



## Intertextuality in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*

Derick J. Mbungang

HTTC Bambili, University of Bamenda

### ABSTRACT

Many postcolonial writers have entered into a critical dialogue with English classic texts, where the classic text is revised and functions as an important imaginative resource. If as John Mc Lead puts it in *Beginning Postcolonialism*, "A re-writing often exists to resist or challenge colonialist representations of colonised peoples and culture perceived in the source-text" (168), then the textual fragments present in *Annie John* gives the occasion for their revision. This paper seeks to bring out the textual allusions present in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*. If any text is a transformation of previous texts, as Gerard Genette remarks (1997), then *Annie John* carries within it, aspects of texts from which it was inspired. And if any text is an intertext, then meaning in *Annie John* is influenced by the text or set of texts that contributed in its construction. The hypertextual relation therefore that exists between a text or hypertext and a previous text (hypotext) leads to the determination of sources as the point of departure. It is this determination of sources and a comparative analysis of hypertext with the hypotext that will be the focus in this study. The comparative analysis of the hypertext and its source (hypotext) will serve to identify the various intertextual elements present in *Annie John*. This paper therefore seeks to study intertextuality in *Annie John*. While using poststructuralism as the theoretical framework, it examines the textual fragments that abound in the novel and to reveal their influence both on the novel's semantic construction and their significance in the field of postcolonial literature.

**Keyword:** text, intertext, intertextuality, textual allusions

Many postcolonial writers have entered into a critical dialogue with English classic texts, where the classic text is revised and functions as an important imaginative resource. If as John Mc Lead puts it in *Beginning Postcolonialism*, "A re-writing often exists to resist or challenge colonialist representations of colonised peoples and culture perceived in the source-text" (168), then the textual fragments present in *Annie John* gives the occasion for their revision. This paper seeks to bring out the textual allusions present in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*. If any text is a transformation of previous texts, as Julia Kristeva remarks Gerard Genette remarks (1997), then *Annie John* carries within it, aspects of texts from which it was inspired. And if any text is an intertext, then meaning in *Annie John* is influenced by the text or set of texts that contributed in its construction. The hypertextual relation therefore that exists between a text or hypertext and a previous text (hypotext) leads to the determination of sources as the point of departure. It is this determination of sources and a comparative analysis of hypertext with the hypotext that will be the focus in this study. The comparative analysis of the hypertext and its source (hypotext) will serve to identify the various intertextual elements present in *Annie John*. This paper therefore seeks to examine intertextuality in *Annie John*. While using poststructuralism as the theoretical framework, it focuses on textual fragments that abound in the novel to reveal their influence both on the novel's semantic construction and their significance in the field of postcolonial literature.

In an interview with Diane Simmons, Jamaica Kincaid points out the influence English classics have had on her writings. In a publication of the *New York Times*

*Magazine*, Kincaid remarks that: "When I was a child...I loved *Jane Eyre* especially and read it over" (Leslie Garis, 42). However, Diane Simmons in an online article titled "Jamaica Kincaid and the canon: In Dialogue with *Paradise Lost* and *Jane Eyre*" notes that as a child schooled in the British colonial system, Kincaid "was nourished on a diet of English classics" reading from Shakespeare to Milton by the age of five (Cudjoe, 398). He writes that "sometimes the canonical works of English literature were administered as punishment and points out that for her schoolgirl crimes Kincaid was forced to copy large chunks of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Other books like Genesis and the book of Revelation in the Bible and the poems of William Wordsworth have also greatly influenced Kincaid's works especially *Annie John* and *Lucy*. This acknowledgement by Kincaid With Kristeva's view that a literary work is not simply the product of a single author, but of its relationship to other texts and to the structures of language itself. In *The Kristeva Reader* she also observes that any "text is constructed of a mosaic of quotation; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (66). Therefore, the study of intertextuality in *Annie John* will be based on tracing the allusions and quotations from other texts cited in *Annie John* and showing how they contribute in mapping out the meaning and structure of the text. In Gerard Genette's terms, the aim is to detect the effective presence of other texts in *Annie John*. To proceed, the analysis of the text mentioned in the novel under study will be carried out. The intertextuality will center on drawing analogies on major themes contained in source texts and showing how these themes are echoed in the re-writing (*Annie John*). Kincaid has herself remarked that "All that I write is a further development of something ... My work is a chord that develops in many different ways" (Dwight Garner, Interview). This means that *Annie John* as a "transformation" of previous texts (Julia Kristeva) bears within it themes which Kincaid has read in her own terms and "turned them to her own use" (Simmons).

