

ABSTRACT

Signs That Point Nowhere: Empty Theological Forms in Twentieth-Century American Literature

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My dissertation considers how twentieth-century writers such as F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Carson McCullers, Sylvia Plath, and Bret Easton Ellis have attempted to find meaning in a world that no longer believes in God. I examine how, in the face of the death of God, the characters in these authors' works still turn to religious rituals and forms, particularly marriage, Scripture, icons, baptism, the Eucharist, and confession. However, these forms are no longer connected to the Christian faith and have been divested of their spiritual value; thus, they can no longer provide the grace, redemption, and healing they once offered. I argue that these emptied, ineffective forms counter literature that espouses belief without doctrine or faith without content by revealing the deep need for traditional, theologically full Christian forms.

Signs That Point Nowhere: Empty Theological Forms in Twentieth-Century American Literature

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DEDICATION

*To my parents, who never understood what I did
but supported me anyway, and to Vince, who kept me sane*

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Recovering Meaning out of Meaninglessness

A ghost town leaves traces of itself. Even long after the town has been abandoned, bulldozed, and changed into a cornfield, signs may still exist that point to the town and tell a traveler how to get there. Landmarks may still be promoted on road signs, and maps may still mark the town. However, since the town no longer exists, these signs lead nowhere. Or, consider how, if someone had taken the signs down from the road before the town had actually been abandoned, the loss of those signs might have contributed to the death of the town. Likewise, if someone took the grocery store away from the town but left the rest of it behind, that may also have contributed to the town's death. While Christianity has not yet been completely abandoned by all its believers, it resembles this little ghost town. Once thriving and influential, it has long been declared "dead." As with the ghost town, the question arises of what to do with the Christian "signs" that remain. After God has been declared dead and the Christian Church turned into a ghost town, should these signs be abandoned, or can they be appropriated for another purpose?

Like the ghost town, God did not "die" in a day. Instead, God and the Christian Church were gradually stripped of essential elements and made

seemingly weak, impotent, and ineffective. Friedrich Nietzsche, who famously decreed God's death, emphasized that he did not single-handedly kill God, nor was God's death instantaneous. Rather, the "murder" of God began long ago when eighteenth and nineteenth-century thinkers started denigrating God's signs and stealing "buildings" from Christianity. Nietzsche's madman declares, "God is dead" because "*we have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers" (*Gay Science* 181), a statement which emphasizes not that God abandoned the world, or that Nietzsche himself has proven God does not exist, but that God's death is a natural consequence of people having gradually made God impotent and unnecessary. Consequently, God and Christianity became a ghost town, and now, its remaining sacred signs point nowhere.

There remains, however, a distinction between stolen signs and those that point to an absence. Stolen signs—signs that are appropriated so that they point somewhere other than the original source—will lead travelers astray from their intended destination. The sign may bring them to a town, but not the town they set out for. An appropriated sign therefore misleads. A sign that points nowhere, on the other hand, will lead its followers to the original destination. While the destination may have been abandoned by its original inhabitants, the followers might realize how much they miss or need that ghost town, and they may even be encouraged to start rebuilding the town anew.

What I hope to show in the chapters to follow is that, in twentieth-century American literature, sacred signs function in much the same way as these metaphorical ghost town signs. Many of Christianity's sacred signs, such as its sacraments, images, and Scripture, have been "stolen" from Christianity and appropriated for other means, an appropriation that has made the Christian Church (the "town" in which Christianity resides) seem unnecessary and weak. The new towns that these signs point to, however, are not the same, and the more people who follow these appropriated signs and travel to these substitute towns only to be disappointed that they are not the same as the ghost town, the more people will clamor to rebuild the ghost town. Likewise, when Christian forms fail to provide the same benefits and effects to people outside of the Church as they do to people within the Church, those empty signs may help people to recognize their deep need for the Church.

In the following pages, I will be examining the once sacred—but now emptied—Christian signs within six twentieth-century American writers: F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Carson McCullers, Sylvia Plath, and Bret Easton Ellis. By analyzing empty Christian signs within these writers' works, I will make a threefold argument: 1) That even in a society where God has been declared dead, people still seek out religious forms in order to help them understand their lives and shape their identities; 2) That without God,

these forms will not, in fact, provide a meaningful framework for understanding life and one's role in it, but will instead reinforce the characters' sense of an isolated and fragmented identity; 3) That showing the failure of these empty forms to effect meaning or affirm identity reasserts a deep need—and desire—for traditional Christian forms and traditional Christian faith.

In order to provide the background necessary to make this argument, I will show, in this introduction, the interrelationship between the slayers of God, Christianity in America, the formation of identity, and literature and religion criticism and demonstrate how they all lead to a kind of nihilism. First, Nietzsche's "God-slayers" are defined as such because they have weakened Christianity by stripping it of its transcendence. They do so by appropriating the practical elements of Christianity (those related to civil society and action) and rejecting the "supernatural" parts.¹ I, with Nietzsche, view the desire to use Christian signs while rejecting Christian beliefs as a fundamental cause of God's death since the slayers of God transformed Christianity from a theologically rich faith rooted in tradition and practice into a vague, empty conceptualization mostly used for its civil expediency. This transformation of Christianity is

¹ Feuerbach may be helpful here as an illustration. He argues that God is nothing but a projection of man: "Man—this is the mystery of religion—objectifies his being and then again makes himself an object to the objectified image of himself thus converted into a subject" (29). There is, therefore no transcendence, and rather than God creating human beings, human beings created God as a way to understand themselves. In this understanding, God is only useful in so far as God explains human beings.

particularly evident in America, where the life of faith merges with civic duty.²

Studying America's role in the slaying of God also helps highlight the interrelationship between desacralization and identity, the topic of my third section. God's death had vast repercussions upon people's ability to establish a firm sense of identity; without God, people were left alone in their quest to create a meaningful existence and thus no longer knew how to direct or find purpose for their lives. Finally, I consider current religion and literature criticism and set the stage for how my twentieth-century writers depict the effects of the death of God, reimagine uses for the remaining sacred signs, and characterize people's attempts to construct stable identities.

This project is a consideration, through literature, of what we lose if Christianity is lost, and it is therefore an intentionally Christian examination of these texts. I do not believe this approach excludes all non-Christian readers, however. All of the writers I study have had their own questions about the Christian faith and consider Christianity within their texts. I therefore examine, from a Christian perspective, the problems, questions, and themes the writers themselves have posed. These writers have all wrestled with matters of faith, and the works they have produced depict an incredibly complex tension between

² While I will discuss this in more detail later in the chapter, a very loose connection to the Christian faith is part of our political framework. For instance, prayers still accompany Presidential Inaugurations (including the famous evangelical pastor Rick Warren at President Obama's 2009 election), "In God We Trust" remains a national motto, and politicians usually make appeals to the Christian faith as part of their campaign.

the desire to believe and the inability to believe. I believe that within this tension, the authors provide a profound and powerful critique of what the Christian faith has become—both outside of and within the Christian Church.

By a Christian perspective and the Church, I mean a perspective informed by Christianity as it is professed through the confessions and creeds and practiced by the catholic Church. For my definition of Christianity, I will be using the first four creeds, namely the Apostle's Creed, Nicene Creed, Definition of Chalcedon, and Athanasian Creed, which were created by the first four ecumenical councils of the Church and are accepted by Protestants, Roman Catholics, and the Eastern Orthodox. Creeds articulate the Christian faith, so that though creeds are enriched and elaborated in various forms, the whole of tradition is encapsulated in them. These creeds not only state the fundamental beliefs of Christianity but were also produced by the Church, and the beliefs the creeds state must be expressed in the worship and practice of the Church. My definition therefore relies both on Christian doctrine and practice since they are inextricably unified within the life of the faith. Consequently, I will not be drawing from just one denominational tradition but will rather be drawing upon the vast riches of various expressions of Christianity, all of which contribute to the "holy catholic Church." This inclusive definition is what I mean, therefore,

when I refer to the “whole” of Christianity and critique those who are trying to take only a “part” of it.³

The Slayers of God

An examination of leading intellectual thinkers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries confirms Nietzsche’s insight that God’s death was not sudden but gradual. After the new focus on science and rationalism, Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, and German biblical criticism, skepticism toward the supernatural and the transcendent made many of Christianity’s doctrines seem implausible, particularly Christ’s divinity and bodily resurrection. Yet, since Christianity had been such a vital part of culture for so long, a desire to keep what might be useful in Christianity prompted a creative re-appropriation of certain parts of the faith.

The parts of Christianity that appeared to be supernatural or miraculous were often discarded while those which were seen as potentially helpful for maintaining society were kept. For example, both Ernest Renan and David Strauss rejected a divine Christ and pursued the historical Jesus. They held

³ As Augustine admonishes in “Against Faustus,” believing in only part of Christianity really means rejecting it entirely: “Tell us straight out that you do not believe in the Gospel of Christ; for you believe what you want in the Gospel and disbelieve what you want. You believe in yourself rather than in the Gospel” (17.3). His comment both demonstrates the unbreakable wholeness of Christianity as well as the key difference between Christians and slayers of God: Christians believe in and find meaning in God while slayers believe in and find meaning first in themselves.

Scripture to modern standards of scientific veracity and thus concluded that its stories cannot be historically accurate—that the Gospels must be “in part legendary” —because “they are full of miracles and of the supernatural” (Renan 8). Renan argues that any account of an event that cannot be proven by science is false. Any story with miracles must therefore be incorrect: “[N]one of the miracles with which the old histories are filled took place under scientific conditions. Neither common people nor men of the world are able to do this” (29). Miracles cannot be repeated and cannot be verified by scientific method. Thus, for Renan, Jesus did not perform miracles and was not divine; instead, his misinformed and delusional followers constructed his “legend” and falsified his status as a divine Savior (250). Yet Renan concludes that not all of Christianity is false. Jesus may not be divine, but he still reaches “the highest summit of human greatness” for his teachings, which are “the foundation-stone of true religion” in that they instruct each person to “step towards the divine” through a virtuous life (305, 90, 310). Renan's argument and conclusions epitomize the characteristics of the slayers of God: they reject central doctrines and beliefs about God, but they still profess a desire to follow Christianity's teachings. In other words, Christianity may not be believable, but it can be useful. By arguing that Jesus is clearly not a divine Savior but is still a great teacher, Renan moves

the metaphorical “building” of Jesus's teachings away from the “town” that also claims his divinity.

