a historical situation. Although many modern-day readers would tend to believe they would have overcome the abuse and escaped unscathed with their modern strength and ingenuity, *Kindred* shows readers that modern attitudes and strengths would not have helped them overcome adversity in the slave setting; in fact, they may have been dangerous and detrimental.

Dana's mixture of modern woman and slave woman is representational of the palimpsest, two layered eras of time and information. A past that was once blurry and little understood becomes clearer to Dana as she repeatedly lives and experiences the era of slavery with contemporary knowledge and attitude. She begins to grasp her heredity and is not merely an observer of history, but rather a primary participant with heightened understanding because of her modern-day insight. In fact, she embodies history itself. Lisa A. Long, in her article "A Relative Pain: The Rape of History in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*," writes:

Octavia Butler's time-travel novel, *Kindred* (1979) ... challenge[s] [its] readers to conceive of remembering as a palpable, physical experience. [Its] goal is not so much to set the record straight, as historical fiction such as Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* does, nor even to 'raise the idea,' as Morrison's *Beloved* does so compellingly, but to *become* the dead, to embody and enact the protagonists' families' personal histories and our national past. (460)

Truly *Kindred* is unique in its ability to take the reader into the past as a participant—to symbolically make the reader "become the dead" and "embody and enact" people from the past (460).

Sarah Wood calls *Kindred* “a hybrid text: part science fiction, part fantasy, and part historical novel, where at its crux lies the slave narrative” (84–85). Butler’s method of time travel in *Kindred* is completely nonscientific. Crossley calls the novel’s time travel “an irresistible psycho-historical force, not a feat of engineering” (267). He contrasts it with typical science fiction time-travel in novels such as H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895) in which the traveler rides into the future in a shiny vehicle (267). Crossley explains:

[Butler] did not need to show off a technological marvel of the sort Wells provided to mark his traveler’s path through time; instead *Kindred* evokes the terrifying and nauseating voyage that looms behind every American slave narrative: the Middle Passage from Africa to the slave markets of the New World. (268)

Dana’s forced and unavoidable journey back in time into slavery certainly mirrors the same feelings of helplessness and fear that Africans felt on the Middle Passage. After arriving in Maryland on one of her journeys, Dana says, “I don’t like it. I don’t want to be in the middle of it. I don’t understand how it can be happening, but it’s real. It hurts too much not to be. And ... and my ancestors, for God’s sake!” (Butler 46).

Crossley further explains that the manner in which Dana travels into the past is irrelevant to Butler’s story, which is not intended to be science fiction. Butler herself once made it clear that *Kindred* is a “grim fantasy” and that there is “absolutely no science in it” (Crossley 269). However, neither is *Kindred* merely a grim fantasy, as it does not clearly match the definition of the fantasy genre; that is, “imaginative fiction featuring esp. strange settings and grotesque characters” (*Merriam-Webster’s*) or “fiction

characterized by highly fanciful or supernatural elements” (*American Heritage*). As discussed earlier, “fantasy is always contrary to fact” (Pashin), and *Kindred* certainly has a layer of fact.

However, rather than complicate the novel as a hybrid with nonscientific time travel and a slave narrative at its core, it can more easily be categorized as palimpsestic under the speculative fiction umbrella, which allows it to be both fantastical and factual, both fantasy and history. Wood also states that Butler uses the “tools of fantasy” to “re-negotiate the ‘realities’ of slavery ... [and] interrogate the ‘realities’ of both slavery and contemporary US society” (83, 85).

Butler’s mixture of fantasy and reality to address the import of the past on the present again clearly places *Kindred* in a palimpsestic category. Just as the *scriptio inferior* of the Archimedes Palimpsest provides valuable information to contemporary mathematics, so the underlayer of *Kindred* provides significant information to contemporary society. Wood also recognizes that Dana’s fluid time travels back to Maryland in the early 1800s are meant “to juxtapose the realities of slavery with its legacy” (83). This juxtaposition of the slave era with the present is clearly the novel’s unique layering.

All of the aforementioned characteristics of *Kindred* point directly to the Archimedes Palimpsest as an ideal metaphor for the novel, even though the layers in *Kindred* are directly related and the layers in the Archimedes Palimpsest are not. The palimpsest, as a material object that embodies information separated by fifteen centuries, is a concrete depiction of the two layers of time separated by more than a century and a half in *Kindred*. Even the primary device for revealing the Archimedes text—the x-ray—

is an ideal metaphor for how Butler uses time travel to closely examine and reveal the past up close and to see it from a contemporary viewpoint.

### *Nonscientific Time Travel*

When Butler wrote *Kindred* in 1979, no other author had used time travel to resurrect a slave narrative of America's antebellum South. Butler's effectiveness in revisiting Maryland in the 1800s neither focuses on nor depends upon the mode of time travel, and Butler never explains how the time travel occurs. Rather, the novel's effectiveness is in the way Butler joins and mixes the two settings and eras of time, two layers superimposed over each other and forever joined with a lasting intersignificance. Dana's contemporary presence in antebellum Maryland—her 1970s clothing, belongings, and independent personal attitude on a slave plantation setting—illuminates history in a modern way. Butler sheds light on a tale once told only by slaves but now told from the perspective of a contemporary, self-sufficient, successful black woman. Indeed, sometimes fantastical elements and considerable imagination “can succeed where traditional historiography and historical fiction fail” (Spaulding 7).

All of Butler's other novels are set in the future, making *Kindred* a unique text for the author. In *Kindred*, Butler wants to look back, to concentrate on the past, to look in the opposite direction of her science fiction novels; *Kindred* looks to a particular time in history that needs to be understood on a contemporary level. Crossley points out in his essay that since her childhood, Butler has been concerned about “earlier generations of black Americans who are in danger of being forgotten by the black middle class as well as ignored by white Americans” (270). The forgotten past she is worried about is the

*scriptio inferior* of her novel *Kindred*. Throughout *Kindred*, Butler almost entirely writes in the *scriptio inferior*, covering the events of the past that increasingly become easier to perceive, witness, and understand as the story progresses. Butler introduces slavery slowly, as though the reader needs to get used to the gentler aspects of the antebellum South before being introduced to the harsh realities of what slavery was like. Dana's visits become increasingly longer and darker, progressively taking the reader more deeply into the horrors of forced bondage. The reader becomes increasingly less aware of the *scriptio superior*, the contemporary setting in 1976 Los Angeles, as the events of antebellum Maryland take on more significance and as Dana stays in the past for longer periods of time. However, the *scriptio superior* cannot and should not be ignored, since the contemporary setting is where the significance of the past is meant to be understood and implemented.

#### *Kindred's Scriptio Superior and Scriptio Inferior*

The Prologue of Butler's *Kindred* begins with the *scriptio superior*—the present—in a scene that will actually also conclude the tale. Dana Franklin, who is both the narrator and protagonist, describes how her arm was recently stuck in her living room wall and subsequently amputated above the elbow at the hospital. The very short opening section in the present sets up the reader for time travel and a nebulous tale of the distant past that even Dana does not fully understand. Dana tells the reader, “I was almost comfortable except for the strange throbbing of my arm. Of where my arm had been. I moved my head, tried to look at the empty place ... the stump” (10). Dana tells her husband, Kevin, “I tried to think through the drugs, through the distant pain, but there

was no honest explanation I could give them [the police]—none they would believe” (9). Kevin also describes the incident: “I found you struggling to free your arm from what seemed to be a hole in the wall” (11). He makes it clear that Dana’s encounter was obviously a violent, painful struggle that had taken part of her (her arm) and left her severely maimed and scarred.

Dana also sets up the reader for the blurriness of the novel; she mentions her once hazy and blurred recollection and minimal understanding of her experience through words such as *blur* and *vague*, which she uses to describe her conversation with the police: “Their words seemed to blur together,” she says. “I said this over and over until the vague police shapes let me alone” (9, 10). It is significant that Dana’s mind and thoughts are hazy; it prepares the reader for the blurry *scriptio inferior* of a palimpsest that is faint and embedded underneath the more recent, clearly written text.

It is also significant that Dana moves from one layer to the other several times, often without warning; her understanding grows with each journey. Her first voyage into the past lasts only a few minutes, but each encounter with history gets longer until she is there several months at a time. As each trip gets longer, the significance of the past as it relates to the present becomes clearer, and metaphorically, the *scriptio inferior* becomes more readable under the bolder text of the *scriptio superior*.

It is also worth noting that each time Dana returns to 1976 Los Angeles, she is marked or scarred in increasingly injurious ways. The wounds become more severe as the trips progress. Upon returning from her first short encounter with antebellum Maryland, Dana has water and mud on her. She brings back evidence of the past, evidence that permanently connects her to history, the *scriptio inferior*. By the end of Dana’s journeys,



the *scriptio inferior* and the *scriptio superior* are both seen clearly, although the latter is clearer in its superimposition over the former, signified by Dana remaining in the present and living with only the scars of the past. Both layers become figuratively translatable and even interchangeable in some ways by the end of Dana's journeys. Marc Steinberg, in his article "Inverting History in Octavia Butler's Postmodern Slave Narrative," agrees with the eventual interchangeability of time in the novel: "By zigzagging the time frame of the novel from past to present, Butler points to ways in which past and present become interchangeable" (Steinberg 467). In fact, in *Kindred*, history actually seems to trespass upon the present and leave destruction in its path.

Dana travels to antebellum Maryland six times throughout the novel, twice with Kevin; the nature and duration of these time travels are significant to the understanding of the narrative. Each trip to Maryland is preceded and followed by Dana becoming dizzy—a direct link to the blurriness of the palimpsest's faint underlayer of text when viewed from the present. After each of Dana's trips to Maryland, the events of the past become clearer and more understandable, and the injuries and scars become increasingly more severe. Butler is pointing out that as we understand history better (i.e., as we are able to read the *scriptio inferior* more clearly), we are more aware of the horrible wounds and scars that are reminders of how events of the past, such as the Middle Passage and the era of slavery, affect the present.

#### *From Layer to Layer*

The first chapter of *Kindred*, which opens in the *scriptio superior*, is cursory but important to the novel. The setting is in 1976 Los Angeles, California, where Dana and

her husband, Kevin, have just moved from an apartment into their own home. The present-day scene is described clearly, and the circumstances of the young couple's careers and their move seem normal and uneventful; however, it is notable that they are unpacking a large number of books, both fiction and nonfiction, which they are displaying separately in large bookcases. The scene with the books serves as a forecast that *Kindred* will include two layers: the fantastical (the fiction books) and the historical (the nonfiction books). It also forecasts what the reader will eventually see as a striking juxtaposition of two distinct layers of time: a literate present and an essentially illiterate past characterized by slaves who are forbidden to learn how to read or write. In her article "Power and Repetition: Philosophies of (Literary) History in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*," Christine Levecq points out that "Dana and Kevin are portrayed as characters who are intimately associated with texts" (528). Both of them are career writers and well read. Levecq adds, "This strong connection with writing enhances the contrast between a present informed by literacy and a past deficient in it" (528).

In the first chapter, as Dana bends down to push another box of books toward Kevin, noticeably nonfiction books, she becomes dizzy, holds on to a bookcase, and falls to her knees. Butler emphasizes that Dana loses her focus and everything becomes blurry before "the house, the books, everything vanished" (Butler 13). Dana's blurriness in this scene can easily be compared to the unclear *scriptio inferior* of a palimpsest, and her subsequent immediate transport into the past clearly correlates with the palimpsest and its underlying revelations of historical information and events. Where Dana is going will fulfill the same purpose as the *scriptio inferior*; she will see historical events with new understanding and modern application.