However, the first theme which offers analogues to other themes found in the texts alluded to in *Annie John* is the theme of loss. Kincaid's reinscription of the *Paradise Lost* theme found in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* as well as her (Kincaid) rewriting of the story of a young woman's struggle for autonomy in *Jane Eyre* offers her the possibility to explore this theme more elaborately. Her relation to the paradise lost theme and Milton's work in particular is complex. In *Annie John*, she both uses and subverts the European creation story

to explore her own predicament, identifying her protagonist with both the unfortunate Eve and the bold, raging Satan. By so doing, she counters Milton's story by creating her own different version of paradise.

In *Annie John*, the paradise which the protagonist first loses is her mother's love. The preoccupation with this loss is seen as the withdrawal of love by her once adoring mother. This paradise becomes a hell as the mother's love turns to obsessive control and mocking contempt. Diane Simmons in his article titled "Jamaica Kincaid and the canon" notes that the paradise in question in *Annie John* is most clearly seen as a cruel trick, as the joy and security of enveloping mother's love is abruptly withdrawn. When Annie is very young, she feels herself to be the beloved center of her mother's world. She says: "Sometimes when I gave her [Something she had asked me to fetch] she might stoop down and kiss me on my lips and then on my neck. It was such a paradise that I lived" (*Annie John*, 25). But as Annie approaches maturity, her mother changes. When Annie asks her mother if they can look through a trunk of Keepsakes, one of their former shared pleasures, "A person I did not recognize answered in a voice I did not recognize, 'Absolutely not! You and I don't have time for that anymore'" (27). The mother's love is apparently withdrawn because Annie has begun to mature. Annie's sin is similar to Eve's in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Simmons however observes that "the first, slight, near-unconscious step toward a mature sensibility is cause for violent expulsion by a power which will brook nothing but utter childlike innocence and ignorance" (4). Annie's response which is similar to Lucifer's in *Paradise Lost* shows Annie is angered but resolved to stand the challenges of her new life. She has lost a paradise but does not submit, rather she retains like Lucifer "the unconquerable will, / and study of revenge, immortal hate, / and courage never to submit or yield" (*Paradise Lost*, 1.106-108). Thus, Annie teaches herself to hate her once-adored mother, to steal and lie, and to do anything she knows her mother would hate. She takes up with the dirty, and uncivilized Red Girl and like Lucifer who declares that "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven" (1.254-255), Annie now tries to make a heaven out of her outcast state. The "Paradise" of the mother's world lost, is now replaced by the Red girl's wild and dirty life "paradise". She says the Red Girl:

Didn't like to go to Sunday school, and her mother didn't force her. She didn't like to brush her teeth, but occasionally her mother said it was necessary. She

loved to play marbles, and was so good that only Skerrit boys now played against her. Oh, what an angel she was, and what a heaven she lived in! (*Annie John*, 58)

When Annie reaches fifteen years, the awkwardness and confusion of adolescence is so like a punishment that it seems to bear out the mother's attitude that Annie's new maturity is a kind of sin or perversion. In part, she is Eve, suddenly ashamed of her body as she remarks:

My whole head was so big, and my eyes, which were big too, sat in my big head wide open, as if I had just had a sudden fright. My skin was black in little bumps, each with a perfect, round white point. My plaits stuck out in every direction from under my hat; my long, thin neck stuck out from the blouse of my uniform. (94)