Several other leading intellectual figures likewise rejected foundational doctrines or creeds but did not want to abandon other parts of Christianity that they found useful or meaningful. Matthew Arnold, for instance, wanted to keep Christianity's literature and morality although he rejected the particulars of the creeds. He believed that “there is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve” (*Essays*, 1). Arnold asserted that the Church's theological traditions, including “terms like *God, creation, will, propitiation, immortality,*” were an “accident” of Christianity (*Works*, 145), and he therefore encouraged a new way to think about Christianity, particularly as a “corporation for purposes of moral growth and of practice” which teaches proper conduct (145). Arnold, like Renan, highlights morality as a particularly transferable and helpful teaching of Christianity. It can teach one how to live if not what to believe.⁴

⁴ For a concise (but further developed than here) analysis of Arnold and Christianity, see Luke Ferretter's “Matthew Arnold” entry in *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*. He says, for instance, that “the fundamental truth of religion, for Arnold, is that human happiness consists in the practice of right conduct” (642). In other words, morality is the fundamental principle to be extracted from religion. However, as Ferretter notes, Arnold did not apply the same critiques to moral ideas as he does to Christianity, and thus does not “acknowledge the possibility that moral ideas are subject to the same process of historical change as science,” the science that made belief in Jesus seemingly impossible (646).

Other writers agreed with Renan and Arnold's conclusions. George Eliot, an avid supporter and translator of Strauss, also advocated using Christian morality and symbolism even though she rejected Christianity as a faith. In a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe, she explained that Christianity "has to be modified" to become a "more perfect" religion, one which would express a "more deeply awing sense of responsibility to man springing from sympathy with that which of all things is most certainly known to us, the difficulty of the human lot" (Cross 86). The crux of Eliot's "more perfect" religion is that it relies not on beliefs but solely on feelings and actions: what matters most is how we treat and empathize with one another. She concluded that human beings are capable of good behavior without divine intervention, but that Christianity offers a means of understanding right treatment of others.⁵ Arthur Hugh Clough, an English poet, also supports this conclusion, arguing that religion should be less doctrinal and more concerned with societal ethics, so that people can learn to be and behave like the divine without any divine help. Clough rejects, for instance, a literal resurrection of Christ but affirms its metaphorical value, positing the resurrection story as an inspiration rather than a truth. In his poem, "Easter

⁵ For instance, as Norman Vance writes of Eliot's work, she "re-describes miracle and mystery as human compassion" and uses narrative "as a kind of extended parable of salvation which provides humanitarian fulfillment of the messianic prophecy" (486-7). Because she so emphasizes a humanistic fulfillment of Christian morals, Nietzsche singles out George Eliot in *Twilight of the Idols*: "They are rid of the Christian God and now believe all the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality" (*Portable*, 515).

Day," he first denies Christ's resurrection: "This is the one sad Gospel that is true--/Christ is not risen!" (102). In part two of the poem, he speaks of a "voice" that he hears inside himself, a voice which helps him to realize that Christ is metaphorically alive: "Though He be dead, He is not dead./ In the true creed/He is yet risen indeed." The speaker in Clough's poem concludes that he does not need a resurrected Savior since the metaphorical divine has risen and is alive in him. The only "true creed" is the creed one writes of and for oneself.

Arnold, Eliot, and the other "slayers" of God no longer needed traditional Christianity and its creeds because they could make Christianity their own. The dead tradition of Christianity could still have meaning and value if it were recast; a person could decide which parts of Christianity to believe, which to disregard, and which to transform. What Arnold, Eliot, and Clough primarily emphasize, then, is the practice of, rather than the belief in, Christianity. They want to affirm that which they see as rational and helpful without believing in that which they see as irrational. Even though they are skeptical of Christian beliefs in miracles and in events like the incarnation and resurrection, they still want to affirm the parts of Christianity that help guide their daily actions. What starts to occur here is a move toward both the individual and the universal—individual, private belief was coupled with moral, public actions. As Clough shows, the truth and the divine resides within the individual, and it is up to the individual to write his

or her own creed and thereby determine meaning for oneself. On the other hand, the emphasis on keeping Christian morality underscores the universal, so that though one may have individual beliefs, everyone should benefit the larger community.⁶

Two other thinkers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, further highlight the underlying shift behind the rejection of traditional Christianity and the appropriation of its components. Rather than Christianity, Rousseau advocates a “religion of man” that is “without temples, altars, or rites, limited to the purely inward worship of the supreme God and to the eternal duties of morality,” a “pure and simple religion of the Gospel, the true theism” (117). Rousseau’s emphasis on a “purely inward worship” captures a

⁶ This kind of vague beneficence toward “humankind” and the “larger good” is wonderfully critiqued in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. Father Zossima teaches his people “not to love in dreams” but “to love in reality.” Madame Khokhlakov provides the example for this kind of “love in dreams” — she has a deep love for “humanity” in general, but she cannot love the particular person in front of her. She tells Father Zossima, “I so love humanity that—would you believe it?—I often dream of forsaking all that I have, leaving Lise, and becoming a sister of mercy. [. . .] I would nurse the afflicted. I would be ready to kiss such wounds” (53). Yet what Madame Khokhlakov eventually admits is that if those people do not show gratitude, praise, “and the repayment of love with love,” she would be “incapable of loving any one” (54). Zossima tells her the problem with this line of thinking by relaying the story of a doctor who realized “the more [he] love[s] humanity in general, the less [he] love[s] man in particular” (54). The doctor, like Madame Khokhlakov, makes grand schemes to help humanity but finds he is “incapable of living in the same room with any one for two days together,” even to the point that “in twenty-four hours” he would likely “begin to hate the best of men” (54). Zossima draws a distinct line, then, between the “love in dreams” toward humanity in general with the active love toward one’s specific neighbor. The “love in action” he prescribes is “a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams,” but love in action is the only kind of real love (54). “Love in dreams” for “humanity” becomes this obscure, faceless entity without an actual presence or effect. Therefore people can desire and contribute to an attempt to “improve humanity” while passing by or refusing to help a particular person they come across.

fundamental shift in thinking, a shift that explains why thinkers believed they could choose to live out Christian morality without believing in Christianity: instead of following and believing in institutional creeds or teachings, a more individualized, “inner” faith decides what parts of religion are “pure and simple” and thus “true.”

Emerson also exemplifies this shift from belief in traditional, orthodox Christianity to faith in the inner self. He argues that one does not find truth in established religion, but in one’s own self. Consequently, any appeals to traditional forms of religion are a weakness, an admission that one cannot pave an individual path. In “Self Reliance,” Emerson calls prayer a “disease of the will” and creeds a “disease of the intellect” because they both call for outside guidance and direction (*Prose* 131). Emerson makes a similar argument against Christian sacraments. In Sermon CLXII, he justifies abandoning the Eucharist by stating that individual preference alone can override the religious tradition of the Lord’s Supper. He says the Eucharist is “not suitable to me. That is reason enough why I should abandon it” (24). Instead of following religious rituals like the Eucharist, Emerson says one should abandon traditional religion and “be doctrine, society, law to himself” (“Self-Reliance” 131). The radicalness of this shift should not be overlooked, since Emerson is here redefining redemption and

salvation. Salvation and redemption are no longer effected by outside means, such as by the Church and its practices and sacraments, but rather by the inward exploration and affirmation of the self.

What lies at the heart of the “slayers of God” is a change in the locus of belief and meaning. What was previously communal and shaped by tradition has become internal and individualized. One does not have to believe in “all” of a faith, but can use one's individual powers of reason to determine what elements will be helpful for living well and benefiting society. In this way, faith was both compartmentalized (made personal and private) and universalized (directed toward the social good). This connection among the rights of the individual, the emphasis on the universal, and the breakdown (and subsequent appropriation of parts) of traditional Christianity is particularly evident in America, where exalted individualism and vague and empty references to God are built into its very Constitution.

American Slayers

America was founded on a seemingly paradoxical emphasis on both the individual and the universal. Puritan influence played a large role in shaping America's identity, and many later trends can be traced back to them. Sacvan Bercovitch, in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, explains the profound influence of the Puritan understanding of the self on America. With the advent

of Protestantism and the emphasis on *sola scriptura* and *sola fides*, salvation became more internalized. In order to prevent one's faith from becoming completely individualistic, however, Luther formulated the "*exemplum fidei*," which, according to Bercovitch, "proposed a mode of *imitatio*," including placing one's story within the "process of calling, temptation, and salvation shared by all believers" (Bercovitch 9). With the Puritans, the *exemplum fidei* became inextricably connected to the land of America itself. The Puritans viewed the New World as their promised land, ordained by God for them, and they thus began their hermeneutics with the sacredness of America (134). Consequently, the Puritan idea of America is eschatological, so that "country, saint, and church reflected one another" (101). Since America was part of the divine plan, serving the nation became a way of working out one's salvation.

As Bercovitch shows, Cotton Mather's biographies exemplify this important connection between the individual and the country. For example, Mather's biography of John Winthrop, which is supposed to be a sort of hagiography, exalts Winthrop's unique holiness by stressing that Winthrop is a particularly good example of an American. Traditional hagiographies emphasize the holiness of a saint as set apart from a secular community (44). But in Mather's rendering of Winthrop, Winthrop's ascendancy to the governorship is indistinguishable from his more overtly spiritual acts (43). Mather depicts

Winthrop's significance as being bound to the cleric's actions in America, as an American colonist, so, as Bercovitch puts it, Winthrop "stands at once for citizen and saint, state and church" (44). This individual thus becomes the model for and the embodiment of an entire nation, even as the nation defines the individual. Individuals are saintly because of how faithfully they serve America, and their individual example becomes the rule for all other Americans to follow. The Puritans' understanding of America, then, foreshadows the acts of the "slayers" of God: a greater emphasis on the autonomous, individual self, combined with a desire to universalize by stressing the importance of contributing to a greater good (in this case, to America).