The reader's first glimpse at the *scriptio inferior*, Dana's first visit to Maryland, is brief, several minutes in the past but only a few seconds in the present. When Dana returns to her Los Angeles home, Kevin finds her in a different place in the room than where she was when she left. She is "wet and muddy, but intact" (Butler 14); she has an ache in her back and shoulders and remembers saving a young boy named Rufus from drowning in a river by giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation while his mother watches in amazement at the lifesaving technique that is unheard of at the time. Dana remembers small details and tells Kevin, "I even recalled things that I hadn't realized I'd noticed"—the pine trees, the long deadly gun pointed at her face, and Rufus' mother's clothing and accent.

Dana is also afraid and comments, "I'm pulling away from it because it scares me so. But it was real" (Butler 17). Kevin encourages her to pull away and tells her, "Let go of it" (Butler 17). Dana and Kevin's responses are typical of many people's reactions when they discover the dark aspects of history. They do not easily accept the realities of distressing pieces of the past and prefer to pull away from them and release them. Dana finds that the memories of her short encounter in antebellum Maryland do not go away. "They stayed with me," she says, "shadowy and threatening. They made their own limbo and held me in it" (Butler 18). The shadowy events of the past that people pull away from are truly the faint, blurry *scriptio inferior* of the metaphorical palimpsest. The limbo is the space between the two layers of the palimpsest, distanced in time but never separable.

Later, on the same day as her first visit, Dana again experiences a fuzziness and says, "[T]he kitchen began to blur around me" (Butler 19). The light seems to dim, Dana feels a sick dizziness, and she is immediately transported back to Maryland for her

second encounter with history. Although her second time travel takes place on the same day in 1976, Rufus is now three or four years older than when Dana arrived in Maryland the first time. Dana saves him from a fire in his room and then realizes she has not been immediately transported home. As she gazes at the room, she becomes aware that she is not dizzy there and says that the “room remained unblurred, undeniably real” (Butler 20). When Dana is in the past, she sees it clearly; in the present, history is hazy.

Time is conflated in the novel; Dana travels into the past twice in one day, but in history, the visits are years apart. Rufus can also see into the future, either seeing or hearing Dana in her 20th century home before he beckons her to help him when he is in extreme danger. When Rufus is five years old, he sees Dana in her room before he steps into the hole in the bottom of the river and nearly drowns. He tells her later, “I was walking in the water and there was a hole. I fell, and then I couldn’t find the bottom any more. I saw you inside a room. I could see part of the room, and there were books all around—more than in Daddy’s library” (Butler 22). Butler seems to be saying that the past and the present are inextricably connected, in both directions.

When Dana arrives on her second time travel, Rufus is passively watching the draperies in his bedroom that he has set on fire. Dana again saves his life by pulling the draperies down, smothering the flames, and throwing them out the window. She saves the boy’s life for the second time, and interestingly, she “didn’t feel dizzy. The room remained unblurred, undeniably real” (Butler 20). Dana does not immediately return home to Los Angeles as she did on her first journey. Instead, she remains in Maryland longer, possibly an indication that she is now able to handle more of her past. Rufus tells her that his last name is Weylin, and the name evokes a memory. Dana begins to

remember details of her heritage, things she has seen in a large family Bible in her uncle's possession. She comments, "The memory was coming back to me in fragments" (Butler 28). She remembers names written in the family Bible, a distant grandmother's name—Hagar Weylin—born in 1831. Hagar's parents are listed as Rufus Weylin and Alice Greenwood, a free black woman. Now for the first time, Dana realizes that one of her ancestors, Rufus Weylin, is white, the son of a white slave owner; he is the young boy whose life she feels compelled to save.

Dana's black ancestor, Alice Greenwood, is living and working on the Weylin plantation, although she is a free woman. Dana now recognizes the link between Alice and Rufus and rationalizes saving the son of a white slave owner:

After all ... after all, what would have happened to me, to my mother's family, if I hadn't saved him? Was that why I was here? Not only to insure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure my family's survival, my own birth. ... No matter what I did, he would have to survive to father Hagar, or I could not exist. That made sense." (Butler 29)

The reader now learns that Dana is in antebellum Maryland to guarantee her own existence, which would not happen for well over a century. At first, Dana wonders how Rufus and Alice will become her ancestors: "Alice Greenwood," she says. "How would she marry this boy? Or would it be marriage? And why hadn't someone in my family mentioned that Rufus Weylin was white?" (Butler 28). "And then there was history," she says. "Rufus and Alice would get together somehow" (Butler 40). At that point, Dana

begins to track the events of the history she is experiencing and connect them to her own ancestry and her modern-day life.

Before her existence can be assured, Dana experiences firsthand the *scriptio inferior*, or life on a slave plantation. On this trip, she looks for Alice Greenwood and finds herself alone in the woods at night by a row of slave cabins, trying to avoid white men looking for runaway slaves. She finds Alice and her parents and discovers that she bears a strong resemblance to Alice. She describes Alice as “fine-boned, probably not as strong as she needed to be to survive in this era. But she was surviving, however painfully. Maybe she would help me learn how” (Butler 38). This strong allusion to learning from history sets the reader up to discover valuable lessons from the *scriptio inferior*.

Dana then witnesses four white men drag Alice’s father out of his home, tie him to a tree, whip him, and take him away. One of the men punches Alice’s mother in the face. Once the men leave, Dana helps Alice’s mother regain consciousness. But as soon as Dana leaves the cabin, she is pursued by a patrolman who beats her and tries to rape her. Dana connects these white men on horseback to the future, as the “forerunners of the Ku Klux Klan” (Butler 37). Then Dana begins to lose consciousness and falls “into a deep starless darkness” (Butler 43). When she wakes up, she is back in Los Angeles, scrambling away from Kevin’s blurry face above her, and Kevin helps her understand that she is able to return to the 1970s when she believes her life is in danger. This time, Dana’s injuries are more severe; she is dirty and bloody, and every part of her body hurts from being beaten. She finds out that the hours she spent in Maryland translate to two or three minutes in California. Because of her injuries, Dana now has a much clearer

understanding of the history she is experiencing: “To me, it’s getting more and more believable. . . . I don’t understand how it can be happening, but it’s real. It hurts too much not to be” (Butler 46). Butler is saying essentially that experiencing the pain of history is tantamount to understanding it. On the other hand, Dana regrets knowing more and says, “I almost wish I hadn’t read about it” (Butler 48). Before she goes back, she looks through her books to find out more about where she is when she is transported to Maryland.

The important aspect of Dana’s journeys into the past is her increasing awareness of history. On her second journey, she not only enters the past and learns about it, but she also lives it and experiences it. She develops relationships with people and becomes increasingly involved in the slave community. The blurriness is gone when she is in the past, which, again, is the x-ray process of revealing the *scriptio inferior* of the Archimedes Palimpsest and making it interpretable. When the Archimedes Palimpsest was first discovered in 1906, very little of the *scriptio inferior* was readable. But the time that lapsed between 1906 and 1998 when the book was found again is significant. In the more than 92-year interval, better modern technology made it possible to decipher more of the Archimedes text. Likewise, in *Kindred*, the Maryland plantation in the *scriptio inferior* setting has more clarity, even as early as her second visit, because Dana is more connected to the people and the community. She is also able to interpret the events because of her contemporary understanding and knowledge of history, especially the facts about the Civil War, which has not yet taken place on her journeys into the past.

The reader joins the protagonist in her journeys to Maryland and gets to know her ancestors and realize the significance their lives have on hers. For both Dana and the

reader, these slaves that live where Frederick Douglass lived become “people rather than ... encrusted literary or sociological types” (Crossley 270). Crossley calls it “the recovery of historical and psychological realities” and calls *Kindred* “Butler’s contribution to the literature of memory every bit as much as it is an exercise in the fantastic imagination” (270–271). Butler has mixed fact (symbolized by the nonfiction books in Dana and Kevin’s home) and fantasy (symbolized by their fiction books) and given the reader a fantastical historical experience, a combination of past and present that mirrors living in the era itself.

The day after Dana returns from her second journey, she experiences a sickening dizziness before she is transported a third time to Maryland. This time, Kevin comes with her since he is holding her when she becomes dizzy. Rufus, who is now about twelve years old, has broken his leg, and the three—Rufus, Dana, and Kevin—are able to carry on a conversation about history past, present, and future. On this trip, Dana and Kevin encounter more details of slavery in action; they pass a wheat field where mostly male slaves are swinging scythes and female slaves are following them as they tie the wheat into bundles. Dana learns that as a black woman with an independent spirit, she does not fit into 19th-century culture nor is she a likely caretaker or rescuer for Rufus: “I was the worst possible guardian for him—a black to watch over him in a society that considered blacks subhuman, a woman to watch over him in a society that considered women perennial children” (Butler 68). Butler is thus making a statement about the changes in the status of black women throughout the century or more that divides these two layers of history in *Kindred*.



On this third journey, Dana learns firsthand what it is like to live like a slave, while Kevin claims he is a writer from New York City and receives special treatment because he is white. In her nearly two-month stay, Dana learns about slavery and how to properly act the part of a slave in order to survive. She lives by advice she once heard one slave give to another: “Don’t argue with white folks, ... Don’t tell them ‘no.’ Don’t let them see you mad. Just say ‘yes, sir.’ Then go ‘head and do what you want to do. Might have to take a whippin’ for it later on, but if you want it bad enough, the whippin’ won’t matter much” (Butler 96). Dana learns how to clean and pluck a chicken and prepare biscuits and bread dough, and she learns what it is like to be abused by white masters. Dana discovers that slave traders buy slaves, many of them the children of the slaves on the plantation, and take them to Georgia, Louisiana, or Mississippi, the deeper South where they are worth more money. Slavery becomes even more personal for Dana when she faces the possibility of being purchased by Tom Weylin. All her encounters now go far beyond just observing history; she is experiencing it personally.

As Dana discovers the ugly realities of slavery, she also realizes how easily she and Kevin are accepting slavery as commonplace. Kevin, who is on the plantation but not experiencing life as a slave, tends to put on blinders to what is going on around him. He does not minimize slavery, but he also does not see plantation life as all that bad. Dana has firsthand experience as a slave, but even so, she finds herself beginning to accept slavery. She shares her thoughts with the reader: “Time passed. Kevin and I became more a part of the household, familiar, accepted, accepting. That disturbed me too when I thought about it. How easily we seemed to acclimatize. ... it seemed as though we should have had a harder time adjusting to this particular segment of history—adjusting to our

places in the household of a slaveholder” (Butler 97). Readers are reminded how easy it is to overlook injustice and suffering and deny the evil that exists in the world.

The reader is also reminded that things we take for granted in contemporary society, such as reading, were once forbidden. Dana finds out that educated slaves are illegal in the South; slave owners believe that a slave who can read is a dangerous thing. Secretly, Dana teaches the slave Nigel how to read, and he, in turn, teaches others. When the plantation owner catches Dana with an old speller, he drags her out of the cookhouse and whips her repeatedly across her back. With her mouth full of dirt and blood, she hears Tom Weylin curse her and lecture her about reading as he beats her. Dana vomits, sees a blurry image of Kevin running, and then passes out. Here, Butler inserts a sort of dream interval in which Dana remembers details about her mother and about her marriage to Kevin in Las Vegas years ago. It is as though Butler knows that Dana and the reader need some relief from history, from the horrors of slavery. When Dana wakes up in the present in Los Angeles, she is alone; Kevin is still in 1819. Dana bears alone the wounds and excruciating pain of her whipping and recalls old photographs she once saw in history books of slaves’ horribly scarred backs. Again, the *scriptio inferior* and the *scriptio superior* are clearly linked in her memory and in her experiences. Dana reads books about slavery—fiction and nonfiction—and the reader is reminded once again that in this novel, fact is mixed with fantasy.