Like Eve, Annie is in part, still the innocent child mysteriously taken over by evil. Annie is also still Lucifer but no longer the proud; rebellious Lucifer. Rather she has become the degraded Lucifer of Milton's *Paradise Lost* for whom "Revenge, at first through sweet, / bitter ere long back on itself recoils" (9.171-172). Now Annie sees herself as:

Old and miserable. Not long before, I had seen a picture of a painting entitled The Young Lucifer. It showed Satan just recently cast out of heaven for all his bad deeds, and was standing on a black, rock all alone and naked. Everything around him was charred and black, as if a great fire had just roared through. His skin was coarse, and so were all his features. His hair was made up of live snakes, and they were in a position to strike. Satan was wearing a smile, but it was one of those smiles that see through, one of those smiles that make you know the person is just putting up a good front. At heart, you could see, he was really lonely and miserable at the way things had turned out. (94-95)

Kincaid's allusion to the biblical figure, Lucifer, is not useless. This allusion serves to establish the link between Annie's situation. She is an outcast of the paradise which her mother's love constitutes. By describing the awful looking "Satan", Annie draws attention to herself. She is aware that the physiological changes which she undergoes as a result of a passage of time are responsible for her troubles. When she sets out to describe herself when she looks herself in the glass as she goes through Market Street (93), she notes:

I saw myself among all these things [the groceries], but I didn't know that it was I, for I had got so strange. My whole head was so big, and my eyes, which were big, too sat in my big head wide open, as if I had just had a sudden fright. My skin was black in a way I had not noticed before, as if someone had thrown a lot of soot out of a window just when I was passing by and it had all fallen on me. On my forehead, on my cheeks were little bumps, each with a perfect, round white point. My plaits stuck out in every direction from under my hat; my long, thin neck stuck out from the blouse of my uniform. (94)

At the end of *Annie John*, Annie identified with Eve once again; departs the failed paradise of her mother's love for a new world, one that is unknown but which she knows can never replace the lost dream. She says:

My name is Annie John". These were the first words that came into my mind as I woke up on the morning of the last day I spent in Antigua... At noon on that day, a ship on which I was to be a passenger would sail to Barbados, and there I would board another ship, which would sail to England, Where I would study to become a nurse. (130)

As Annie sets to board the ship for what looks like a voyage toward a new paradise, her mother reminds her "It doesn't matter what you do or where you go, I'll always be your mother and this will always be your home" (147). Meaning that despite the physical separation she still remains attached to her mother and island.

The second loss which Kincaid draws analogy with in previous texts is the loss of home and freedom. However, knowing that her ancestors were slaves who were uprooted from their place of origin, Africa, where they lived freely, and transported to a land where they would be eternally criminalized, Annie struggles to free herself from the burden of history. She knows that if she cannot realise this physically, she can achieve it psychologically by denouncing the actions of the coloniser. But Annie, like Milton's Lucifer in *Paradise Lost*, finds herself in a place of eternal loss, very much "unlike the place from whence they fell" (Milton 1. 75).

Another intertextual element recurrent in *Annie John* from a thematic point of view is oppression. To explore the theme of oppression, Kincaid draws analogy with the characters of previous texts to demonstrate how Annie both suffers and subverts it (oppression). Kincaid in this exercise alludes to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

and the works of John Milton. These textual allusions contribute in carving out meaning in *Annie John* and determine the spirit in which the novel was written.

Meantime, in a chapter of *Annie John* titled, "Somewhere, Belgium," Kincaid alludes to *Jane Eyre* to explore the theme of the oppression which her protagonist Annie John suffers. Annie begins to escape her increasingly oppressive surroundings by imagining herself living alone in Belgium. As she puts it "a place I had picked when I read in one of my books that Charlotte Brontë, the author of my favourite novel, *Jane Eyre*, had spent a year or so there" (52). Here Annie would be alone and free, "walking down a street in Belgium; wearing a skirt that came down to my ankles" (*Annie John*, 92). The allusion to the author of *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë, is appealing. First Annie identifies herself with Brontë and imagines she suffers from the same oppression the author has suffered. Like Brontë, Annie thinks by moving to Belgium, she will encounter the same fate the author of her favourite novel has encountered: self-determination and acceptance.