Founding documents exemplify how the Puritan emphasis on the individual and their conception of America as a "sacred land" remained even as the Christian faith of the Puritans faded. America was founded upon individualism: the right of each individual to pursue happiness as he or she sees fit. Being an American was synonymous with being an individual, and individualism became, in a sense, the greatest good. Thomas Paine, for instance, remarked, "Independence is my happiness, [...] and my religion is to do good" (1). In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault argues that this individuation and universalism is the mark of modern society. For instance, the modern standard for evaluation in education is the exam, an instrument that both individualizes

and totalizes: it holds each individual to a set standard, and then each test-taker is individualized by the results. Exams produce differentiation according to the standard so that individualism is only determined through and against that predetermined standard. Likewise, in America, individual worth is determined, at least in part, by what kind of contributor one is to the greater good of American society. As Bercovitch concludes, "America came to signify both self-gratification and self-evident good" (*Rites*, 42).

Religious beliefs followed suit by also individualizing and totalizing. Deism, in particular, was the characteristic religion of the American founding fathers. Deism conceives of God as distant and largely uninvolved in the world, meaning that human beings had to be responsible for their world and use their gift of reason to drive human progress.⁷ Deism emphasizes personal responsibility both in terms of understanding who God is (through studying and understanding God's Creation in nature) and of working to ensure goodness and progress for all humankind. Deism is the religion of the Enlightenment, in that its tenets rest primarily on reason, scientific inquiry, and progress. Deists used

⁷ Two dictionary definitions of Deism may be helpful here. 2012 *Encyclopedia Britannica* : "In general, Deism refers to what can be called natural religion, the acceptance of a certain body of religious knowledge that is inborn in every person or that can be acquired by the use of reason and the rejection of religious knowledge when it is acquired through either revelation or the teaching of any church." 1828 *Webster's Dictionary*: "The doctrine or creed of a deist; the belief or system of religious opinions of those who acknowledge the existence of one God, but deny revelation: or deism is the belief in natural religion only, or those truths, in doctrine and practice, which man is to discover by the light of reason, independent and exclusive of any revelation from God. Hence deism implies infidelity or a disbelief in the divine origin of the scriptures."

their individual reason to study universal laws of nature and make many social improvements. Deism assumes that, since God is distant and not very involved in human life, what really matters are social actions and bettering this world. How one understands God matters much less than what one does.

One of the founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin, exemplifies how a distant, vague notion of God arises from individualism and universalism. In his autobiography, Franklin stresses his powers of individual self-improvement, and this self-improvement also intrinsically leads to the “good” of the community. For example, when Franklin decides to make himself more virtuous, he composes a list of all the virtues that he wants to exemplify and a chart to monitor his progress toward attaining them. These virtues are not, however, Christian virtues, such as the theological virtues of love, hope, and faith, virtues which cannot be achieved by human will alone.⁸ Most of his virtues, such as frugality, industry, order, and cleanliness, are more linked to financial and social successes than they are to any religious ends, while his other virtues, such as justice and sincerity, are aimed at proper social conduct. His virtues fuse the two American ideals: self-gratification (success) and self-evident good (kind

⁸ There are also the cardinal virtues, which are prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. These share names and even some definitional elements with a few of Franklin's virtues, but again, the end purpose of his virtues differ greatly from the Christian cardinal virtues since his are directed towards individual success within civil society rather than the imitation of Christ.

treatment of others). He individually selects his virtues, defines what each virtue means, creates a self-accountable system for practicing them, and then presents his virtues and system for the greater good in his book. Traditional definitions and practices of the virtues are moot; they may serve as examples, but they definitely do not provide finality on how to define, acquire, or live them.

Franklin treats religion similarly to the virtues. There may be names or parts of the traditional conceptions of Christianity that remain, but the individual now makes singular definitions of faith. One can thus create a creed rather than confess any of the traditional creeds. Franklin's own creed, for instance, again reflects the move away from traditional Christianity toward a personal and self-determined depiction of faith:

Here is my Creed: I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That He governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable Service we can render to him, is doing Good to his other Children. That the Soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental Principles of all sound Religion, and I regard them as you do, in whatever Sect I meet with them. As to Jesus of Nazareth, my Opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think the System of Morals and his Religion as he left them to us, the best the World ever saw, or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupting Changes, and I have with most of the present Dissenters in England, some Doubts as to his Divinity: tho' it is a Question I do not dogmatise upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble. (*Works*, 423-4)

Franklin's creed professes a vague belief in God, but the particulars of his faith are not important to him. Franklin questions Christ's divinity, but he also does not care to "Trouble" himself about it. Whether or not Jesus is the Son of God holds little weight for him because God is distant and vague, and morally upright behavior (one's "Conduct in this" life) is really the key toward salvation. Consequently, what one believes does not matter as long as one lives morally, so that God is utilized primarily for social and moral advantages. As long as one's internal beliefs are coupled with external moral action, one can believe as one wills.

As the Christian faith moved away from the authority of the Church toward the authority of the self in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the idea of God became more infused with the idea of the self. With the self as the ultimate arbiter of meaning and definer of faith, belief in God ultimately transformed into belief in oneself. Thomas Jefferson famously said, "I am a sect myself," and Thomas Paine declared, "my mind is my church" (qtd. in Bellah 233), both expressing the growing faith in a "personal" religion that is self-defined. Each person should be able to choose which elements of faith works for him and, as Emerson, Jefferson, and Paine suggest, be one's own church.⁹

⁹ Emerson believed that the logical and appropriate "conclusion to the Reformation would be a state in which there were as many churches as there were believers: a church apiece" (Packer 127).

Thus, while America's Puritan roots and political references to God may make America seem like a "Christian nation," it in fact relies much more heavily on a fluid, individualized definition of faith than it does on the traditional definition of Christianity.¹⁰ Two Supreme Court cases particularly exemplify how America has embodied the practices of the slayers of God by creating a kind of faith without content and an over-emphasis on the individual. In *Lynch v. Donnelly*, the Supreme Court coined the term "ceremonial deism" in its defense of the use of phrases such as "In God We Trust" or "Under God" in the nation's mottoes and pledges, a term created to signify that such phrases do not have any particular religious affiliation. These phrases, explains Justice William Brennan, are "protected [...] because they have lost through rote repetition any significant religious content." Another Supreme Court ruling, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, reveals that what America really believes in is individualism. In the case, the justices ruled that reality can be individually construed: "At the very heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, of the mystery of life." This small line within the ruling statement contains a very powerful point: the individual is ultimately accountable only to him or herself. While the case decision ruled that each person can therefore define life in terms of abortion, it goes much further than that and says that each

¹⁰ Again, by "traditional definition" I mean Christianity as it is set forth in the first four creeds and practiced in the life of the catholic Church.

individual can define all of life. Both *Lynch v Donnelly* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* thus emphasize understanding as relative: God is no longer steadfast but changeable—determined by whatever meaning one confers upon a name that has lost any “significant religious content”—and consequently, so is any kind of understanding of life. The individual defines God, the self, and the world.

Yet absolute self-reliance is incredibly isolating. How does one start to make the distinctions necessary to living independent of others? Since identity is formed through relationships, how can identity be formed in isolation? Are there still coherent frameworks with which to understand one’s life? To stand alone in one’s beliefs and to be a church unto one’s self is to be *alone*. The next section evaluates some of the consequences of the death of God, especially as it relates to the identity crises that occurred once people no longer had a steady understanding of God with which to understand their lives.

The Consequences of Murdering God: Identity

Rather than celebrate the slayers of God, Nietzsche contemptuously explains that one cannot simply appropriate parts of Christianity while discarding the rest. Christianity cannot be picked apart, but must either be fully accepted or fully abandoned: “Christianity is a system, a whole view of things thought out together. By breaking one main concept out of it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole: nothing necessary remains in one’s hands” (*Twilight*, 515-

6). Every part of Christianity, including its moral guidelines, “stands and falls with belief in God” (516). He therefore derides those who have weakened Christianity by treating it like a religious smorgasbord. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche even classifies these “slayers of God” as the “last men,” the apotheosis of nihilism. By connecting those who appropriate or adapt elements of Christianity with nihilism, Nietzsche rightly suggests that the part, without the whole, is nothing, so to choose the part and not the whole is to choose nothingness.

The ability to choose (even to choose nothingness) becomes, in an age that values individualism above all else, the most important element in determining how to live life. In *The Secular Age*, Charles Taylor argues that viewing belief as a choice is a primary characteristic of secularism. Secularism is not simply the loss of religious institutions, the decline of church attendance, or a shrinking number of Christians. Instead, he says that one of secularism’s key characteristics is that belief is no longer intrinsic, but has become one choice among several options. And, even if one does “choose” belief, the “religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this” (486). Yet this type of choice affirms the self first and any religion one chooses to believe in second.

One therefore *creates* meaning and no longer *receives* meaning from outside of oneself. As Taylor argues, in the “enchanted,” pre-modern world, there were “charged” objects that “can affect not only us but other things in the world. They can effect cures, save ships from wreck, end hail, etc.” These objects have a “power which matches their incorporated meaning” (35). Taylor gives the example of mercury, which people believed cured venereal disease, since Mercury is the god of markets, and the market was where venereal disease was contracted. However, in the “secular age,” meaning is self-constructed, and thus, “there can be no charged objects” since the “causal relations between things cannot be in any way dependent on their meanings, which must be projected on them from our minds” (35). When all meaning comes from within, outside “signs” no longer have the same power.