*Journey from “Bi-ness” to “One-ness”*

It is worth noting that as Dana’s visits to the 19th century become longer, she understands history more and is able to better connect the past with the present. In her

fourth, fifth, and sixth trips to Maryland, Dana finds herself mentally and emotionally experiencing the past and present more equally. She becomes a part of both eras, and the time gap that once distanced her from her past now closes up. The novel moves from two distinct layers of history—a sort of “bi-ness”—to one layer—a “one-ness”—characterized by an inseparable union of history with the present. It is in these final three journeys that the two layers of time, the 1800s and the 1970s, are less separate entities. Here, *Kindred* deviates somewhat from the metaphor of the palimpsest because the two layers of the novel are related and eventually merge, whereas the Archimedes text and the common book of prayers are not associated with each other and remain separate texts with their own implications.

As Dana understands history and applies it to her life, the distance between history and the present diminishes, and Dana can see history’s personal and social significance. Sarah Wood comments in her article on the two layers in *Kindred*—the past and the present—becoming one and thus interrelated:

The inclusion of these two narrative strands collapses the historical distance between the two moments in time. This allows the reader to view them not as distinct and compartmentalized segments of history, but rather highlights their interrelated qualities and, therefore, demonstrates how the legacy of slavery lives on in contemporary American society. ... Its aim is to tackle what Butler views as the contemporary misconceptions and stereotypes that inform America’s interpretation of slavery. (86)

This collapse of historical distance between two moments in time is indicative of the novel’s “one-ness” as well as how the past casts significance on the present.

On Dana's fourth journey, thirteen or fourteen years have passed since her first trip to Maryland. Rufus is now a young man, and Dana learns that Kevin has left the plantation and probably gone North. Dana again arrives in time to rescue Rufus, who has been beat up and nearly killed by Isaac, Alice Greenwood's husband. The text hints that Rufus has attempted to rape Alice, and in this way, Butler introduces the core of the novel: the horrors and routine practice of white slave owners raping black female slaves and the subsequent birth of mixed race children who are considered a plantation asset and typically used by their white fathers as slaves or sold to slave traders for a profit.

Introducing rape sets the reader up for the reason Dana is in the past: to ensure her future birth through a rape that results in the racial mixture of her ancestors as well as herself. Dana is actually a product of rape, although she is removed from it by several generations. In her article, Sarah Wood states:

*Kindred* exposes the persistent sexual abuse to which black women were subjected during slavery. In so doing Butler comments upon the futility of interposing 20th-century values onto the context of 19th-century slavery. When Dana suggests to Alice that she is able to refuse Rufus's sexual advances because it is 'her body', Alice desperately, but accurately, responds that it is 'Not mine ... not mine, his. He paid for it, didn't he?' ... In the reality of plantation life Alice has no control over her body; it becomes the possession of her white owner, and her sexuality is at his disposal. (92)

Marriage between a white man and a black woman was taboo in the South, but white men were permitted to sexually abuse a black female slave, even if it resulted in children. In

fact, white slave owners considered those children valuable plantation assets, since they could be sold at slave auctions. The reader is reminded that this marriage taboo carried over into the 20th century. When Kevin and Dana decided to get married, both of their families object because Dana is black and Kevin is white. Dana's favorite uncle is quite unhappy with her decision, and Kevin's sister says she will not allow Kevin and Dana to enter her home if they marry.

On this fourth trip to Maryland, Dana brings with her a bag full of items she may need, including a knife she had brought on her previous trip but not used. An unusual and interesting item in Dana's bag is a history book, and before long, Rufus becomes interested in it. Butler uses this book to cleverly present time from two perspectives: as prophetic of the future as seen from Rufus' perspective, and as a look back on the history of the 1800s as seen from Dana's 20th-century viewpoint. The book—prophecy for Rufus, history for Dana—serves as a valuable connector of the two layers of time in *Kindred*. It is also interesting that for the first time in the novel, Butler uses real historical names, such as Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, and J.D.B. DeBow, an advocate of slavery. But after Dana tells Rufus about these people and what they will accomplish, Rufus forces her to burn the book. She tears it up and throws it onto the hot coals, but her thoughts go to the book burnings in Nazi Germany in the early 1930s. She connects the antebellum South to “repressive societies [that] always seemed to understand the danger of ‘wrong’ ideas” (Butler 141).

During this trip, Dana witnesses worse horrors than the times before, and the reader is reminded that the past leaves deep wounds and indelible, enduring scars. Alice and her husband, Isaac, try to escape but are captured, and Alice is forcibly returned to

the plantation and punished. After this incident, Dana tends to Alice's wounds from the beatings, the dog bites, and being dragged behind a horse, but Dana recognizes that the wound on Alice's leg from the dog bite will be there for the rest of Alice's life. The reader realizes that the wounds of slavery's consequences will never go away. The violence of slavery does not end there; Alice also hears that Isaac's ears have been cut off and that he has been sold to a Mississippi slave trader. Alice's punishment for trying to escape is not only the pain and scars of her injuries, but also the loss of her husband and the loss of her own freedom; she now belongs to Rufus and is no longer a free black woman. Rufus then freely uses her sexually and beats her whenever he pleases.

During her time in Maryland on this journey, Dana has written several letters to Kevin, who, she is told, has gone North. She is trying to connect with him and find a way for both of them to return home to Los Angeles. When Dana finds out that Rufus has never mailed her letters, she decides to run away. Dressed as a boy and filled with fear, she leaves in the middle of the night, only to be caught by Tom and Rufus Weylin themselves. Tom kicks her in the face, knocking out two of her teeth. Then he takes her to the barn, ties her up by her hands raised above her head, and lifts her body off the ground. He rips off her clothes and whips her relentlessly, an incident that again evokes historical events from Douglass' *Narrative* for the knowledgeable reader. Dana realizes that her education and her knowledge of what will take place in the future do her no good in these circumstances. Tom Weylin comments when Dana is captured, "Educated nigger don't mean smart nigger, do it?" (Butler 175). Dana now has to agree: "He had a point. Nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me to escape. Yet in a few years an illiterate runaway named Harriet Tubman would make nineteen trips into

this country and lead three hundred fugitives to freedom. What had I done wrong?"

(Butler 177).

Dana now recognizes that she has experienced so much of slavery that her senses are beginning to dull, a reminder to readers that their sensitivities toward the abuses of slavery dull through time. Dana ponders her feelings, "I felt sweat on my face mingling with silent tears of frustration and anger. My back had already begun to ache dully, and I felt dully ashamed. Slavery was a long slow process of dulling" (Butler 182). Rufus feels badly about Dana's beating but justifies his father's actions. He does try to recompense for Dana's horrific experience, however, and convinces his father to send for Kevin, whom she has not seen in five years. When Kevin arrives on horseback, Dana barely recognizes him with his gray beard, and Kevin hesitates before he realizes it is Dana. Kevin had grown a beard to disguise himself from the mob that was after him for helping slaves escape. The lack of recognition on both of their parts is a reminder that both of them have changed but from very different experiences. For both of them, time is diminishing the initial shock of slavery, and they find their senses, emotions, and hopes becoming numb. Dana recognizes, as she did on her third journey, that Kevin is getting comfortable in his role as a free white man in an antebellum era. This systematic dulling and comfortableness makes the reader wonder how much dulling and complacency took place over the next 100 or so years, and what time would do to the attitudes and mind-sets of the generations that followed the era of slavery.

Dana realizes that she must get out of Maryland and is afraid that may not be possible. "I already know all I ever want to find out about being a slave," she tells Kevin. "I'd rather be shot than go back in there" (Butler 187). But as Dana starts to mount

Kevin's horse, Rufus refuses to let her leave and pulls out his gun to shoot her. Dana dives to the ground, sees the gun inches from her head, and then "everything was distorted, blurred," a recurring sign that Dana is being transported back to the present (Butler 188). Kevin falls on her back, and they are both taken to their Los Angeles apartment. In the present, Dana has been away for a few hours; Kevin has been gone eight days. Dana returns with serious injuries; Kevin returns with a slight southern accent that resembles Rufus and Tom Weylin's and a jagged scar on his forehead that "healed years ago" but is a constant reminder of his harrowing experiences (Butler 190). Butler clearly makes a social comment here on the difference between a black person's and a white person's experiences in the South. Dana barely survives and suffers egregious injuries; Kevin returns fearful and slightly scarred, but healed. He has also taken on some of the characteristics of the white slave owners. Dana clearly recalls the atrocities of slave life as she personally experienced them, and Kevin remembers the slaves he helped to escape.

So entrenched are both Dana and Kevin in slavery's history, although in different ways, and so clearly do they now see the *scriptio inferior* that they have a hard time adjusting back to the 1970s. Kevin comments, "Now, somehow, I've got to fit myself back into nineteen seventy-six. If I can" (Butler 193). The realities of slavery are so ingrained in them that they find it difficult to separate the past from the present. Thus, the "bi-ness" of the *scriptio inferior* and the *scriptio superior* has nearly disappeared, and the two layers are becoming one—the "one-ness" is emerging. Dana tells Kevin, "[Y]ou can't come back all at once any more than you can leave all at once." (Butler 194). The divide between history and the present has nearly disappeared.



Before the day is over, Dana is back in Maryland for her fifth visit. She arrives in the rain and saves Rufus from drowning in a muddy ditch in front of the Weylin mansion. Six years have passed, and Dana notices that the birth of her ancestor Hagar has not yet taken place. She also openly admits that she is “so tired of this going back and forth” (Butler 208). Tom Weylin dies on this journey, and Rufus blames Dana for not being able to save him. Her punishment is working in the fields, and Dana thus experiences another yet harsher aspect of slavery: brutal field work and inhumane punishment that goes along with it. Within minutes of arriving at the cornfield, Dana is lashed across her back and hit across her breasts. She doubles over in excruciating pain with tears running down her face but is forced to get up immediately and continue working. Eventually, she passes out between the rows of corn. She spends only half a day in the fields.

When Dana wakes up on the plantation, she is subjected to more of the terrible realities of slavery. She witnesses a coffle, a line of slaves fastened together on their way to be sold. She recalls, “A white man went by on horseback leading two dozen black men chained two by two. Chained. They wore handcuffs and iron collars with chains connecting the collars to a central chain that ran between the two lines. Behind the men walked several women roped together neck to neck. A coffle—slaves for sale” (Butler 221). Then she sees three slaves from the Weylin plantation chained to the back of the line. One of them she knows—a slave named Tess. She blames herself for saving the life of Rufus Weylin, the man responsible for selling these slaves, and feels like an advocate for slavery because she saved his life. “I was beginning to feel like a traitor,” she says. “Guilty for saving him. ... I guess I can see why there are those here who think I’m more

white than black” (Butler 223). Here, Butler briefly touches on the issue of whiteness, or blacks who have purportedly abandoned their race for white status and privilege.

This fifth journey is clearly a turning point in the novel; it is the point at which the *scriptio inferior* and the *scriptio superior* become equally clear and nearly one text.

Butler clearly points out that this journey has closed the distance between past and present. The two times have intermingled, and Dana is part of one as much as the other. The “bi-ness” of history and the present has become a “one-ness” that reminds the reader that history and the present are interconnected and inseparable. Dana reflects, “Once—God knows how long ago—I had worried that I was keeping too much distance between myself and this alien time. Now, there was no distance at all” (Butler 220). Dana is no longer merely pretending to be part of antebellum Maryland; she has become a resident of the slave South of the 1800s, and she is living in it as truly as she is living in the 1970s.

During Dana’s fifth visit, Alice has her baby, the child who will be Dana’s ancestor. The father of the baby girl is Rufus Weylin, something the readers of the novel know since they are privy to the information in Dana’s uncle’s family Bible. Alice names her Hagar—the name in the front of the Bible. Dana feels “almost free, half-free if such a thing was possible, half-way home” because she knows her task is nearly done (Butler 233). Her lineage has been preserved, and her own birth has been ensured; however, she is not a free woman. When Rufus hits Dana and a slave trader suggests he should sell her, Dana takes time travel into her own hands and cuts her own wrists so she can return to the 1970s.