By addressing the question of oppression, Kincaid also deals with concerns of power and justice prevalent in the works of Milton and in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Intertextuality reveals parallels on matters concerning power and justice in *Annie John*, *Jane Eyre* and Milton's poetical works. Annie's refusal to stand up at the refrain of the British colonial anthem is an expression of subversion of power and of her questioning of British colonial justice. Intertextually, it is as an echo of Jane's fight against class oppression in *Jane Eyre* though in *Annie John* the oppression is as a result of slavery and colonialism. Diane Simmons in a comparative analysis of Annie's and Jane's approach as to justice and power, observes that at the end of *Jane Eyre*, Jane not only triumphs utterly over her former oppressors, the Reeds, but also regains her lost birth right. The birth right enables her to re-enter the class which once persecuted her. To Diane, Jane's loss of her birth right is a mistake that can be repaired. But for Annie, her rightful place can never be found.

Annie's awareness that she is being treated with injustice and hypocrisy, and her sense of self that does not allow her to submit even though she knows that she will never have the power to prevail mirrors Jane's struggle to correct the injustice of which she is victim. For both protagonists, the attempt to rebel brings on a crisis, as they are overwhelmed by the enormity of the forces allied against them (Simmons). Jane's defence

against John Reed's unprovoked attack, her refusal to apologise which leads to her seclusion then to her unconsciousness, is echoed in *Annie John* through Annie's struggle to counter forces which deny her identity. It is also echoed through her long illness. Jane's unconsciousness and Annie's long illness symbolise their fall. However, both protagonists still find the way for escape. This happens to Jane when she is examined by a chemist and sent to school. In *Annie John*, Kincaid has reproduced the same scene by allowing Ma Chess to treat Annie from her illness. Besides, the reproduction of *Jane Eyre* in *Annie John* at the level of the exploration of the themes of power/powerlessness, justice/injustice, loss and oppression, it can be advanced that Kincaid's novel is tethered to Brontë's. And it is because of this intertextuality that Diane Simmons in explaining the meaning of the collapse and escape of protagonists in *Jane Eyre* and *Annie John* asserts that:

Though the chemist's intercession is mild compared to Ma Chess's act of rebirthing, the two healers bring about similar results. In both cases a kindly, healing presence, which acknowledges the girl's pain, provides just enough help to allow the girl to survive and escape. Both young women, it seems, have threatened the forces aligned against them through the only means available to them. They are prepared to die of their ill-treatment, and under this threat relief has been provided. ("Jamaica Kincaid and the Canon". (11)

The above assertion shows how Kincaid has modelled her text on Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The assertion also reveals from an intertextual perspective that Kincaid's *Annie John* is both informed and determined by *Jane Eyre*. *Jane Eyre* in this sense has been reproduced thematically to generate *Annie John*. And by allowing this reproduction, the author Jamaica Kincaid, has applied intertextuality.

Beside the texts mentioned above, there are other texts Kincaid has made reference to in her *Annie John*. They include, *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare, the Bible, namely the book of Genesis, and books such as *Roman Britain*, *The Schoolgirl's Own Annual* and *A History of the West Indies*.

Kincaid's evocation of *The Tempest* suggests an analogy of Annie's situation with a situation between two characters in *The Tempest*, Prospero and Caliban. Annie points out that as she and some of her classmates get ready to read out their autobiographies, an assignment given them earlier, other students get

involved in playful activities in the presence of the teacher, Miss Nelson. She notes that: "All this Miss Nelson must have seen and heard, but she didn't say anything. Only kept reading her book: an elaborately illustrated edition of *The Tempest*" (39).