This loss of the sacred sign is a major characteristic of the modern world. Max Weber calls it the “disenchantment of the world,” the shift away from an almost “magical” view of the world and objects toward the more scientific and rational approach of modernity. For Paul Ricoeur, modernity tends to reduce to sameness; it empties symbols of their original meaning. He says a “forgetfulness of hierophanies, forgetfulness of signs of the sacred, [and a] loss of man himself insofar as he belongs to the sacred” has marked modernity from its inception (349). Descartes and his *cogito* brought about a turn in how we understand

ourselves in relation to the world. Before Descartes, thinkers such as Augustine encouraged self-reflection but still concluded that knowing God is fundamental to understanding anything else—including who one is—fully. God is the fullness of being, and everything else only has being in its participation in God; it is God, therefore, who bestows everything with its meaning and purpose.¹¹ After Descartes, meaning and purpose become internalized; the being of all things, including God, becomes something one can comprehend on one's own. Meaning is no longer deciphered but rather is assigned. Consequently, as Taylor and Ricoeur argue, objects no longer have any meaning or power except that which an individual confers upon them. One chooses whether an object or an act is "sacred" or possesses certain powers.

This new "power" to individually confer meaning came at a cost. The means through which people found meaning—through God and one's religious community and its sacred rituals—were erased. Nietzsche predicts the consequences of the death of God, foreseeing that the world will be disoriented. His madman asks,

Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all

¹¹ As Augustine says in his *Confessions*, "Since nothing that exists would exist without you, does it follow that whatever exists does in some way contain you? [...] No, my God, I would not exist, I would not be at all, were you not in me. Or should I say, rather, that I should not exist if I were not in you, from whom are all things, through whom are all things, in whom are all things?" (1.2).

suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? (*Gay Science*, 181).

Nietzsche knows that without Christianity to orient one's life, people can no longer even determine what is "up or down." Christianity had given human life a clear purpose and meaning, and it also provided various mediums for understanding one's life, such as its rites of initiation for the major milestones of life. But when we "wipe away the horizon," we experience, as Taylor says, "the dissipation of our sense of the cosmos as a meaningful order" (17).

A loss of a horizon ultimately means a lost sense of identity. We now are faced with "empty space" in which to create meaning—and therefore create ourselves—on our own. Taylor, in *The Sources of the Self*, traces the transformation of understanding oneself as part of a communal, ordered, and "enchanted" universe to that of viewing oneself as independent and autonomous—and therefore in control of finding "a meaningful order" in the universe for oneself. He points out that this new "choice" brought some new dangers with it, including the possibility of discovering that "nothing is worth doing," a fear "of a terrifying emptiness, a kind of vertigo, or even a fracturing of our world and body space" (18). In other words, it caused a crisis of identity. Taylor argues that, with the loss of a universal framework within which to understand life, people had to determine how to make sense of their lives

through some other medium. Since Taylor believes that “to know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand,” he asserts that to lose our “orientation, or not to have found it, is not to know who one is” (27, 29). He says there is an “essential link between identity and a kind of orientation,” because “to know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance to you and what is trivial and secondary” (28). A frame helps a person to determine “where they stand on questions of what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value” (27), so to lose this orientation would be to strip away much of the significance of life. This causes an “acute form of disorientation”—an “identity crisis” (27). The modern problem of the “alienation of the self” and the postmodern concern with the “fragmentation of the self,” then, can both be traced back to the loss of a communal identity and framework and the growing emphasis on an autonomous self.

Since an “identity crisis” of some form or another is a prevalent phenomenon among those living in modern society, Christian forms can seem appealing to those struggling with issues of identity because these forms intrinsically shape and affirm identity. As Taylor points out, the principal means through which believers understand their faith and affirm a sense of identity are

ritual, visual presentation, and narrative (Scripture)¹² (92). These forms consecrate and give meaning to time, vision, and purpose; they teach a person how to live, see, and understand one's role in the world. They therefore provide a frame that shapes one's everyday existence. Partaking in the Eucharist, for instance, is not just a small, momentary act on a Sunday morning, but an affirmation of community, a participation in the narrative of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection, and a call to live one's life in a way that reflects the same spirit of love and forgiveness of Christ's broken body and shed blood. Christians are taught, through Scripture, visual representation, and rituals, "where they stand" and thus are also furnished with a strong sense of "who they are."

Because these forms shape and affirm Christians, nonbelievers often appropriate these parts of Christianity in an attempt to provide a sense of place and order and to inject meaning or significance into their lives. Philip Larkin's poem, "Church Going," for instance, portrays a biker who visits an empty, abandoned church and happily notes that the church's Scripture parchment and Eucharist plates are locked up, since "superstition, like belief, must die." Yet the biker realizes that within "this special shell, [...] all our compulsions meet/ Are recognized, and robed as destinies." For the speaker, those compulsions "can

¹² Taylor uses narrative, but since Christianity's fundamental narrative is found in the Scriptures, I equate the two in my study. The chapter that analyzes narrative is Hemingway, and in that, I use Scripture as the Christian narrative.

never be obsolete" to those who "hunger" for meaning in life and thus are continually "gravitating" back to religion. The speaker contentedly affirms Christianity's demise but yearns for the survival of its rituals, hoping that since the church "container" has been broken, its sacred rituals may be "dispersed" elsewhere.¹³ Yet it is my contention that these signs, once freed from their "shell," no longer function in the same way; they no longer lead to God, and thus lead to nowhere.

Literary Criticism

While literature of the nineteenth century pondered what to do in the face of the death of God,¹⁴ much of twentieth-century literature considers the effects of that death. Two massive world wars and the continuing advances of science recast humans as beings created not in the image of God, but primarily as the result of a process of biological mechanisms, as matter that can decay.¹⁵ While

¹³ A more recent example is Alain de Botton, a public atheist, who wrote a book entitled *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Atheism*. In it, de Botton selects the characteristics he admires about various religions and explains how they can be modified for secular purposes. His fundamental premise is that religion can teach us important things about how to live even if belief in God is a sham. He addresses different categories, such as love, loss, marriage, etc., discusses some of the beneficial teachings on these topics, and then advises the reader on how to "secularize" them.

¹⁴ Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" is one of the most popular and clear examples: "The Sea of Faith/Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore/Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled./But now I only hear/Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,/Retreating, to the breath/Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear/And naked shingles of the world."

¹⁵ As Yossarian says in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, "man is garbage" (440). Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* also emphasizes this idea by having two characters living in trashcans.

some twentieth-century writers accepted nihilistic consequences and the futility of finding meaning, others tried to recover some parts of religion in order to recover meaning.

Three of the most important recent works in literature and religion criticism examine how some twentieth-century novelists recover a sense of meaning by incorporating religious elements and experiences into their work even as they reject traditional religion. All three, Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, Amy Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief*, and John McClure's *Partial Faiths*, demonstrate that twentieth-century writers have not, as is usually argued, completely abandoned the idea of religion but have instead found new modes of expression for the religious impulse. Lewis argues that the modernists, including Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Henry James, and Franz Kafka, found methods to describe the "religious experience" in a way that is "isolated from any institutionalization in a theology or a church" (20). They sought what he calls a "secular sacred, a form of transcendence or ultimate meaning to be discovered in this world, without reference to the supernatural" (21). These authors support, along with Emerson, a "transfer of authority in religious belief from public to private hands" so that beliefs become, in a sense, self-created (30).

John McClure and Amy Hungerford point out that the postmodern writers they study also want to reject the purely secular and recover some form of religion. McClure argues that the postmodern writers he is analyzing (Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Michael Ondaatje) espouse what he deems the “postsecular,” distinguished by two characteristics: its “ontological signature,” which is a “religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real,” and its “ideological signature,” which is the “rearticulation of a dramatically ‘weakened’ religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects” (3). Consequently, the authors McClure studies demonstrate both a “selective disenchantment with secular values and modes of being and a determination to invent alternatives” that are religious, yet that “reject (in most instances) the familiar dream of a full return to an authoritative faith” (6-7). McClure's term “postsecular” is helpful, but his very definition of the project contradicts itself and demonstrates the inherent flaws of separating the sacred from that which makes it sacred: he claims that writers are tired of secular values but still insert secular values into their new “religiosity.”

Hungerford, on the other hand, argues that postmodern writers (Salinger, Ginsberg, DeLillo, Morrison, and Cormac McCarthy) demonstrate a need for belief, but that their belief is a “belief without content” or a “belief in

meaninglessness" (xiii, xiv). Belief in meaninglessness, for Hungerford, means one can still have conviction amidst conflicting beliefs. She claims the writers she studies "bridge the gaps between conviction and relativism, between doctrine and pluralism, between belief and meaninglessness" (xxi). Thus, they believe in belief itself, in the form of belief. The content behind the belief, however, is empty. Hungerford's conclusions demonstrate what I deem to be the natural progression of what began with the "murderers of God." Divorcing parts of Christianity from the authoritative expressions of it (from the Church, dogma, creeds, etc.) results in belief in nothing, the very nihilism Nietzsche prophesies.¹⁶

Though Lewis, McClure, and Hungerford argue that, in a sense, these writers are resurrecting religion and belief amidst a secular age, they seem not to be resurrecting God, but carrying on the tradition of murdering God. Hungerford even confesses that as much as she admires the writers, their works, and their commitment to belief, she wonders whether the "uses of belief without meaning dehumanize literature, the writer, or both" and concludes that the forms of content-less belief her writers exemplify "have their own emptiness" (133). Hungerford's conclusion here and McClure's definitional contradiction

¹⁶ In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche particularly calls out the nihilism of those who have a "belief in unbelief" (289). He says that it is "the need for a faith, a support, backbone, something to fall back on," which he considers the "instinct of weakness" (288-9). This kind of belief is the result of needing Christianity while being unable to believe in the Christian God (287).

point to the impossibility of trying to make the sacred secular: to divorce a sacred form from its sacred origins is to empty it, and if it is empty, it cannot transform anyone who invokes it. Thus, although these literary critics effectively demonstrate that the religious impulse is alive and that writers have not utterly abandoned all religious forms, the appropriation and privatization of religion that the critics analyze does not grant fulfillment but still a sense of “emptiness.”