Back in California, Dana realizes she has been in Maryland for eight months; about three hours have lapsed in the present. Dana is home for fifteen days before her sixth and final journey occurs, but Butler writes little in the *scriptio superior* during the interval between the two trips. She uses the text only to show that Dana does realize that history is real and not conceptual. “It’s real now, isn’t it,” Dana says to Kevin. “We talked about it before—God knows how long ago—but somehow, it was abstract then” (Butler 243). Now the *scriptio inferior* has been uncovered, x-rayed, experienced, and interpreted; Dana can see the past as clearly as she sees the present. In fact, it is extremely important to note that the present is different now because Dana has a new understanding of and connection to the past.

On July 4, 1976, ironically the bicentennial of the United States, Dana is transported back to Maryland for her sixth and final visit. Kevin is worried that Dana may never come back since Rufus once told Dana he would never let her leave him. Upon Dana’s arrival in Maryland, on a hill of black ants, Rufus falls on top of her. Within a few minutes, Dana discovers that Alice has hanged herself in the barn because she believes Rufus has sold her two children, Joe and Hagar, to slave traders. Rufus has actually sent them to live with his aunt in Baltimore but wants to punish Alice by scaring her. In the shocking wake of Alice’s death, Dana convinces Rufus to write certificates of freedom for both of Alice’s children.

Dana now has some influence over Rufus. The presence of a strong black woman on the plantation presents a new twist to history. It causes a kind of confusion or altering of the past and makes an additional reference to the issue of whiteness. Rufus says, “You confuse everybody. You sound too white ... you knew too many white ways, but you

were black” (Butler 255). Because Dana looks so much like Alice, Rufus now views her as a replacement for the woman he raped and used, and Dana realizes that Rufus wants her to “take the place of the dead” (Butler 259). Rufus’ view of Dana reinforces the “oneness” of the past and the present, the contemporary woman taking the place of the deceased woman in history. The palimpsestic layers intermingle more and more as Rufus sees Dana and Alice as one woman. “You and her,” he says. “One woman. Two halves of a whole” (Butler 257). He expects Dana to take Alice’s place as his lover, but that goes beyond what Dana is willing to do. In the end, she murders Rufus by stabbing him with her knife and then reflects, “I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover” (Butler 260).

As Rufus collapses and dies, he still has a firm grip on Dana’s arm. The last four short paragraphs of the novel take the reader immediately to Dana’s Los Angeles home; Dana’s arm is embedded in the wall. Now it is the wall that is squeezing and pressing on her arm in the same place Rufus had his hold. The wall thus becomes a symbol of Rufus the slave owner, but more importantly, it is a metaphor of the past that Dana has just experienced and become a part of. Dana becomes one with the wall, or one with slavery, “meshing with it as though somehow my arm were being absorbed into something. Something cold and nonliving” (Butler 261). The scene takes the reader back to the Prologue, but this time, the reader clearly understands that Dana’s arm in the wall represents the past interconnecting with the present, joining them together in a permanent, inseparable bond and claiming part of Dana—her arm—in history’s grasp. Dana now bears unmistakable proof of her encounter with history—her missing arm. Her missing arm becomes a symbol of the scar of history that contemporary society always

bears. Butler explains in an interview conducted by Randall Kenan in 1991, “I couldn’t really let her [Dana] come all the way back. I couldn’t let her return to what she was, I couldn’t let her come back whole and that, I think, really symbolizes her not coming back whole. Antebellum slavery didn’t leave people quite whole” (498).

Butler makes sure that the scar left by slavery is extremely obvious (everyone will notice a missing arm), unlike the ambiguous or hidden scars of slavery ever present in modern society. There is no longer any distance between history and contemporary society. Dana says, “I was still caught somehow, joined to the wall as though my arm were growing out of it—or growing into it. From the elbow to the ends of the fingers, my left arm had become a part of the wall. I looked at the spot where flesh joined with plaster, stared at it uncomprehending. It was the exact spot Rufus’s fingers had grasped” (Butler 261). But the novel does not end there. Dana’s arm is severed, and part of it is left in the wall. She explains, “I pulled my arm toward me, pulled hard. And suddenly, there was an avalanche of pain, red impossible agony! And I screamed and screamed” (Butler 261). In spite of the pain and the loss of part of herself, Dana breaks loose from the past in order to continue living her modern-day life. In doing so, she leaves a vital part of herself in history, and the past and the present are joined and inseparable. Dana must now live without that appendage; she must endure the painful memories and the visible scar of her past. The wall thus becomes a symbol of history; it is a symbol of Rufus, Dana’s white ancestor, and what he took from her and, thus, what all slave owners took from black and mixed-race slaves. The wall is also a symbol of a barrier that separates contemporary society from the past; it is what still keeps the *scriptio inferior* separate from the *scriptio superior*.

Dana now has a “truer understanding of African-American history than the sanitized versions offered by the popular media ... [and she] scorns the image of the plantation derived from *Gone with the Wind*” (Crossley 276). More importantly, and in line with Butler’s intent, the reader can come away from the novel with the same unsanitized version of history. Even more significant is the actual experience *in* history for both the protagonist and the reader. The text reminds the reader that time distances people from the realities of the past, and only a real-life experience, even through literary time travel, can change that perspective. Although Dana holds on tightly but precariously to her present life, she finds it impossible by the end of the narrative to separate the past from the present or to only be an observer of history. She finds herself drawn into and bearing the marks of the antebellum South of the early nineteenth century (Crossley 279). In the novel, she tells her husband, Kevin:

You might be able to go through this whole experience as an observer. ...  
I can understand that because most of the time, I’m still an observer. It’s protection. It’s nineteen seventy-six shielding and cushioning eighteen nineteen for me. But now and then, ... I can’t maintain the distance. I’m drawn all the way into eighteen nineteen, and I don’t know what to do.  
(Butler 101)

As early as Dana’s first travel back in time, Kevin is more distanced than Dana from the realities of antebellum Maryland. Throughout the novel, Kevin’s lack of complete understanding seems to be Butler’s statement that white people will never fully understand the experiences of slavery. At the beginning of the novel, Dana proclaims to her skeptical husband, “But it was real! I was there!” (Butler 16). Kevin responds with

realism and a limited understanding: “You vanished and you reappeared. Facts” (Butler 16). Dana’s trips into the past have heightened her understanding of the era of slavery and what it means to her existence. On the other hand, it is worth noting that Kevin’s visits to the antebellum South have provided him with a different, limited appreciation of that era. There are certain things that Dana does not share with Kevin because she knows there is a disparity in their experiences, the differences between a black woman’s and a white man’s perspective, no matter what era they are in. In Kenan’s interview with the author, Butler admits that she “gave her [Dana] that husband to complicate her life” (497). Dana and Kevin’s continuing debate over what is fact and what is imagination causes Dana’s experience to blur, to become more like the *scriptio inferior*. It can be inferred that Dana herself becomes a palimpsest—a living *scriptio superior* with permanent shadows of a *scriptio inferior* causing havoc in their attempt to coexist within her.

Throughout the novel, Dana becomes less able to shield herself from her nineteenth-century experiences, and from that, the reader benefits. Crossley points out in his afterword that “what may be most powerful and valuable for readers of *Kindred* is the simple reminder that all that history occurred not so very long ago” (279). He reminds the reader that “Butler focuses our attention on the continuity between past and present; the fantasy of traveling backwards in time becomes a lesson in historical realities” (279). The history in the novel’s *scriptio inferior* is not only illuminated in *Kindred*; it is also connected unequivocally to the present, to the *scriptio superior*. Just as the two texts of the Archimedes Palimpsest will be forever joined and inseparable, so history in *Kindred* is forever joined thematically, theoretically, and practically with the present and even the future. Butler also clarifies in her novel that her focus does not apply only to African-

American history. During one interval when Dana is at home in Los Angeles, she reads one of Kevin's World War II books with excerpts from the memoirs of Jewish concentration camp survivors and compares those few years to the nearly 200 years of American slavery. Dana finds that she cannot handle the information in that book any more than she can handle what she is learning on her trips back to the antebellum South: "The books depressed me, scared me, made me stuff Kevin's sleeping pills into my bag. Like the Nazis, ante bellum whites had known quite a bit about torture—quite a bit more than I ever wanted to learn" (Butler 117).

Crossley concludes his essay with a clear explanation of *Kindred* that fits the definition of and purpose of the palimpsestic novel: to layer history with the present and expose the significance of the *scriptio inferior*. He calls Butler's novel "an underground railroad between past and present whose terminus is the reawakened imagination of the reader" (280). He also assumes that "the reader of *Kindred* may discover a closer kinship with the characters and events of the antebellum South than we often care to admit" (280). Through nonscientific time travel, Butler x-rays a palimpsest, so to speak, and reveals history by transporting her protagonist and the reader into the early 1800s, depicting along the way the realities of slavery and the marks it has left on humankind forever. Lisa Yaszek, in her article "'A Grim Fantasy': Remaking American History in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*," calls Dana's experiences a "new mode of historical memory" (1063). She adds that "Dana does not escape her encounter with American history unscathed" and "is indeed deeply marked by—but at the same time an undisputed survivor of—that same history" (1063–1064).



In the Epilogue, at the conclusion of *Kindred*, Dana and Kevin travel in the present to Maryland, to the site of the Weylin plantation and to the nearby town of Easton. They want to search for, see, and touch for themselves the places they have been in their time travels and find primary documents that prove the people in history actually lived and the events they experienced actually took place. In this way, Butler emphasizes the importance of searching for facts and primary sources such as court documents and written records of the people who lived in history. Dana admits, “Why did I even want to come here. You’d think I would have had enough of the past” (Butler 264). But the past is always worth further investigation and greater understanding. Kevin aptly responds, “You probably needed to come for the same reason I did. ... To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed. To reassure yourself that you’re sane” (Butler 264). Yaszek states that Dana affirms “her own relationship to history as an important source of cultural and individual memory” (1064).

The astute reader of *Kindred* is able, to a limited extent, to take the same six journeys to antebellum Maryland and subsequently to contemporary Maryland to touch, see, and experience history and come away from the novel with a greater understanding of one era of the past and how it has affected and left a permanent scar on the present. The astute reader is able to decipher and translate the *scriptio inferior* of *Kindred*, the underlying text of this palimpsestic novel. The reader can metaphorically see the once hidden text of the palimpsest and recognize his or her personal relationship to that layer of history. Butler wants her readers to take with them an actual encounter with the past, a nearly in-person experience, not merely knowledge of the traumatic events of slavery. The perceptive reader, through understanding and a “new mode of historical memory”

(Yaszek 1063–1064), is also able to preserve something in danger of being lost—the significance of the history of past generations of black Americans that might be forgotten by the black middle class and ignored by white Americans.

Experiencing history in *Kindred* makes the reader smell, see, hear, taste, and feel the painful events and realities of an era of slavery that are otherwise static knowledge. Experiencing history in *Kindred* also transcends historical knowledge because the reader can apply contemporary discernment to the past. Butler's purpose runs deep; she wants to provide history's significance to whatever "present" the reader is living in. Philosopher Henri Bergson explains it well: "But the truth is that we shall never reach the past unless we frankly place ourselves within it. Essentially virtual, it cannot be known as something past unless we follow and adopt the movement by which it expands into a present image, thus emerging from obscurity into the light of day" (173). Bergson's connection of the past expanding into "a present image" is what Butler intended and the central distinguishing characteristic of *Kindred*, a truly palimpsestic novel.