Kincaid's allusion to *The Tempest* is symbolic. It suggests that Annie and her classmate consider Miss Nelson as Prospero who invades their island to enslave them. Thus, Annie views herself and her classmates as Caliban. They can only receive orders from Prospero, Miss Nelson. Furthermore, like in *The Tempest* Annie and her classmates are being taught just like Prospero taught Caliban. Hence as Caliban says: "Your taught me language, and my profit on it is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you for learning me your language" (18).

Annie is aware that like Caliban, she is learning in order to better serve the English, her colonial masters who here stands as Prospero. She is aware of the master/slave relationship which the British colonial system is imposing on them and is perpetuating through education. Annie even observes: "It was hard for us to tell on which side we really now belonged – with the masters or with the slaves" (76). But she is also aware that just as Caliban "use[s] the language to curse" she can also use the knowledge received to resist the British colonial master. She does so when in one of her books she writes under the picture of Christopher Columbus, himself in claims, "The Great Man can No longer Just Get up and Go" (78). Though because of this act Annie was to "copy Books I and II of Paradise Lost by John Milton" (82) as a punishment, she was not worried about it as she declares: "I had nothing to worry about there yet; it would be a while before my mother and father heard of my bad deeds. What a terrible morning! Seeing my mother would be such a tonic – something to pick me up" (83).

On the other hand, *Paradise Lost* which Annie makes mention of and which has been discussed earlier in this study draws upon another textual allusion prevalent in *Annie John*. The allusion in question concerns biblical images. One of these images is the reference to "The Book of Genesis". The Book of Genesis which narrates the story of creation is used by Kincaid to compare Annie's loss of her mother's love to the loss of paradise by Adam and Eve after their disobedience to God. As Annie matures (52) the references to Satan (94) remind the reader of the Bible story of human acquisition of knowledge through experience and sin. This is exactly Annie's childhood experience in Antigua, one of

conflict, corruption and trauma with family and friends. At the end, she feels that her life has become a dustheap" (138). Like Adam and Eve, it is only after the abasement and destruction wrought by acquisition of unpleasant human knowledge that Annie is mature enough to face the real world and earn the possibility of winning salvation for herself. Kincaid's reference to The Book of Genesis continues when Annie pretends to be comforted by her mother and makes her think that they are drawn closer together. As Annie notes: "you [Annie] are getting too old for that. It's time you had your own clothes. You just cannot go around the rest of your life looking like a little me" (26). Annie's separation from her mother can be regarded as her (Annie) expulsion from the Eden of childhood innocence to the Hell of adulthood.

*Roman Britain* as one of the texts which Kincaid refers to in her narrative reminds the reader that Britain, like Antigua, was once invaded and colonised by the Romans. The book in question is about the Roman conquest of Britain between AD 43 and 410. According to an online article titled "Roman Britain" the title of the book is also an expression which refers to those parts of the island of Great Britain controlled by the Roman Empire. When Annie observes that: "For taking first place over all the other girls, I had been given a prize, a copy of a book called *Roman Britain*, and I was made prefect of my class" (73) she sends out a message: Just as Britain was once colonised by Romans and later on freed, Antigua her country will one day be freed from British colonialism. And she (Annie) will also one day be freed from her mother's control when she leaves the island. The allusion to *Roman Britain* also suggests that there is nothing like an eternal domination of a people over another. Change is a constant phenomenon. The position of power which Britain now occupies is temporal, and her island, Antigua may also one day occupy that position.

The allusion to *A History of the West Indies* in *Annie John* (73) takes the reader back to the history of the discovery of the New World, the history of slave trade, slavery and colonisation of the West Indies. The allusion which falls under the chapter titled "Columbus in Chains" suggests that Christopher Columbus is responsible for the history of the West Indies. Annie remarks that "on the third of November 1493, a Sunday morning Christopher Columbus discovered Dominica (75); and their presence in the island was as a result of this misdeed. *A History of the West Indies* therefore contains the motives of Annie's angst and her hatred for the British colonial administration.