Sartre asserts that “God does not exist,” and therefore “it is necessary to draw the consequences of his absence right to the end” (32), meaning we cannot hold on to those forms that comfort us, but must instead face the “empty space” that remains. Sartre depicts the “consequences” of God’s absence by casting the isolated self as the sole constructor of meaning; however, many thinkers who followed him were unhappy or uncomfortable with this result. As Lewis, McClure, and Hungerford show, several writers attempt to relieve this alienation by creating a “secular sacred,” as Lewis dubbed it, in order to fashion meaning for oneself through the fragments of religion that one accepts. However, it is my claim that this kind of appropriation further isolates and fragments the self. Most writers who appropriate Christian forms and ideas are optimistic about their efforts and present it, as Lewis’s and McClure’s works have shown, as a possible alternative to both secularism and religion. Once again, however, this strategy naturally leads to Hungerford’s “faith without content” or “belief in

meaninglessness” and thus ends in nihilism. What may further reveal the emptiness of these kinds of appropriations of the sacred is a study of works that show appropriated religious forms as they are: empty and thus ineffective.

A God-Shaped Hole: Absence versus Appropriation

In George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, zombies return to the mall they occupied as human beings because it was a familiar place to them. They no longer knew what the place meant or why they went there, but they automatically found themselves bodily following their old habits. Similarly, many people still find themselves drawn to Christian signs and rituals, so that although there is no understanding or sense of a real connection present anymore, there is still a desire to return to these Christian forms. These signs once gave life meaning and therefore may offer an escape from the isolation of creating meaning for one's self. Although traditional Christianity may not be appealing anymore, its signs and rituals still are.

Despite the different ways Christian forms have been appropriated, once divorced from their referent, religious forms that were traditionally considered powerful and redemptive lose their potency and authority. Czeslaw Milosz explains both the desire for religious rituals and signs as well as their ineffectiveness once they are separated from their traditional source and practice. He says that “once upon a time the most intimate realities of human existence

were consecrated by rituals" (316), but he also notes that these rituals are becoming "more problematic" and no longer "self-evident" (317). Our "scientific-technological civilization" has made it difficult for us to even understand what these rituals are supposed to mean or enact, so that even when people participate in the ritual, they do not understand its significance (317). The sign is empty and no longer carries the same meaning or effect. Binx Bolling, in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, for instance, notes that what was once sacred is now seemingly meaningless: "Abraham saw signs of God and believed. Now the only sign is that all the signs in the world make no difference" (119). What both Milosz and Percy thus indicate is that though signs may still serve as reminders of what was once there, if the referent, God, is absent from them, rituals, Scripture, and sacred visual presentations can no longer effect the same results.

In this project, I consider these empty signs within twentieth-century American literature. I examine writers who demonstrate that attempts to appropriate Christian forms while divorcing them from their original source lead not to a privatized, self-sufficient redemption and affirmation of identity, but to the failure of redemption and the fracturing of identity. F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Carson McCullers, Sylvia Plath, and Bret Easton Ellis show that appropriation of religious forms cannot achieve what it attempts.

These writers demonstrate that religious forms, emptied of their religious content, lose their power and instead reaffirm the isolation and fragmentation from which many of the characters are trying to escape.

In each author's works, I examine how the characters attempt to appropriate the three principal means in which believers understand their faith: ritual, narrative, and visual representation.¹⁷ I will analyze marriage in the Fitzgeralds, Scripture in Hemingway, visual presentation in the form of the icon in McCullers, the Eucharist and baptism in Plath, and confession in Ellis. Their characters seek an affirmation and fulfillment of their identities by following these traditional forms of Christianity even though they lack belief in the forms' source. The characters find that the form without its referent is merely an empty sign, a reminder of the absence of meaning. This empty sign reaffirms a sense of disorientation, an uncertainty about where one stands, which, as Taylor has told us, is an uncertainty about one's own identity.

To reiterate my fundamental premise, my argument is threefold and will show 1) that even in society where God has been declared dead, people still seek out religious forms in order to help them understand their lives; 2) that without God, these forms will not, in fact, provide a meaningful framework for

¹⁷ Once again, these three forms—ritual, narrative, and visual presentation—come from Charles Taylor. He argues that it is through these forms that Christians understand their place in the world and their identity.

understanding life, but will merely reinforce the characters' sense of an isolated and fragmented identity; 3) that these writers' demonstrations of the failure of these empty forms to effect meaning or affirm identity is much closer to an affirmation of real faith than Pericles Lewis's modernists who privatize religion and appropriate the sacred or McClure's postmodernists who regain a sense of the supernatural but still refute concrete dogma. It will also help address why Hungerford feels "empty" after reading literature she believes demonstrates a "faith without content." The twentieth-century writers I will examine demonstrate that "faith without content" is no faith at all, thus challenging the kind of weakened religiosity that has become so prevalent and clearing the way for traditional, content-full theological categories.

Negative theology begins by describing what God is not, and much can be said about literature that does the same. If we begin with what God is not, we can start moving towards an understanding of who God is. In my argument, my authors present a picture of what these Christian theological forms are not, and their literature thus leads us to better understand what these forms are. My authors may not present a perfect picture of Christianity and its theological forms, but they do present important examples of what Christianity is not. As David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet point out, sometimes "absolute emptiness" can provide "its own self-critique; sometimes, in fact, the spiritual

void [modern authors] represent can seem clearly God-shaped" (271).¹⁸

Consequently, art that seems the darkest, the most ambiguous, often points best to the light. To put it proverbially, admitting something is broken is the first step in repairing it. For example, in Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard argues that everyone who does not know God is in despair. Most people think they are content, but those who actually realize they are "in despair [are] a little closer to being cured than all those who are not regarded as such" (26). The works I am examining show characters who recognize their despair; they all know they are lacking something and aim to fill it. They try to achieve wholeness without God and fail in their attempts. In his *Confessions*, Augustine writes that "evil has no existence except as privation of good" and, similarly, the privation of Christian forms in these authors' works points to what they are a privation of (43).

¹⁸ The idea of absence or emptiness as something that points to God and the good is not a new concept to Christian thinkers. C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, for instance, has some of the most contemptuous hellish creatures "convert" to heavenly ones. The Teacher explains that he has "seen that kind converted" even "when those ye would think less deeply damned have gone back [to hell]. Those that hate goodness are sometimes nearer than those that know nothing at all about it and think they have it already" (82). While I'm not examining works that "hate goodness," Lewis's point is that oftentimes, the cases that seem the most dark, the most dismal, are closer to faith than those that seem more hopeful. Pope John Paul II, for example, argues that questions about evil and suffering immediately lead to questions about goodness: "Christianity proclaims the *essential good of existence* and the good of that which exists, acknowledges the goodness of the Creator and proclaims the good of creatures. Man suffers on account of evil, which is a certain lack, limitation or distortion of good. We could say that man suffers *because of a good* in which he does not share [. . .]. Thus, in the Christian view, the reality of suffering is explained through evil, which always, in some way, refers to a good." (2.5)

I do not claim, of course, that any of the writers I examine are intentionally justifying the Christian faith. Many of them were Christians or nearly became Christians at some point of their lives, but by their deaths (with the exception of Ellis, who is still alive), none were professed Christians.¹⁹ While their texts do evince the writers' interest in and conflict with the Christian faith, declaring any of these texts a testament to the Christian faith would be problematic. However, even though these writers are Christians, I believe that by showing "the consequences" of the absence of the Christian God, their works still, intentionally or not, bear witness to the meaning to be found in Christian faith.

In other words, I believe much can be learned about Christianity from those who carefully considered but still rejected the Christian faith. The authors I study challenge not just a culture that has tried to recast God and Christianity into something else but also a Church which has tried too hard to adapt to that culture and has thus failed to be the Church. By respecting the unique perspective and critiques that those outside of the Church can make about those inside of the Church, I separate myself from John Killinger's *The Failure of Theology in Modern Literature*, which also considers empty theology in twentieth-

¹⁹ Hemingway's faith is the most difficult to determine. Some critics, particularly H.R. Stoneback, believe he was a faithful Christian most of his life, and definitely in his old age while most others believe that he became an atheist after separating from his Protestant childhood upbringing. I will briefly discuss Hemingway's, as well as the rest of the author's, own faith more extensively within each chapter.

century writers. Killinger views the empty theology as an artistic failure and blames the literature for failing to adequately convey Christian theology. He considers his study a “test” to see if the arts convey a “truthful, consistent, and coherent representation of the faith” (16), and he thus judges the art according to very set theological categories and does not look at what the literature has to teach in itself. He considers “art for art’s sake” a “deity substitute,” when for him, art should always serve religion (221). Killinger believes that “literature that reflects only the loss of God is not Christian literature any more than a pamphlet on anarchy is pro government because it happens to use the word government in every other sentence,” and he even calls the literature “blasphemous” (57-8). While I thus consider, with Killinger, empty theology in twentieth-century literature, I diverge considerably from his approach and conclusions. He seems to hold very little regard for the works that he is critiquing, and he demands that all art be held to the Christian standard of a full representation of the faith. He focuses more on what art cannot teach rather than on what it can teach. Instead of “blame” the art or consider art a failure, as Killinger does, my argument will try to demonstrate the truth of what Amos Wilder’s *Theology and Modern Literature* argues: that “secular art can contribute to faith,” that “the Church can learn a lot from the modern artist and his calling and way of life,” and that “atheism in the modern artist presents a kind of

purification, a transitional phase, from secondhand and obsolete religious habits, a purging of inferior consolations, hopes, and sentiments” (4, 35). I thus want to extol my authors’ works as a contribution to—not a failure of—the Christian faith.