## Chapter Three

### Multiple Layers in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*

Palimpsestic novels are not always two-layered and clearly linked to one era of history like Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. For example, Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, published in 1959 and winner of the 1961 Hugo Award for best science fiction novel, is a much more complex palimpsestic novel with multiple layers of convoluted time in the past as well as the future. The layers include, but are not limited to, the Dark Ages, the Renaissance, the mid-1900s, a postnuclear-holocaust era 600 years later, another postnuclear time 600 years after that, and a futuristic and finally other-planetary time 600 years yet after that—in the 38th century.

In addition, Miller splashes the novel with Jewish overtones, Christian allusions, biblical people, glimpses of the Roman Empire, the history and traditions of the Roman Catholic Church, and shadows of his own traumatic participation in World War II. Miller also interweaves throughout the narrative the character of the pilgrim with girded loins, who represents the legend of the Wandering Jew who is said to have ridiculed Jesus on the way to the cross and is thus cursed to wander Earth until the second coming of Christ. This legend, which spans time from the first century on, serves as a symbol of *Canticle's* never-ending eras, unifies the layers of time with one recurring character, and skillfully amalgamates the past with the present. Lewis Fried, in his article "*A Canticle for Leibowitz* [sic]: A Song for Benjamin," states, "The *idea* of the 'Jews,' their history and their sacred books are somewhat akin to palimpsests forming a new man, a new writing,

and a new history” (362). *Canticle*, indeed, is a palimpsest that forms a new fictional history that goes beyond the typical inevitability of a postnuclear-apocalyptic world. David J. Tietge, in his article “Priest, Professor, or Prophet: Discursive and Ethical Intersections in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*,” describes typical “after-the-bomb” novels as “trite projections of humankind reduced to its savage, Hobbesian state, a kind of neo-caveman scenario with bear-skinned nomads eking out a meager and violent existence in the rubble of the postapocalyptic landscape” (676). In *Canticle*, Miller goes beyond the typical postnuclear-war novel and introduces several layers of a postapocalyptic world that revisit and reinvent the Dark Ages and the Renaissance, weaving within them rich symbols, myths, and allusions that offer the reader a new look at the age-old conflict of science and religion. But Miller goes beyond that and offers the reader a bird’s-eye view of all the layers and eras of history, from the Garden of Eden to the Apocalypse, and gives rich commentary on what the world once was as well as what it might be.

Miller also emphasizes a “practical, moral commentary rather than a look at a putative end of days” (Fried 363). His most obvious commentary is a question: Is humankind destined to repeat history over and over again? In the third book of *Canticle*, set in the 38th century, a character named Dom Jethrah Zerchi contemplates:

Listen, are we helpless? Are we doomed to do it again and again and again? Have we no choice but to play the Phoenix in an unending sequence of rise and fall? Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Greece, Carthage, Rome, the Empires of Charlemagne and the Turk. Ground to dust and plowed with salt. Spain, France, Britain, America—burned into the

oblivion of the centuries. And again and again and again. (W.M. Miller 264)

The symbol of the phoenix to which Zerchi alludes is an apt image of the layers of history in *Canticle*, eras equal in time spans of 600 years each that keep recurring. In mythology, the phoenix is a sacred bird, a fire spirit that lives anywhere from 500 to 1,000 years. Near the end of its life cycle, it builds a nest of sticks, which catches fire and burns the bird to ashes. The phoenix remains dead for three days; then from the ashes appears a new phoenix that lives again, for as long as the previous one, and the cycle repeats itself again and again (Bluze). The 600-year cycles of time in *Canticle*, which recur in nearly identical fashion, can appropriately be associated with the phoenix. In the novel, Zerchi repeatedly ponders the cycles of time and repeated events, and then asks, “*Are we doomed to it, Lord, chained to the pendulum of our own mad clockwork, helpless to halt its swing? This time, it will swing us clean to oblivion*” (W.M. Miller 265).

Throughout *Canticle*, no matter what century the characters are in, Miller repeatedly poses questions about the world’s history and each civilization’s repetition of the events of the past, some of them tragic. Some of the questions are about the world’s final destruction, sometimes implying that the end will never come; others are about a history that will forever repeat itself. At the end of the novel, the final blame for the impending destruction of Earth is placed on the human race. In the article “History as Judgment and Promise in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*,” Dominic Manganiello calls it a “central historical irony” that “the more human beings know about nuclear technology, the less they know about themselves” and that “great knowledge has destroyed the world

rather than saving it” (162–163). Manganiello agrees with the text of *Canticle* that the blame for what has gone wrong on Earth lies with the human race.

In the third and final book of *Canticle*, “*Fiat Voluntas Tua*” (“Let Thy Will Be Done”), the 38th-century is stacked on top of countless human failures that span time, from the spiritual downfall of Adam and Eve to the Flood Deluge in the time of Noah to the recurring nuclear blasts of later eras. In this book, Zerchi “concludes rightly that the human race has failed miserably the test of fidelity to God’s word in contemporary times just as it did in the garden of Eden and in the time of Noah” and that man is “the perpetrator of evil” (Manganiello 163). *Canticle* tells the reader that “human nature, as well as history, repeats itself” (Manganiello 164). The palimpsestic nature of *Canticle* with its fantastical setting and multiple layers of time is an ideal place to explore the nature of humanity and the significance of history as a whole.

Miller skillfully incorporates a wide spectrum of history to explore the nature of humans. He depicts a type of dual humanity, or two human natures, through the character of Mrs. Grales, a “bicephalous [two-headed] old tomato woman” (W.M. Miller 261). One head is her own, and the other, named Rachel, appears to be the result of nuclear genetic mutation caused by an atomic blast, but Rachel also seems to have a spiritual, transearthy, eternal nature. The two heads are in direct contrast to each other; the head referred to as Mrs. Grales is finite and aging: “It had grown gray with the impersonal mask of coma. The lips seemed bloodless. Somehow he felt certain it was dying. He could imagine it withering and eventually falling away like a scab or an umbilical cord” (W.M. Miller 331). The face of Rachel, on the other hand, is young and fluctuates from a smile to passivity or prayerfulness: “Her smile froze and vanished. ... An expression of

complete passivity came over her face. With her head bowed that way, her whole attitude seemed suggestive of prayer. Gradually, out of the passivity, a smile was reborn. It grew” (W.M. Miller 331). Rachel is described as “a creature of primal innocence” with “a promise of resurrection” (W.M. Miller 332). Manganiello explains Mrs. Grales’ two heads: “The heads have been understood to express symbolically the spiritual conditions of human history: sin and grace. Her Rachel head, reborn after the atomic blast, links her ... with the Blessed Virgin Mary ... and is therefore a symbol of redeemed humanity” (166). Miller’s inclusion of a two-headed symbol reflects a message that humans are both finite and infinite, sinful and innocent, doomed and perhaps saved.

The name of the ageless head, Rachel, is also significant; Rachel in the Bible is the mother of Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. Jacob’s twelve sons become heads of the twelve tribes of Israel who flee their bondage in Egypt and eventually enter the Promised Land of Canaan. Jacob is also the line through which Jesus the Messiah was born. To Zerchi, the Rachel head indicates that humanity has hope, the hope of a promised land, a heavenly Canaan, salvation, and an eternal future.

In the novel, Zerchi realizes the significance of Rachel, whom he compares to the Virgin Mary: “Now he knew what she was, and he sobbed faintly when he could not again force his eyes to focus on those cool, green, and untroubled eyes of one born free. ... My soul doth magnify the Lord, ... He wanted to teach her these words as his last act, for he was certain that she shared something with the Maiden who first had spoken them” (W.M. Miller 332). Rachel responds with just one word: “Live” (W.M. Miller 332). Zerchi recognizes that Rachel possesses the “preternatural gifts of Eden—those gifts which Man had been trying to seize by brute force again from Heaven since first he lost

them” (W.M. Miller 332). Zerchi sees innocence in Rachel’s eyes and “a promise of resurrection” (W.M. Miller 332). Miller cleverly integrates all the layers of history into the character of this two-headed woman. She symbolizes humanity and the vast history of humanity in an immense array of events and people from the past, from creation in the Garden of Eden, to the tribes of Israel, to the Virgin Mary, to life, and to an eternal resurrection.

However, in Miller’s consistently acerbic style, he uses Rachel as a parody of hope, a mockery of the promise of any eternal bliss. Although Rachel apparently symbolizes infinity, grace, salvation, and an eternal future, she proves by the end of the novel to be nothing, merely a “voice trailing away in the new ruins. ‘la la la, la-la-la ...’” (W.M. Miller 332). Zerchi lays with his face down, waiting for the fulfillment of this promise; however, “Nothing else ever came—nothing that he saw, or felt, or heard” (W.M. Miller 332).

The trailing voice of Rachel leads the reader into the final chapter of the novel, where singing children are being lifted into a starship that will take them and a group of nuns and monks away from an Earth that is aflame in its final destruction. Above them, “The visage of Lucifer mushroomed into hideousness above the cloudbank, rising slowly like some titan climbing to its feet after ages of imprisonment in the Earth” (333). Here, Miller alludes to the biblical passage in the Book of Revelation where Satan is loosed for a season before fire comes down from heaven to destroy Earth (*The New International Version of the Bible*, Rev. 20.7–8). The final paragraph of *Canticle* depicts a hungry shark, most likely alluding to Satan, who has devoured all his prey and still lives in “the old clean currents ... [and] was very hungry that season” (W.M. Miller 334). Miller may



also be making reference to the Darwinian theory of the survival of the fittest; the strongest creature in the ocean—the shark—is Earth’s final survivor. But in spite of Miller’s numerous biblical overtones, the remnant of humanity in *Canticle* does not spend eternity in heaven. Miller’s remnant from Earth merely stays in space for a period of time and then goes to another planet where humanity will stay alive and where history will again most likely recycle itself.

#### *Palimpsestic Metaphors for Canticle*

*A Canticle for Leibowitz*, with its multiple layers of history and time—from the ancient past through all known epochs to 1,800 years in the future—unmistakably fits the definition of a palimpsestic novel and corresponds with the metaphor of the Archimedes Palimpsest. The type of palimpsestic manuscript that would aptly serve as a metaphor for *Canticle* could certainly be a parchment that has been scraped and rewritten on several times; however, because there are so many layers in *Canticle*, a more appropriate metaphor might be the palimpsests of architecture or archaeology. Architects use the term *palimpsestic* to refer to buildings that have been resurfaced or remodeled numerous times throughout the ages. Over time, parts of the newer layers deteriorate and expose layers of past architectural styles, colors, and designs, sometimes from centuries before, providing important information about ancient architectural methods and practices. Architects imply that a palimpsestic building is a ghost image of what once was, and they refer to architectural palimpsests as “accumulated iterations of a design or a site, whether in literal layers of archaeological remains, or by the figurative accumulation and reinforcement of design ideas over time” (MacAnTsaoir and Blair).



*An architectural palimpsest in downtown Toronto, Ontario, Canada (“Palimpsests as Metaphor”)*

The term *palimpsestic* is also used by archaeologists to refer to the layers of earth that reveal clues about other eras of time. As archaeologists carefully dig through palimpsestic layers in the earth, they find buried bits and pieces of artifacts and evidences of history that they collect piecemeal and interpret as accurately as possible in order to understand the past. *Canticle* can easily be compared to the multiple layers of archaeological digs where scattered artifacts of history lie. In fact, the most important artifacts in *A Canticle for Leibowitz* are discovered underground in a subterranean bomb shelter. In the first book, in the mid-2500s, while the world above ground lies in waste after being nearly destroyed by a nuclear holocaust, a monk named Brother Francis Gerard finds traces of history safely preserved underground. The narrator explains, “The ruins above ground had been reduced to archaeological ambiguity by generations of scavengers, but this underground ruin had been touched by no hand but the hand of

impersonal disaster. The place seemed haunted by the presences of another age” (W.M. Miller 22).