The last text which Kincaid alludes to in *Annie John* is *The Schoolgirl's Own Annual*. *The Schoolgirl's Own Annual* was a weekly magazine published by The Amalgamated Press. It ran from February 1921 until May 1936. The magazine featured stories about girls of which the majority were daughters of aristocrats. According to Sylvia Reed in an online article titled "Schoolgirls own Annual", this magazine focus was Morcove school. The magazine was very famous in British school. Annie's reference to this weekly to describe the way Ruth looks when she is wearing "the dunce cap" (74) not only suggests that Ruth was the daughter of an aristocrat but also Annie passes the message that though she is a descendant of a slave she is more intelligent than Ruth who belongs to the "master" class. Another message which Annie puts across by alluding to *The Schoolgirl's Annual* is that there is nothing as the superiority of a race. All the races are equal.

Kincaid also alludes to Enid Blyton to suggest the influence of *Annie John* by the works of Enid Blyton. Enid Blyton (11 August 1897-28 November 1968) was a British children's writer and was one of the most successful children's storytellers of the twentieth century. She has written hundreds of books for young and older children; novels, story collections and non-fiction. Her books often feature the fantasies of younger children. In these books, children are free to play and explore without adult interference and adult characters are usually either authority figures or adversaries to be conquered by the children. The influence of the works of Blyton on *Annie John* can be seen through the choice of the protagonist Kincaid has made for her novel. Like the protagonist in the works of Blyton, the protagonist of *Annie John* is a young girl who faces issues in conjunction with coming to age in a British colonised nation. The young heroine narrates her fantasies as she grows up and focuses on the love/hate relationship with her mother. So, when Kincaid declares through Annie "I wished I had been named Enid, after Enid Blyton, the author of the first books I had discovered on my own and liked" (51), she (Kincaid) indirectly shows how related is her novel to the works of the British children's writer Enid Blyton. She also shows *Annie John* is influenced by the works of Enid Blyton. Besides, *Annie John* just like Blyton's novels, features children who interact with each other telling their stories freely but who are also under the authority of their parents and teachers.

In a nutshell, *Annie John's* connections to previous texts are purely intertextual. Some of these texts recognised and identified in the book are *The Tempest*, *Jane Eyre*, *Paradise Lost*, *The School Girl's Own Annual*, the Bible, other English classics and books. The significance of these textual allusions is revisionary as the fragments offer occasion for a rereading of master narratives which the intertexts in *Annie John* represent. It is this revisionary aspect of the novel that most postcolonial writers have adopted as a strategy to question the representation of the other Western discourse.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. 1847. New York: Penguin, 1985.
- [2] Garis, Leslie. "Through West Indian Eyes", New York Times Magazine 1990
- [3] Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests* (trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky). Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.
- [4] Kincaid, Jamaica. *Annie John*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985
- [5] Kriteva, Julia. *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- [6] Mc Lead, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester: MUP, 2000.
- [7] ----- . Sémiotikè, Recherches pour une sémanalyse. Paris: Seuil, 1969.
- [8] Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. The Northon Anthology of English Literature. vol.1, 5<sup>th</sup> edition. Ed. M.H.Abrams. New York: Norton, 1986.
- [9] Selwyn, Cudjoe R. "Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Projects: An Interview." *Caribbean Women Writers Essay from the First International Conference*,
- [10] Simmons, Diane." Jamaica Kincaid and the Canon: In Dialogue with *Paradise Lost* and *Jane Eyre*". MELUS 23.2 (1998): 65-85.

- [11] Wordsworth, William. I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud". 1804. *British Literature*. Ed.
- [12] Hazelton Spencer et al. Boston: Heath 1963, 60. MELUS. Los Angeles: Summer 2006. Vol.31.