In fact, I contend that rather than fail the Church, these writers demonstrate how the Church may have failed (and is failing). Christianity itself, for instance, is not exempt from the slayers of God. Many Christian movements, in an effort to defend Christianity or make it more appealing, simultaneously contributed to creating problems for it. James Turner, in *Without God, Without Creed*, traces how “the defenders of God slowly strangled Him” through their attempts “to adapt their religious beliefs to socioeconomic change, to new moral challenges, to novel problems of knowledge, to the tightening standards of science” (xiii). Christianity tried to become more reasonable, moral/universal, and personalized, and in so doing, lost much of its power.²⁰ Rather than be counter-cultural, Christians conformed to culture and reduced Christianity to little more than an inspirational message and a guide toward better self-esteem. For instance, today’s popular Christian bestsellers, such as Joel Osteen and Rick Warren, represent this tendency well. Joel Osteen’s recent book, *Become a Better*

²⁰ It is not that these are bad/wrong characteristics in and of themselves, but, like Luther’s focus on solo scriptura and sola fides, can be quickly taken out of context and made something they should not be. The Church should be involved, for instance, in aiding the poor and contributing to the community, but an over-emphasis on morality makes other aspects of faith unnecessary, so that eventually, as we’ve seen with the slayers, morality may become *all* that is required.

You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day, has chapters on how to “Develop Your Inner Life” and “Be Positive Towards Yourself.” He also prescribes to a Gospel of Wealth principle, in that he believes God will bless the faithful with worldly success. Rick Warren, though he emphasizes participation within the Church at least a little more than Osteen, also pitches Christianity as a sort-of self-help guide toward living better. Even Billy Graham, one of the best-known Christian evangelicals, presents faith first as a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ” rather than as a communal practice and commitment. Thus, as one of my authors, Bret Easton Ellis, shows in a cutting and poignant depiction of a televangelist, the Church is not exempt from—and even contributes to—many of the problems I charge the slayers of God with. Within my authors’ works, then, is not just a cleansing of a cultural weakening of the Christian faith, but a charge against the Church for not being and acting as it should. Each of these writers thought deeply about matters of faith, and the fact that each of them ultimately ended up rejecting Christianity should give Christian thinkers pause about how not just the cultural appropriation of a Christian form is failing, but also how the Church is failing to present or practice its forms in full.

Within each chapter, then, I will first consider the questions and problems, particularly those that affect identity formation, that each author's works raise, and show how the characters attempt to resolve these questions and problems by

appropriating a specific Christian form. I will then show, in a detailed analysis of one of the author's works, how the use of that Christian form fails. Finally, I will show how that theological form is ideally supposed to work in the Church, thereby contrasting more clearly the privation of the form with its fullness and thus highlight both the need for Christian rituals, visuals, and Scripture to remain firmly rooted to the Christian Church and its tradition as well as the need for the Church to present and practice the form as its traditions suggest. Only then can these forms effect the identity affirmation that these characters seek.

Unlike many of the writers and thinkers who espouse the appropriation and privatization of religion, the Fitzgeralds, Hemingway, McCullers, Plath, and Ellis show that, outside proper practice in the Christian faith, Christian signs are meaningless. Yet in a faith built on paradoxes—a God who is three in one and a Savior who is fully human and fully divine—meaning may paradoxically be hidden within the meaninglessness. The works of these authors do not endorse, as Hungerford argues, a “belief in meaninglessness.” Rather, they demonstrate that meaninglessness can be a sign in itself, a sign that may point to nowhere, but that in so doing, points to the absence of meaning and thus provokes a longing for meaning to return. The meaninglessness of these empty forms points back to their need to be filled with their original meaning, to be reconnected to their source so that they can effect their intended purposes. These authors

demonstrate the failure of appropriated Christian forms, and, in so doing, they prepare the way for a return to traditional Christianity and traditional Christian forms.

CHAPTER TWO

The Wrong Kind of Love: Marriage in the Fitzgeralds

F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife, Zelda, were part of a generation that Scott declared had “grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken” (*This Side of Paradise*, 255). The devastation of World War I left many lost, searching for replacements for what they had lost in the war. As the opportunity to choose one's own spouse became more prevalent, the Fitzgeralds became part of a generation that made love into a new god, a new war to be won, a new faith.¹

The Fitzgerald's own romance serves as a fitting example for how romantic love came to be a substitute for what had seemingly been lost in the war. F. Scott Fitzgerald grew up Catholic, but he gradually abandoned the church and his faith.² When he fell in love with Zelda Sayre, all his efforts—including completing his first novel—were directed toward winning her hand in

¹ Luc Ferry argues that marriage takes on an especial importance after WWI. It becomes our most important choice, so that finding one's marriage partner becomes “what will best incarnate the personal structure of meaning” for a person (Ferry 81). In other words, the search for the beloved is also the search for meaning.

² As a twenty-one-year-old, he wrote in his ledger that it was to be his “last year as a Catholic” (Brucoli 86). Brucoli believes Fitzgerald left the Church “without a backward glance or lingering guilt,” but this is a large declaration to make (86). He still baptized his daughter, Scottie, into the Catholic Church, and she also briefly received Catholic training. Fitzgerald did not return to the Church, however, and died outside of it, without final rites.

marriage. In the loss of his religious faith, she became the “beginning and end of everything,” as evidenced in his admission that “Zelda’s the only God I have left now” (*Letters*, 111). Zelda treated Scott as a god as well, addressing him in her letters as the “Superior Being,” a “sun-god” whom she “adore[s]” and “worship[s]” and who transforms days into “easter” (Z. Fitzgerald, *Collected Works*, 469, 461, 465, 445). Once the two married, however, both believed that the most passionate and intense part of their love affair was already over, and their marriage quickly degenerated as their love for one another was torn apart by jealousy and alcoholism. Their bitterness, resentment, and disillusion grew, and their marriage ended on a tragic note: Zelda was diagnosed with schizophrenia and eventually died in a fire at her mental institution while Scott went broke trying to pay for her mental health care, moved in with another woman, and died young from a heart attack.

The Fitzgeralds’ own story influenced and haunted their writing, and marriage problems similar to their own arise in their characters’ relationships. Consequently, much of their writing reflects the trajectory of their own relationship: man and woman meet, a battle over the heart is waged, they treat one another as a god, they disappoint each other and realize that their beloved is not a god, the relationship crumbles. In other words, their stories chronicle how making the beloved a god-substitute places an unbearable burden upon the

relationship. Much of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald's writing reflects this tension and considers how divinizing a human partner can have disastrous consequences.

In this chapter, I will first look at the pattern that arises in nearly all of Scott Fitzgerald's work, namely, the divinization of a beloved, the expectation to achieve immortality and identity affirmation through the divine beloved, and the inevitable realization that one's beloved is not, in fact, divine, but human, mortal, and unable to bestow the wholeness the lover seeks. I will then look at Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* and Zelda's *Save Me the Waltz* as particular examples that demonstrate how divinizing a marriage can quickly lead to that marriage's disintegration. Eventually, my analysis of love and marriage in the Fitzgeralds will show how love and marriage fail to substitute for God.

The Search for (and Failure to Find) an Immortal, Transcendent Love

Aristophanes, in Plato's *Symposium*, offers an ancient explanation of love that serves to illustrate the Fitzgeralds' characterization of love. Aristophanes narrates a mythological story about the beginning of human beings, when there were men, women, and two-person unions. These two-person unions were inextricably linked, shared everything, and were faster and stronger than the "single" human beings. Created for one another, they belonged together. When these conjoined people decided to challenge the gods, however, the gods

punished them by separating them. This separation, Aristophanes suggests, causes people to feel the loss of their other half and subsequently to spend much of their lives searching for their partner. He concludes, therefore, that the pursuit of love is the pursuit of wholeness, so that man's main aim in life is to find his other half and achieve fulfillment. Until that happens, a person constantly longs for one's other half and feels incomplete (Plato 473-7).

Aristophanes' story emphasizes three key points that also arise in the Fitzgeralds' fiction: one feels incomplete without his or her other half; the search for the other half becomes the primary *telos* of one's life; and finding that other half promises to complete both parties and make them whole. Aristophanes' story therefore confers what are usually characteristics of the gods or God upon romantic love. Further evidence for this substitution is the united-people's attempt to supplant the gods, suggesting that since they have one another, they do not need the gods; they have replaced them and attempted to achieve immortality on their own.

The Fitzgeralds' fiction exhibits many of the traits of Aristophanes' story. The characters search for fulfillment in romantic love, and when they find their other half, they believe their beloved will fulfill them in every way, like a god. Yet the Fitzgeralds ask a question that Aristophanes does not: once the two people find each other and are fused together, what happens? They should, in

theory, be fulfilled and complete. Scott Fitzgerald is not that optimistic, however; his fiction shows an extra step to the cycle, wherein the characters seek immortality, transcendence, wholeness, and fulfillment in a romantic partner, and end utterly “disillusioned,” “dissipated,” and “damned,” to borrow terms Scott Fitzgerald often used. His work shows, then, both how each of his characters divinize the beloved and how, when that divine image shatters, the relationship shatters with it.

In Scott Fitzgerald’s “Absolution,” young Rudolph Miller decides he wants to find “something ineffably gorgeous somewhere that had nothing to do with God” (*The Short Stories*, 289), and Fitzgerald’s fiction considers whether romance can fill this role. The religious language Fitzgerald uses implies that romantic love has replaced God and the Church. In *This Side of Paradise*, Amory has “no God in his heart” and does not attend church (255), but he is instead a “liturgist” about love since he falls in love only around Christmas or Easter (209). The fact that Amory falls in love around Christmas and Easter, the two most significant Christian liturgical events, signals romantic love’s usurpation of God and the Church as the provider of a rhythm to his life. The substitute of love-for-God is again emphasized when Rosalind tells Amory she is “not God’s” but Amory’s (172), and when Clara admits that she has had many men tell her that if they “lost faith” in her, they would “lose faith in God” (135). What all these

characters' descriptions indicates that these characters do not seek meaning from outside of the world, in God; rather they seek meaning by making a god out of someone in the world.