In the bomb shelter, Brother Francis finds a metal box with handwritten papers inside. The first paper he examines, which is glued to the inside of the lid, is a note to someone named Carl. The note provides hints of a palimpsest since “the ink had faded, and the paper was so darkened by rusty stains that even good handwriting would have been hard enough to read” (W.M. Miller 25). A second note merely says “*Pound pastrami,*” while on another one is scrawled “*can kraut, six bagels—bring home for Emma*” (W.M. Miller 26). Yet another note reads, “*Remember—pick up Form 1040, Uncle Revenue*” (W.M. Miller 26). There is a book in the bomb shelter titled *Memo*, which reminds Brother Francis of the Memorabilia, the sacred texts being preserved by the monks in the monastery where Brother Francis lives. The book contains dates, which allows Brother Francis to place his discoveries in the 1950s and 1960s. Finally, Brother Francis examines a blueprint of a Transistorized Control System for Unit Six-B. Although he has no idea what it is, he considers it a valuable find since blueprints have become sacred objects, and all the other blueprints in the abbey have “faded long ago from overexposure to light” (W.M. Miller 27). Brother Francis is in awe of his discovery. Tietge describes Brother Francis as “an audience in receptive admiration of the wonders of the ancients” (680). The faded pieces of paper in the bomb shelter remind us of the *scriptio inferior* of a palimpsest, the ink that fades over time.

The narrator in *Canticle* discounts the ability of the world to correctly interpret or learn from these handwritten notes. The narrator states, “Francis had sufficiently recovered from his initial fright to realize that the shelter ... might well be teeming with

rich relics of an age which the world had, for the most part, *deliberately chosen to forget*. ... To find a bit of the past which had escaped both the bonfires and the looting scavengers was a rare stroke of luck these days” (emphasis added, W.M. Miller 22–23). Miller suggests here that humans deliberately erase history from their minds and from their judgments, a type of self-imposed amnesia, most likely so they can go about living the way they choose and thus unknowingly repeat the errors of the past. Ralph C. Wood, in his article “Lest the World’s Amnesia Be Complete: A Reading of Walter Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*,” calls *Canticle* “a small song of blessing and praise for the Hope that might yet rescue the world from its otherwise fatal amnesia” (27). In the penultimate chapter of *Canticle*, after Zerchi pronounces his final edict on the human race, the narrator concludes that “the world fell somehow short of a *half-remembered Eden*” (emphasis added, W.M. Miller 328).

Another palimpsestic metaphor is worth noting here. In medicine, the term *palimpsest* is used to refer to acute amnesia, a complete loss of memory after a critical event (MacAnTsaoir and Blair). The most common event that brings on this type of amnesia is extreme consumption of alcohol, and thus the medical term *alcoholic palimpsest* (MacAnTsaoir and Blair). This type of palimpsest certainly serves as an ideal metaphor for humankind’s self-imposed amnesia in *Canticle* and the characters’ continual failure to remember the many layers of the past.

Brother Francis does try to decipher the meaning of the underground artifacts he finds. Just like an archaeologist, he meets the challenge to discover what history and people from the past can be discovered by studying the underground relics and their significance to the present. In *Canticle*, we find that Brother Francis and the other

characters who have survived the nuclear holocaust do not put these pieces of the past together very well. They do not realize the importance of correctly deciphering the relics left by former civilizations.

In her thesis “Historical Palimpsests in Architecture and Archaeology,” Rachael Kitagawa of the University of British Columbia describes the significance of artifacts that are left behind when cultures and societies fade away:

As societies rise and fall, it is inevitable as they progress through time, artifacts will be left behind. In Percy Shelley’s *Ozymandias*, the only evidence of this society’s place in history is marked by a lone sculpture, though the surrounding infrastructure and built fabric has disappeared, it stands as a landmark of past history. (Kitagawa)

In *Canticle*, the “lone sculpture,” its “Ozymandias,” is the collection of commonplace writings on pieces of paper—the blueprint, notes, and grocery list—that belonged to a prenuclear-holocaust engineer named Isaac Leibowitz.

The artifacts in *Canticle* are discovered 600 years after a fictional mid-20th-century nuclear holocaust. The setting is in the desert near a “distant cluster of buildings,” a large monastery called the Leibowitz Abbey (W.M. Miller 7). The abbey’s historical records show that Isaac Edward Leibowitz, one of the few survivors of the nuclear holocaust, “had fled to the Cistercians [a Catholic religious order of monks] where he remained in hiding during the early post-Deluge years” (W.M. Miller 63). There, Leibowitz embraces religious life, and the new Pope, in what is now called new Rome, gives him permission to form a new religious community whose task is to preserve

human history. However, Leibowitz is eventually martyred—hanged by a mob—and thus granted sainthood.

It is 600 years later when Brother Francis, a young novice from Leibowitz' monastery, is attempting to carry out his Lenten fast and comes across the bomb shelter with items that belonged to Leibowitz. But because Brother Francis has little or no knowledge of the 20th century before the nuclear holocaust, his find leads to a misinterpretation and a satiric sanctification of the items. Brother Francis and the other monks in the abbey declare them holy relics that add important doctrine to their religion, which is already absurdly based on the sanctification and sainthood of Leibowitz. Kitagawa reminds us that “[a]rtifacts and historic landscapes are a physical symbol of a historical society and culture. They can remind people of past events” (Kitagawa). But she goes on to ask, “But how are these artifacts interpreted in the present?” (Kitagawa). Walker Percy writes, “When one age dies, its symbols lose their referents and become incomprehensible” (231). *Canticle* clearly tells the reader that artifacts from the past are important, but the story goes on to show how the characters misconstrue the past and thus create beliefs and a religion in the present that are flawed.

Miller, through wit, humor, and irony, sheds light on how the sole remains of a previous era, when misinterpreted, create a buffoonlike story of fools who worship and sanctify normal people as well as mundane, earthly objects. David Seed, in his article “Recycling the Texts of the Culture: Walter M. Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*,” states that Miller “builds a comedy of incomprehension,” and the text is “charged with half-concealed meaning” (261). Tietge writes, “Miller’s skill in capturing the mythologizing of historical events represents how easily a logical, if mistaken, conclusion can be drawn

from the existing evidence” (681). He adds the well known axiom, “a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing” (681). *Canticle* effectively communicates that history repeats itself largely because humankind misinterprets what knowledge there is of the past. The first book of the novel, set in a postnuclear-war futuristic time in approximately the mid-2500s, becomes a “rerun of the Dark Ages ... which traces out a historical sequence through its three books until the novel ends at a point where nuclear war breaks out afresh ... to dramatize the aftermath of a disaster as historical repetition” (Seed 257).

#### *Palimpsestic Layers in Canticle*

*Canticle* opens in one of the the *scriptios superior*, the one that takes place in the mid-2500s in an Arizona desert near an ancient monastery that has somehow survived a 20th-century worldwide nuclear destruction. The monastery, described as the only building left standing after the nuclear war, is reminiscent of a famous abbey in Italy that held great significance for Miller. As a radio operator and tail gunner for the Army Air Corps in World War II, Miller flew fifty-three Allied bombing missions over Italy and participated in a series of famous and controversial bombings of the Roman Catholic Abbey at Monte Cassino, built in 429. The experience was traumatic for Miller, who became a Roman Catholic after the war but later became disenchanted with Catholicism. He then embraced a self-made religion that he referred to as “somewhere west of Zen and east of the Son” (Garvey 7). His focus on a nearly identical abbey in *Canticle* clearly points to his traumatic war experiences in Italy. Miller’s wartime and postwar experiences greatly affect the content of *Canticle*. In the mid-1940s, the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were targets of the first nuclear bombs. Throughout the rest of

the 1940s and during the 1950s, the postwar period before Miller wrote *Canticle* in 1959, the fear of nuclear war was rampant, and those with enough money built underground bomb shelters and prepared for what they thought was inevitable: a worldwide nuclear destruction. The underground bomb shelter introduced in the first chapter of *Canticle* clearly reflects that mid-20th century era—the first *scriptio inferior* of the novel—when a war-weary world feared nuclear weapons of mass destruction in an era of nuclear threats that came to be called the Cold War.

Although the novel opens with a description of postnuclear humanity—people who are “misborn, . . . monsters in the earth [who] suffered to live”—the main characters of *Canticle* are Roman Catholics, particularly monks who live in an abbey (W.M. Miller 3). In the tradition of Saint Leibowitz, who is said to have been commissioned by the Pope to preserve history, the monks in the monastery are committed to copying, preserving, hiding, and memorizing the scant remains of any written material they have found in the postnuclear rubble. Their work is done in secret to hide written history from the Simpletons, other survivors of the nuclear holocaust who want a new world with no traces of what went before. Monks called bookleggers copy and recopy books and then smuggle them to the desert in the Southwest, where they bury them in kegs. Other monks, the memorizers, commit written texts to memory to protect the information from destruction. However, as Susan Spenser states in her article “The Post-Apocalyptic Library: Oral and Literate Culture in *Fahrenheit 451* and *A Canticle for Leibowitz*,” “The monks’ painstakingly reconstructed ‘literacy’ turns out to be a world of signifiers with no corresponding signifieds to give them concrete meaning” (337). The monks’ written and memorized materials are repeatedly and increasingly misconstrued and misinterpreted.



As the story begins, in the first book titled “*Fiat Homo*” (“Let There Be Man”), a novice monk named Brother Francis is trying to fulfill his Lenten vow of fasting, but he is interrupted and startled by the appearance of a very old pilgrim on the horizon. This opening *scriptio superior* of the novel is unmistakably futuristic, but surprisingly, the world is not the typically portrayed advanced, high-tech civilization of the future found in most science fiction novels. Rather, the reader soon discovers that the scene in the future is actually a recurrence and repetition of the European Dark Ages, the novel’s second *scriptio inferior*. It is now called a new Dark Age, but there is actually nothing new about it. Although it is centuries after a modern-day nuclear war, what is left of civilization has returned to that period of intellectual darkness that followed the fifth-century decline of the Roman Empire and lasted through part of the 15th century.

The monks in this first book of *Canticle* are simplistic and superstitious, like the civilizations of the Dark Ages. Religious life replicates the religious practices of the Dark Ages. Life for the monks in the monastery emulates the medieval monastic practices of taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The monks reject all worldly lifestyles and possessions, choosing instead to endure isolation with long periods of silence and fasting, disciplining themselves with hard work, intense religious studies, and prayers repeated eight times a day. The monks are reminiscent of both the Cistercian and the Benedictine monks of the Middle Ages, who were strict, disciplined, and isolated monks in sects that valued written texts and believed that through them, an “individual climbed toward a perfection thought to represent complete understanding and effortless communication with God” (Stock 90).

But just as the reader settles in to a futuristic *scriptio superior* and a Dark Ages *scriptio inferior*, Miller introduces other layers of history, more *scriptios inferior*, that date back to the first century and, at the same time, continue to allude to the 20th century. The layer of the first century is represented by the wandering pilgrim who represents the legend of the Wandering Jew who is said to have heckled Jesus on the way to the cross. The 20th century is further explored when Brother Francis and the pilgrim discover the underground fallout shelter used during the fictional mid-20th-century nuclear holocaust. The enthusiasm of the monks to canonize the items found in the fallout shelter and make them significant religious documents introduces a humorous, comedic aspect to the novel. The monks' serious attempts to interpret the limited written remains of the past bring out the futility of an uneducated society that grasps for hope in religiously irrelevant items that become sacred through erroneous interpretation. The documents from the fallout shelter, as well as the Memorabilia already canonized in the monastery, are copied time and again by the monks. Even Brother Francis dedicates fifteen years of his own life to copying and producing a beautiful illuminated replica of the Memorabilia. He eventually attempts to take his copy on a dangerous, sacred pilgrimage to the Pope in new Rome. The monks repeatedly make mistakes and introduce errors into the texts they copy. One monk, Brother Sarl, is making mistakes, so he is allowed to take a break from his work for an hour a day. His superior, Brother Horner, explains, "When the work gets so tedious that he starts making errors in copy, he can put it aside for a while and work on his own project" (W.M. Miller 71). These errors in copying are an allusion to the scribal errors of the past that later elicited strong criticism of ancient copied texts.