Fitzgerald indicates that people have replaced the Christian version of God-becoming-man with a romantic version wherein the divine-becomes-the beloved or the beloved-becomes-divine. As H. Keith Monroe and Steven Frye argue, Fitzgerald frequently confers divine characteristics upon a human being. In *The Great Gatsby*, Monroe believes that Fitzgerald likens Gatsby to Christ but substitutes "Gatsby's love of a goddess, Daisy, for Christ's love of the Father" (55). He points out that both of Gatsby's names, Jay and James, "derive from Jacob, which means supplanter," and argues that Gatsby, like the Biblical Jacob, envisions a ladder up to the heavens, which for him, is Daisy (59). He climbs the ladder in order to supplant Tom for the hand of Daisy, who has, for Gatsby, supplanted God. While the connection to the Biblical Jacob is slightly stretched, Gatsby and Daisy's association with heavenly imagery does suggest a supplanting of God by romantic love. Gatsby is a "son of God" who has "committed himself to the following of a grail," winning over Daisy (94, 104), and both Gatsby—since he is a "son of God"—and Daisy—who represents the

divine object of his quest—are human gods.³ By acting as such, Monroe says they are able “to remove the crucified Christ from the cross” since they serve as each other’s redeemers (59).⁴

The lover as redeeming-god is made even clearer in *The Beautiful and Damned*. Gloria is an actual goddess, Beauty, who descends to the earth to become a jazz baby. Steven Frye argues that her inherent “divinity” symbolizes a Eucharistic element in the novel, wherein the material (Gloria) becomes infused with the divine and thus becomes a salvific agent. He argues that Gloria’s role as the goddess Beauty allows Gloria to manifest beauty, a “rare virtue emanating directly from the divine” that thus points beyond itself to its source in the divine (69). In this way, Gloria holds in herself the “physical and the spiritual, the temporal and the eternal,” characteristics which also describe the Eucharist (69).

³ Several critics have noted the transcendent quality in *Gatsby*. Paul Giles says that *Gatsby*’s quest for beauty leads him to a “spiritualization of earthly matter” (177). Giles Gunn also notes *Gatsby*’s quest to spiritualize his world—to make a faith out of wonder—saying *Gatsby* seems like “a grotesque parody of some high priest or shaman who is continually dispensing holy waters, consecrated food, and other elements of the sanctified life to whatever aspirants he can gather around him” (208). Robert Emmitt argues that Fitzgerald may have used *The Golden Bough* and *From Ritual to Romance* to build a human myth resemblant of the god and goddess myths these books tell.

⁴ The removal of Christ from the cross is a particularly apt description of how much love has replaced Christianity as lovers metaphorically take the place of Christ. Gloria makes a “likeness of Anthony akin to some martyred and transfigured Christ” (361), making him into a divine figure to match her own goddess-hood. This theme is again echoed in the Fitzgeralds’ relationship: Zelda painted Scott in a crown of thorns while in the mental hospital, depicting him as her Christ, or, if not that, depicting his view of himself as a suffering, sacrificial Christ figure. Dick, in *This Side of Paradise*, also takes the place of Christ as an “exasperated” Christ who sacrifices himself for the health of his wife, Nicole.

Gloria becomes for Anthony a human representation of the divine, the pathway to eternity and redemption.

In other words, loving an immortal—and being chosen to be loved by an immortal—“saves” the lover from mortality and makes him immortal as well.

One passionate romance can become the passageway to immortality and godhood. In *Gatsby*, for instance, Daisy and Gatsby both already resemble gods, but it is not until Gatsby kisses Daisy that the “incarnation was complete” (117).⁵ Gatsby can only fully become a “son of God” when he seals the romantic covenant with Daisy, making him and Daisy immortal through their immortal love (104). In *The Beautiful and Damned*, Gloria’s statement that “two souls are sometimes created together and are in love before they are born” reflects Aristophanes’ views on romance and implies that love conquers mortality by restoring human beings to their pre-mortal-body state as spirits living together (*Beautiful*, 99). If Gloria is a goddess and Anthony was created with her, then he

⁵ Paul Giles notes a paradox in Gatsby’s kiss with Daisy. He says that “Gatsby’s aspirations toward transcendent divinity seem in one way to be compromised by Daisy’s appearance as a real live human being, whose ‘perishable breath’ betokens mutability and mortality. Still, the word ‘incarnation’ has obvious Christian overtones, as if Daisy, like Christ, might be a God made flesh who does not necessarily forfeit her divine status by manifesting herself in a human guise” (182). Giles’s interpretation fits mine well. Gatsby confers godlike status upon Daisy, thinking it will make his own godhood “complete.” However, when he gets close to her, he also realizes she is mortal, has “perishable breath.” This coincides with the problem several characters have, wherein the closer they get to their beloved, the more they realize their mortality, even while holding on to the illusion of their godhood.

is also a god. The relationship has elevated him from a regular human being to an immortal.

Besides immortality and godhood, romance also acts as a god-substitute by providing Anthony, and many of Fitzgerald's characters, with a sense of direction and identity. Before Anthony meets Gloria, his days are usually "shapeless" and "spineless" and demonstrate an overall "growing lack of color" (Fitzgerald, *Beautiful*, 43-4). He realizes that he is as "empty as an old bottle" (45), and the change he seeks comes in the form of Gloria. As Frye notes, the "mystical quality inherent in Gloria" allows her to "provide meaning to Anthony's otherwise purposeless life" (69). As Gloria and Anthony undergo a constant "unfolding to each other" (Fitzgerald, *Beautiful*, 100), Anthony finds that "the union of his soul with Gloria's" gives new meaning and understanding to his sense of selfhood (111). Winning over Gloria and submitting to a "union" with her gives Anthony a purpose, a "color" to his days. The relationship provides him with a new sense of identity: an identity formed by being-in-relationship.⁶

⁶ The need to be in-relationship in order to understand oneself is a standard belief in theology, philosophy, and the human sciences. One's sense of identity cannot arise out of a vacuum. As Jurgen Moltmann succinctly sums up, humans can only understand one's self in relationship: "The 'I' can only be understood in light of the 'Thou'—that is to say, it is a concept of relation. Without the social relation there can be no personality" (145). As I discussed in the Introduction, before "the death of God," identity was affirmed through belief in God and one's role in the Church and its community. However, with belief in God no longer a seemingly viable possibility, seeking identity-affirmation through one's romantic partner became a popular

Aristophanes' story says people cannot be whole until they find their lovers, and likewise, Fitzgerald's characters believe that they can only be whole when in relationships with their mates; consequently, their sense of identity cannot be complete without their other half. For instance, Katherine, in *The Last Tycoon*, admits that after sex with a man, she always hopes she and her lover will remain "one person" and is "surprised" when she finds they "are two people again" (106). Katherine desires a permanent connection and an unbreakable communion. She sees sex—the joining together of two bodies to become one—as a brief respite from the isolation and loneliness she feels. Sex solidifies the sense of being in-relationship, so when the sexual act is done and she realizes she is still a separate person, she feels isolated, alone, and incomplete. She needs the other in order to feel whole.

Gatsby, too, relies on Daisy to complete him since he believes he cannot attain his full identity without Daisy. Before he meets her, he leaves his parents, his hometown, and his given name behind in a quest to construct his own identity. Daisy consummates his self-constructed identity since she represents all that he is trying to achieve: vivacity, riches, and beauty. No matter how many friends or admirers Gatsby wins, it is winning Daisy that will complete this identity transformation. Daisy is the sole means by which Gatsby ascribes

alternative. A "Thou" with which to understand the "I" is still needed, so romantic love began to fulfill that role.

value to his life, as noted in Nick's observation that Gatsby "revalue[s] everything" through Daisy's eyes (97). Daisy's love validates not just his possessions, but Gatsby himself, so though she chose to marry Tom, Gatsby never stops trying to win her—and her validation—back again. When he had Daisy's love, he felt affirmed and complete, so reviving that love is an attempt to "recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy" (116). With Daisy, James Gatz fully becomes Jay Gatsby, but without her, he is just a "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" (137).

Amory, likewise, seeks affirmation through his various romances. He frequently uses "friends as mirrors of himself" and is often "posing" and "pretending" throughout the novel, trying on multiple identities (*This Side*, 33). When he meets Rosalind, however, he suddenly gains a clear purpose and direction. She becomes his "life and hope and happiness, [his] whole world," and they "belong" to each other (172, 174). Every part of them is aligned to the love they share; every part of life is "transmitted into terms of their love, all experience, all desires, all ambitions nullified" (172). Amory does not pose or pretend when he is with Rosalind because his entire being is confirmed in her love. A less encompassing love, like his love for Eleanor, only reveals a "mirror" of himself: what he loves and hates about her is what he loves and hates about

himself. Rosalind, on the other hand, is the god-like creature who manages to have “drawn out more” in him than anyone else (191).

Zelda’s writing reflects a similar desire for a new definition of identity in-relationship.⁷ Her fictional alter-ego, Alabama, frequently searches for a “center” with which to model her identity, and she believes her husband, David, can provide that for her. Alabama’s terminology of searching for a center is important here, as it clarifies what many of Scott Fitzgerald’s characters are also looking for: with “all gods dead,” people must seek a new way to orient their lives—to give themselves purpose. And, as the Fitzgeralds show, many people choose to do this through human relationships. Romance becomes the new center of their existence.

As both Fitzgeralds’ works demonstrate, however, romance does not make a reliable center with which to construct one’s life. Their works depict romantic relationships which, though they have divine characteristics at first, are very human and thus cannot sustain the godlike attributes one may confer upon them; consequently, a relationship built around such exalted expectations is destined to fail, shattering the sense of identity wrapped into the relationship

⁷ Zelda herself relied on Scott to shape her identity. Her letters often say that she wants to give all of herself to Scott, to belong to him and be his completely: “you really own me,” “I’m nothing without you,” “I seem to be about half a human being [without you]” (446, 448, 449).

along with it. What the characters discover is that romantic love does not, in itself, bestow immortality and permanent wholeness.