The second book, “*Fiat Lux*” (“Let There Be Light”), is in a more literate era 600 years after the first book of the novel. A character named Thon Taddeo, a well respected secular scholar, receives “permission to study the Memorabilia, and his ‘rediscovery’ and interpretation of these hidden works prompts a renaissance of learning” (Spencer 337). The *scriptio inferior* now moves to the Renaissance, the era of intellectual enlightenment that followed the Dark Ages. In this second book, sacred texts are still being copied by hand at first. Aadditional knowledge and learning are being trusted more. The strong role of the Catholic Church is being replaced by secular leadership, and literacy is secularizing the world. Taddeo, a quite rude individual, moves into the monastery to study the Memorabilia, becoming a constant irritation to the monks with his bad manners and pride. The monks not only find him objectionable, but they also do not trust him. He is representative of the Renaissance Man, the highly intellectual, literate, creative, and much distrusted man of the original Renaissance. The opportunities, talents, and capacities of the original Renaissance Man were limitless, and his ideas were constantly challenged by the Roman Catholic Church. The same conflict is again a debate in *Canticle* during the new Renaissance of the 32nd century. In a discourse between two of *Canticle*’s characters, Taddeo and Marcus Apollo, Taddeo (the Renaissance Man) challenges the veracity of history:

[Apollo:] ‘You reject all history, then, as myth?’ ...

[Taddeo:] ‘Not “reject.” But it must be questioned. Who wrote your histories?’

‘The monastic Orders, of course. During the darkest centuries, there was no one else to record them.’ ...

‘There! You have it. And during the time of the anti-popes, how many schismatic Orders were fabricating their own versions of things, and passing off their versions as the work of earlier men? You can’t know, you can’t *really* know. . . . But where is there evidence of the kind of machines your historians tell us they had in those days? Where are the remains of self-moving carts, of flying machines?’

‘Beaten into plowshares and hoes.’

‘*If* they existed.’

‘If you doubt it, why bother studying the Leibowitzian documents?’ (W.M. Miller 127)

Taddeo does not hesitate to answer Apollo’s final question: “Because a doubt is not a denial. Doubt is a powerful tool, and it should be applied to history” (W.M. Miller 128).

Taddeo’s idea about history is similar to Francis Bacon’s in his 1605 *The Advancement of Learning*, in which he writes, “A true history of learning throughout the ages is wanting” (Bacon).

In the third book of *Canticle*, “*Fiat Voluntas Tua*” (“Thy Will Be Done”), Miller introduces yet another *scriptio superior* (the 38th century) and another *scriptio inferior* (a return to an industrialized, literate, space-oriented era similar to the 20th century).

Taddeo is dead but has become a saint; he is credited largely with producing this highly literate civilization. The race is said to consider itself “a race of divinely inspired toolmakers; . . . a race of impassioned after-dinner speechmakers” (W.M. Miller 243). It is a race destined to “go forth to conquer stars. To conquer them several times, if need be, and certainly to make speeches about the conquest” (W.M. Miller 244). The people of

this age are called “the generations of the light,” but they are also called “fuzzy impossibilities” (W.M. Miller 239, 243). Miller makes clear that this final civilization, in “the Year of Our Lord 3781,” is the full embodiment and full representation of all civilizations, all history, and all eras of time (W.M. Miller 239). The people of the 38th century proclaim, “We are the centuries” (W.M. Miller 243). Then they make clear what that means:

We have your Babylons and your Pompeiis, your Caesars and your chromium-plated (vital-ingredient-impregnated) artifacts. We have your bloody hatchets and your Hiroshimas. ... telling bawdy jokes about a farm girl name of Eve and a traveling salesman called Lucifer. We bury your dead and their reputations. We bury you. We are the centuries. (W.M. Miller 244)

Then this generation makes it clear that they are not new, that they are not a generation, but rather a regeneration, a remake of many *scriptios inferior*:

Generation, regeneration, again, again, as in a ritual, with blood-stained vestments and nail-torn hands, children of Merlin, chasing a gleam. Children, too, of Eve, forever building Edens—and kicking them apart in berserk fury because somehow it isn’t the same. ... Hear then, the last Canticle of the Brethren of the Order of Leibowitz, as sung by the century that swallowed its name. (W.M. Miller 244)

Brother Francis, now referred to as the Venerable Francis of Utah, is vaguely remembered only by Zerchi, now the head abbot of the still-existing monastic order. The ancient abbey is still there, but now there are modern additions with aluminum and glass

walls. The old abbey and the new addition are separated by a six-lane highway. Saint Leibowitz is now more popular as the patron saint of electricians than he was as the founder of the Order of Saint Leibowitz. It is notable that in this enlightened age, this new Renaissance, this era of the reinvention of the light bulb, Leibowitz's secular profession as an electrician is more highly regarded.

People now live in what is called a new world, but "it was inevitable that the race succumb again to the old maladies on new worlds, even as on Earth before, in the litany of life and in the special liturgy of Man" (W.M. Miller 244). The vestiges of the past are still intertwined in this new world. All the histories of all civilizations come together in this final century, this final book of the novel. Miller then symbolizes all time with a spinning globe of the world. A character named Joshua "twirled the globe faster, ... like a gaming wheel, faster and yet faster until the continents and oceans became a blur" (W.M. Miller 260). The spinning is symbolic of mixing all epochs of history together, and the blurriness points directly to the faded layers of a palimpsest. Joshua stops the globe suddenly with his thumb and reverses the spin "until the axial mountings rattled; 'days' flitted by as briefest instants" (W.M. Miller 260). Then he asks, "Reversing time thereby?" (W.M. Miller 260–261). The globe now becomes a symbol of the repetition of history, the cyclical nature of past eras, and the *scriptios inferior* that regenerate into one repetitive *scriptio superior* after another, finally ending in an era that encompasses all time and ushers in the end of the world. "He [Joshua] kept spinning the globe in reverse, as if hoping the simulacrum of Earth possessed the Chronos for unwinding time" (W.M. Miller 261). He considers using a motor to "spin it back to the beginning of Man," but then he stops it again with his thumb (W.M. Miller 261). In his article, "Recycling the

Texts of the Culture: Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*," David Seed comments on time in *Canticle*: "Time therefore functions in a variety of different ways in this complex novel. Dates give us linear time; recurrences and resemblance suggest cycles" (268).

The people in the final book of *Canticle* are hopeful, sometimes singing and placing their confidence in a better tomorrow. The starship that will eventually take them to another planet is "an act of hope. Hope for Man elsewhere, peace somewhere, if not here and now, then someplace. . . . It is a weary and dog-tired hope, maybe, a hope that says: Shake the dust off your sandals and go preach Sodom to Gomorrha. But it is hope, or it wouldn't say *go* at all" (W.M. Miller 284). But the scene is only a satire of hope, and the reader looks on the starship passengers from afar and laughs at their ridiculous confidence in a peaceful home somewhere in space.

In the final chapter, flashes fill the horizon as a procession of monks climbs the starship's ladder. They look back on a "visage of Lucifer mushroomed into hideousness" (W.M. Miller 333). Allusions to the biblical end of the world are evident in the final chapter, as well as the eternal hope of a final remnant being taken to a better place; in this case, a place in space called Centaurus Colony. Abbot Zerchi tells the children and the religious group on the starship, "You are the continuity of the Order. . . . With you goes the Memorabilia" (W.M. Miller 288). One can only wonder how the documents and artifacts they take with them will be interpreted in the next *scriptio superior*, the next layer of the future. The abbot thus passes on to them the next cycle of history, a new layer of the palimpsest. It is worth noting that this next layer is blurry—"There came a blur, . . . and the starship thrust itself heavenward" (W.M. Miller 333)—thus ironically making it a

*scriptio inferior* even though it is a *scriptio superior*; it is a blurry, futuristic, new layer that functions as both palimpsestic layers.

Before the starship takes off, the abbot tells its passengers:

You will be years in space. The ship will be your monastery. After the patriarchal see is established at the Centaurus Colony, you will establish there a mother house of the Visitationist Friars of the Order of Saint Leibowitz of Tycho. But the ship will remain in your hands, and the Memorabilia. If civilization, or a visage of it, can maintain itself on Centaurus, you will send missions to the other colony worlds, and perhaps eventually to the colonies of their colonies. (W.M. Miller 289)

Here, the abbot answers a previous question, “Are we doomed to do it again and again and again?” (W.M. Miller 264). His answer is a tacit *yes*. After all, they will be reestablishing the monastery, a patriarchal pope, the legend of Saint Leibowitz, and the sacred Memorabilia. But the abbot also adds that nothing is certain, and he calls the trip into space “a long and doubtful journey, a new Exodus from Egypt under the auspices of a God who must surely be very weary of the race of Man” (W.M. Miller 290).

History does not come to an end at the close of the novel. Even in the final chapter, Miller adds yet another layer to history, a future layer that carries with it a hope that is not really hope, but rather another inevitable and predictable cycle of time. Manganiello calls the repeating patterns of history “a ‘recollection forward’ to the final coming of the Integrator or Lord of history, who, as Alpha and Omega, is able to join the beginning and the end, fold up the narrative of the human story like a book, and fit things



together again” (167). Miller certainly leaves the final remnant of humanity hanging literally in space with strict instructions to repeat, replicate, and recycle history.

### *A Blurry Significance*

The multiple layers of *scriptio inferior* in *Canticle* are definitely blurrier and spottier than the single underlayer in *Kindred* and, thus, more challenging to understand. Whereas *Kindred* moves from historical blurriness to clarity, it could be said that *Canticle* moves from blurriness to farce as the tale plays out in a humorous reinvention of the futility of humanity caught in recurring cycles of history. While *Kindred* goes from “bi-ness” to “one-ness,” *Canticle* goes from “multi-ness” to a “wide gulf” that separates history and contemporary society—a chasm that grows wider with time, setting the stage for the darkest, most negative events and characteristics of history to repeat themselves. It is a cyclical history destined to recur, and the characters seem to never learn from the past and thus muddle and make a mess of the present and the future. The characters in *Canticle* realize this by the second book of the novel. The narrator explains, “There was indeed a gulf; that much was plain. The abbot felt suddenly that he belonged not to this age at all, that he had been left stranded somewhere on a sandbar in Time’s river, and that there wasn’t really ever a bridge at all” (W.M. Miller 180–181).

One may ask, then, what contemporary societal significance is there in *scriptios inferior* that are so blurred, spotty, and convoluted and in a history that continues to recycle and repeat itself and undergo constant misinterpretation? The significance lies in the misinterpretation itself, in the ambiguity of history and the travesty of definitively interpreting it with incomplete information. Miller presents the irony and absurdity of

basing societies or religions on limited facts and misinterpretations from the past. He also subtly reveals his disdain for the misinterpretations proliferated by the Catholic Church throughout the ages. Paul Brians, in his article “A Study for Walter M. Miller, Jr.: *A Canticle for Leibowitz*,” describes the trivial pieces of historical artifacts discovered in *Canticle* as “scraps of prewar knowledge ... gathered and preserved by a Catholic Church which no longer understands that knowledge” (Brians).

In the second book of the novel, during the new Renaissance, the items are appropriately referred to as an enigma or a puzzle: “The secular scholar, in two days had unraveled a bit of a puzzle that had been lying around, a complete enigma, for a dozen centuries. ... some fragmentary pre-Deluge science text” (W.M. Miller 194). The idea of an enigma adds a layer of complexity to the novel that invites the reader to attempt to decode some sort of a message in the text. Walker Percy calls *Canticle* a “cipher, a coded message, a book in a strange language” (227). He goes on to say, “Like a cipher, the book has a secret. But unlike a cipher, the secret can’t be told. Telling it ruins it” (227). David Seed says, “The very text of *A Canticle* ... is charged with half-concealed meaning” (260).

*Canticle* is, indeed, replete with messages for the reader to attempt to decode. The book’s ciphers include Latin words and phrases, words written in Hebrew, ritual sacrifices, the idea of the scapegoat, the electric light bulb, the phoenix, characters’ names, eras of time, and numerous other cryptic symbols and historical allusions that demand further investigation. The idea of attempting to decode ciphers in *Canticle* is comparable to scholars trying to scrutinize and translate the readable portions, the 85 percent, of the faded Archimedes text hidden underneath the words of the common prayer

book. The idea of decoding also reminds us of how archaeologists closely examine and interpret pieces and shards of history found in the underlayers of the earth but seldom find all the answers about the past.

The puzzle pieces referred to in the novel certainly suggest that even if society possesses bits and pieces of the past, it will never be able to put those pieces together to form a complete puzzle or an absolutely clear picture. It is easy for an incomplete puzzle to be misconstrued and misinterpreted. Thus, it is the sardonic message of *Canticle* that pieces of history's puzzle are missing, and thus, history is often misinterpreted. Thon Taddeo, the novel's representation of the Renaissance Man, studies Leibowitz's grocery list and blueprint (the sacred Memorabilia) in the second book, and says, "We now have a fairly clear idea of where we're going and what we have to work with here. It will still take considerable time to finish of course. The pieces have to be fitted together, and they don't all belong to the same puzzle" (W.M. Miller 195).

### *Splatterings of History*

*Canticle's* uniqueness is its plethora of layers and its complex palimpsestic strata. Miller includes three futuristic postnuclear-war societies—the 2500s, the 3100s, and the 3700s—as his *scriptios superior*. He also distinctly uses at least three eras in the past—the Dark Ages, the Renaissance, and the mid-1900s—as *scriptios inferior*. The obvious underlayers cover the Middle Ages, when literacy was low; the Renaissance, when learning reigned supreme and religion was pushed to the background; and the mid-1900s, when the world was on high alert for a possible nuclear holocaust. Throughout the novel, Miller also has a prolific splattering of random bits of history, primarily religious history

with references to the biblical accounts of creation, the Noahic Flood, the temptation of Jesus in the desert, the crucifixion, and portions of ancient Hebrew writings. Since Miller was a former Catholic, it is not surprising that he utilizes biblical overtones. It is also not surprising that he often refers to Catholicism and its practices with acerbic cynicism and parodies the religious institution he later came to disdain. His establishment of a future religion based on farcical documents is an obvious scorn of institutionalized religion. The new religious institution Miller creates in *Canticle* is absurd, based on the sanctification of an engineer's grocery list and blueprint and the sainthood of that engineer, Isaac Leibowitz. The sainthood by the Catholic Church of a man with a clearly Jewish name like Leibowitz—an unlikely merger of Christianity and Judaism—only adds to the irony and absurdity of a tale already based on failed memories and misconstrued facts.

The splatterings of history, however, share equal importance with the clearly identified palimpsestic layers. The splatterings begin in the first chapter, which makes rapid allusions to random pieces of history. It utilizes the Hebrew language, the Wandering Jew, Satan's temptation of Jesus in the desert, the Latin Vulgate, Lent, Ash Wednesday, a 20th-century fallout shelter, and the Flame Deluge (the nuclear holocaust). But before the reader is confused by haphazard times and events, Miller focuses on the 20th century as Brother Francis digs in the ancient ruins of a pre-Deluge fallout shelter. The shelter, though, also contains splattered bits of history—a gold tooth, a skeleton, handwritten notes, a grocery list, a blueprint, and more. The more sparse the information, the more comical their interpretation, and the monks who discover the relics do not benefit from them but rather use them to create an altered, farcical religious society. *Canticle* describes it as “a dark, ignorant, and workaday world, where literacy was

nonexistent and a literate youth ... seemed of no worth to a community unless he could also farm, fight, hunt or show some special talent for intertribal theft, or for the divining of water and workable metal” (W.M. Miller 55). Splattered bits of history thus add to the droll, ludicrous nature of the tale.

By the sixth chapter, Miller uses splatterings of history to describe the historic account of the Flame Deluge, the name for the mid-1900s fictional atomic war. In relating what happened, he alludes to God, the Noahic Flood, the fires of hell, and the magi:

It was said that God, in order to test mankind which had become swelled with pride as in the time of Noah, had commanded the wise men of that age, among them the Blessed Leibowitz, to devise great engines of war such as had never before been upon the Earth, weapons of such might that they contained the very fires of Hell, and that God had suffered these magi to place the weapons in the hands of princes. (61)

By the seventh chapter, the allusions to history include a monastic culture and limited literacy with monks using animal skins scraped into parchment to write on. Brother Francis “found the finest available lambskin and spent several weeks of his spare time at curing it and stretching it and stoning it to a perfect surface, which he eventually bleached to a snowy whiteness and carefully stored away” (78). It reminds the reader of the Archimedes Palimpsest, but it also reminds the reader of pre-Gutenberg, preprinting press, when books were painstakingly copied by hand and manuscripts were artfully illuminated with climbing vines twisting around capital letters. But instead of an illuminated Gutenberg Bible that launched the Renaissance, in *Canticle* it is an

illuminated copy of Isaac Leibowitz' handwritten notes, grocery list, and faded blueprint. Scattered pieces of history become enduring, sacred texts for this post-Flame-Deluge society. History is thus misread and then venerated in its inaccuracy.

In his article, Manganiello describes this farce of recycling history based on incomplete information: "What appears to be progress is actually regression" (160). Walker Percy writes that "when one age dies, its symbols lose their referents and become incomprehensible" (qtd. in Seed 269). David Seed says, "The grimmest implication of repetition in the novel is the suggestion that history consists of a cyclical script determining human behavior from era to era" (269). He adds that *Canticle* "achieves much of its impact by ... destabilizing the signifying systems that underpin culture" (269).

The rest of the novel alludes to numerous other bits of history, Jewish traditions, and biblical accounts. Among them are Thomas Edison, the light bulb, rare volumes of books chained to library tables, an abacus, and a wall slate. Miller splatters the text with allusions to the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Exodus, Joshua leading the Israelites into the Promised Land, and the raising of Lazarus from the dead. He includes Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus, the cock that crowed each of the three times Peter denied Jesus, and the crown of thorns worn by Jesus on the way to the cross. People from the past include Eve, Job, Satan, Abraham, Solomon, the Queen of Sheba, Jesus, and the Caesars. Historic places include Babylon, Pompei, Hiroshima, and more. Surprisingly, Miller's splatters of history in *Canticle* do have meaning, which a future, more in-depth study could cover.

*Sardonic Hope in the Final Scriptio Superior*

Although *Canticle* ends with the impending ultimate destruction of Earth by fire, humanity will not be completely destroyed in the eradication of the planet. Notably, the final leader of humanity is named Brother Joshua, a clear allusion to the biblical Joshua who, along with Caleb, led the Israelites into the Promised Land, conquering their enemies along the way. In *Canticle*, Brother Joshua leads the final remnant into the starship to “climb the heavens into a vaster uncertainty than any uncertainty faced by Man on Earth” (W.M. Miller 305). Here, Miller sets up the reader for the final layer, the other-planetary and blurry *scriptio superior*. Brother Joshua will lead the remnant to their Promised Land, and thus “the future of humanity, as well as its past, becomes uniform and theologically continuous” (Fried 371).

*Canticle* ends with the starship, a symbol of hope, leaving Earth: “There came a blur, a glare of light, a high thin whining sound, and the starship thrust itself heavenward” (W.M. Miller 333). It is important to note that the starship goes *heavenward*, not *to heaven*, which alerts the reader to the satirical nature of this journey into space that only appears to be redemptive and hopeful. Miller leaves his final characters in limbo and the reader to wonder what the final *scriptio superior* will be like in the other-planetary Centaurus Colony. The reader has a fairly good idea about the future for this remnant from Earth. After all, every layer of history has recurred again and again and again in the novel. Miller has used layering for a purpose: to depict a world of repeated errors, repeated failures, and futile human attempts to succeed. The world in *Canticle* is a cyclical world in which no progress is ever made.

In *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Walter M. Miller, Jr. has skillfully created several futuristic *scriptios superior* that integrate and mix with multiple layers of *scriptios inferior*, layers that inevitably recur in continuous repetitions of history. The interpretation of the layers is based largely on an understanding of historical eras and biblical allusions, but the blurriness and thus the open-ended interpretation of the layers in *Canticle* should neither be simplified nor trivialized only as religious analysis. The distortions, the blurriness, the countless symbols, and, in particular, the metaphor of the spinning globe of the world with time going both forward and in reverse, invite countless ideas and interpretations about the past, the present, and the future of the world. Interpreting the many palimpsestic layers and splatterings of history in *Canticle* is difficult, just as it was challenging for scientists to decipher the underlayer of the Archimedes Palimpsest. Understanding the meaning and import of *Canticle* is like trying to comprehend the shards of history found in archaeological digs. However, when the layers of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* are illuminated through close study, the result is an astounding bird's-eye view of the world that remarkably comes close to unifying all eras and all layers of humanity.



## Conclusion

This thesis has investigated a possible classification or genre under the speculative fiction umbrella, a category I have referred to as palimpsestic novels. I first became interested in a possible new speculative fiction genre after realizing the critical disagreement over a genre classification for Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. The novel has a "precarious generic status" (S. Wood 85) and, as admitted by the author, does not fit into any of the existing speculative fiction genres or subgenres. After a thorough review of the literature and a close examination of the novel, I have concluded that *Kindred*, indeed, bears numerous palimpsestic characteristics, more than enough to place it in a category of palimpsestic novels. The novel has an underlying layer (*scriptio inferior*) of slave narrative set in a fantastical setting of time travel, with a contemporary relevance that fulfills Butler's purpose to "get people to feel slavery" (Snider) and to get "the character back to confront where she came from" (Kenan 496). Butler's purpose is accomplished through her skillful layering of two eras—the novel's clearly palimpsestic characteristic.

In my search for other novels that might fit into this category, I discovered that Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* also fits nicely into a palimpsestic classification. The novel is extremely complex with a plethora of futuristic layers (*scriptios superior*) superimposed over multiple historical layers (*scriptios inferior*) that encompass all past civilizations of humanity. It proves, indeed, to be palimpsestic with its layers of time that reach back to the Garden of Eden and extend to a post-Apocalyptic era. *Canticle* spins the ages of time—its multiple palimpsestic layers—into an

amalgamation of eras that can be perceived as a composite picture of all humanity. The novel is replete with multiple layers of historical eras that illuminate the relevance and, satirically, the futility of present-day and future generations.

After thorough analyses of *Kindred* and *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, I have determined the clear existence in both novels of historical underlayers that provide significance to contemporary or future eras. Using the Archimedes Palimpsest as well as architectural, archaeological, and medical metaphors, I have examined the novels based on concrete foundational images that give tangible credence to the novels' palimpsestic natures. The layering of past and present as well as fact and fantasy in both novels places them neatly into a category of their own—palimpsestic novels.

The discovery of two novels that are so clearly palimpsestic not only establishes the palimpsestic novel as a valid classification and possible genre under the speculative fiction umbrella but also lays the groundwork for further research of other speculative fiction novels that might also be classified as palimpsestic. I am confident that there are many other speculative fiction novels that can be, and possibly should be, categorized as palimpsestic novels. I believe that future research is important, not only to find other novels that use layers of time to bring historical significance to the present, but also to more firmly establish a new and valid speculative fiction genre—palimpsestic novels.

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