Rather than immortality and permanent wholeness, romantic relationships in the Fitzgeralds often act as a reminder of one's mortality and isolation. *Eros*, as the Greeks teach, can never be separated from *thanatos*. The very act of sex is an attempt to be immortal (by continuing one's genetic line in reproduction) and a reminder of one's mortality (the fact that reproduction is necessary serves as a reminder that death is inevitable).⁸ Sex can also be isolating, as evidenced in Katherine's surprise at having to be separate again after the union of sex. Relationships, too, can be isolating since they are, as Luc Ferry points out, usually based on emotions—which are perpetually changing and seemingly uncontrollable—meaning the beloved, whose reciprocal love provides a sense of wholeness, identity-affirmation, and purpose to the lover, can decide at any moment that emotions have changed and love vanished (83). The inconsistency and fleeting nature of people and their emotions leaves the lover wondering if he is building an entire world in the sand, knowing that there is always a risk that one sudden tide could wash it all away and leave him or her alone, with nothing.

⁸ The ancient Greeks believed that sex was so intricately tied to life and death that they encouraged restraint in sexual matters; they believed sperm contained life, so if one frequently had sex and ejaculated, he lost some of his lifeblood and grew closer to death (Foucault, *History*, 132).

What Fitzgerald's characters therefore discover is that to divinize a relationship is to destine that relationship for failure. To make the beloved into a god fails in two ways in Fitzgerald's fiction: 1) the beloved fails as a god-substitute and does not bring immortality and wholeness; 2) the lover fails to truly love his beloved since he has a false, idealized image of her. By worshipping a false image—both a false image of God and a false image of the beloved—the lover makes an idol out of his relationship. Scott Fitzgerald invokes the image of an idol himself in *The Last Tycoon*, where Monroe Stahr's love interest, Kathleen, literally enters his life sitting on top of an idol when an earthquake hits (35-6), a small moment that characterizes nearly all of his characters' relationships. Robert Emmitt rightly calls *The Great Gatsby* a "parable of the fate of idolatry" (283), and nearly all of Fitzgerald's works could fit this description. Like *Gatsby*, they also show that the "fate of idolatry" is doom: the relationship is doomed since the real person will be a disappointment compared to one's grand illusions, and the quest for transcendence and salvation is doomed since one's beloved is not a divine god but a flawed, mortal human being.

Fitzgerald shows that relationships founded upon mutual worship cannot last, or, at least, one's happiness cannot last. When characters expect nothing less than divine perfection from their beloveds, any evidence of imperfection may cause the entire relationship to crumble. *The Great Gatsby* provides a good

illustration of the disappointment that will inevitably result when one's heavenly expectations are centered on an earthly person. Before Nick arranges Gatsby and Daisy's reunion, Gatsby continually yearns for the green light at the end of the dock, a symbol of Daisy and all she represents. When he sees her again, the mystical quality of the green light and Daisy recedes. Nick notes that Gatsby's "count of enchanted objects diminished by one" after his encounter with Daisy and knows that Daisy could not possibly live up to Gatsby's vision of her, dooming the relationship from the start (98). Even in their first meeting, "Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion," an illusion that "had gone beyond her, beyond everything" (101). Daisy still remained a beautiful, vivacious woman, but she simply lacked the transcendence Gatsby had conferred upon her. Gatsby's "illusion" of Daisy does not fit who Daisy actually is, and this illusion eventually leads to his death.⁹

The cycle of illusion and disillusionment plays a prominent role in Fitzgerald's fiction. His characters' beginning courtships are often blissful, passionate, and near-perfect, but they are also fleeting and based upon false assumptions. The beloved is often not the person Fitzgerald's characters believe

⁹ Gatsby believes so passionately in the image of Daisy—and so fervently in the identity of himself he believes she affirms—that he cannot see her as Nick does—as a "careless" person who tears things up and leaves them behind (187). Consequently, her careless driving and her husband's careless remarks lead to Gatsby's murderous downfall.

they pursue. Fitzgerald's description of Jacob's love for Jenny in "Jacob's Ladder" could fit any number of his other characters. Jacob believes he falls in love with Jenny, but instead of loving her for the fallible, real human being she is, he "molded her over into an image of love—an image that would endure even longer than love" and that was "identical with her old self only by name" (381-2). Jacob constructs Jenny into the person he wants her to be by creating an intricate illusion about who she is and what she means to him. The distance Jacob creates between the real Jenny and the Jenny he loves is emblematic of Gatsby and several others of Fitzgerald's characters: they fall in love with an ideal image that only remotely resembles the real person that it inspired, and, when the real relationship goes sour, they mourn for their illusion more than for the actual person.¹⁰ They thus face frequent disillusionment since that image—their illusion—cannot withstand the everyday challenges of being in a relationship with a real person.

One's illusions can ruin more than just one's relationship. Worshiping an idol means worshiping something false, something constructed, and it also inherently implies that one is not worshiping what is true. Just as Gatsby's idolization of Daisy leads to his death, several of Scott Fitzgerald's characters

¹⁰ Amory is another great example. After believing Isabelle and his love was eternal and special, he has an argument with her and realizes "that he had not an ounce of real affection" for her, that "perhaps all along she had been nothing except what he had read into her" (*This Side* 94).

find ruin, not immortality and godhood, in love. A brief but poignant story in *The Beautiful and Damned* reveals just how dangerous love and sex can be when they cause one to look toward the earth rather than the heavens. In the story, a new monk has joined a convent where monks are not allowed to descend lower than the second floor of their towers in an attempt to separate themselves from all earthly desires and to focus instead on prayer and contemplation. When the new monk glances out the window of the top floor, he catches sight of a young girl adjusting her garter and leans closer to see her. As he leans over the window, a stone loosens from the window and the monk falls down fifty feet, “bound for hard earth and eternal damnation” (70). The monk loses his life and seemingly his salvation by focusing his attention on a woman rather than God. What Fitzgerald’s story thus implies is that even a brief turn away from God toward human love or lust is also a turn from salvation to damnation.

The monk’s story foreshadows Anthony’s fate in *The Beautiful and Damned*. Gloria, the heavenly creature, should be able to bring bliss and redemption to her mate, since she is the “unity sought by philosophers” in that her “soul and spirit were one” (26). Yet when Anthony and Gloria get married, they quickly dissipate: both drink frequently and struggle with boredom, and by the end of the novel, Gloria has lost her vivaciousness and Anthony is mentally unstable. He cheats on Gloria, becomes an alcoholic, and gives up on finding any purpose

for his life.¹¹ Marrying Gloria does not grant him the divine meaning and direction he thought it would, and he unravels when he realizes his salvation was instead a curse. Treating his beloved as a god makes him and Gloria, as the title suggests, beautiful but damned.

Critics agree that at least part of Fitzgerald's characters' problems resides in misdirecting divine love onto the beloved. For instance, Steven Frye suggests that though Gloria has some Eucharistic characteristics, Anthony's "attempt to separate the theological notions that govern the Eucharistic expression from their liturgical context [. . .] ultimately seals their doom" (74). Frye concludes that though Gloria's beauty can act as a transcendent good, the "tendency to transform women into mystical symbols becomes destructive rather than redemptive," a statement that pertains not just to Anthony, but also to several of Fitzgerald's other characters (70). James Gindin agrees that Fitzgerald's characters continually engage in problematic, idealistic relationships, arguing that in Fitzgerald's novels, "once the woman is no longer the idol, remote and virginal, she introduces sin into the world" that corrupts the lover and brings about both their downfalls (341). The divine idol becomes instead the "devil's agent" (341). Indeed, Anthony's move from worshipful love to disintegration

¹¹ For instance, Anthony was determined to find a job through most of the novel. He wanted to be a writer, and he tries several different jobs while awaiting his grandfather's inheritance, but once the inheritance arrives, he gives up any pretense of finding anything specific to do other than wander around the world in idleness and misery.

and damnation is not an isolated occurrence but a standard trajectory for Fitzgerald's characters. Rather than granting fulfillment and purpose, the result of "worshipping" a beloved is to join those who are "beautiful and damned."

Lehan suggests that Fitzgerald writes "Faustian heroes" whose "very desires" are self-destructive (38), but Fitzgerald's characters' *desires* are not problematic—what they believe *fulfills* those desires is. Fitzgerald's characters long for transcendence, immortality, and wholeness, all worthy desires. However, they seek fulfillment of these in their idealization (and idolization) of love. The fact that they describe love with such god-like imagery and ascribe the kind of meaning to a romantic relationship that is normally reserved for religion implies that what the characters are really searching for is not a human, mortal, lover they can transform into a god, but rather a transcendent, eternal God.

Ernest Becker, in *The Denial of Death*, argues that very point, saying that romance has acted as a substitute for God. Human beings, he argues, constantly seek out ways to defeat death. Christianity, he says, provides people with a built-in immortality clause; this clause alleviates the fear of mortality by promising eternal life, and it also gives life a purpose by assigning eternal rewards or punishments for earthly actions. Becker argues that after belief in God waned, people still needed a way to deny their "creatureliness" and find a gateway to immortality. They "reached for a Thou" to help them do so, and,

with God no longer there, made the beloved “the divine ideal” instead (Becker 160-1). If the beloved is divine, “one’s own self will be elevated by joining destinies” with the divine beloved (162). After being purified by the presence of the divine beloved, the beloved will also reflect a “truly ideal image” of one’s self (162). The beloved thus acts as the “Thou” that shapes and affirms the lover’s “I” while also transforming the lover into an immortal. Becker says that those who search for this kind of completion and affirmation in their romantic partners are actually looking for “redemption, nothing less, from elevating their lover partner” to the role of godhood (166), but that, “needless to say, human partners can’t do this” since the “lover cannot give absolution in his own name” (167).

What happens instead of redemption, according to Becker and the Fitzgeralds’ stories, is the dissolution of a love that may have once been passionate and strong, but that simply cannot withstand the pressure of godhood. Eventually, both the lover and the beloved feel shortchanged: each begins to resent the other as the lover realizes redemption cannot be found in the beloved and the beloved finds he or she “cannot stand the burden of godhood” (Becker 168). Becker’s analysis reinforces what the religious imagery in the Fitzgeralds’ stories suggest: love and marriage cannot serve as substitutes for God, and when they are treated as such, the relationship—and the sense of identity woven into the relationship—will shatter.

The Fitzgeralds' characters seek transcendence and find that their romantic relationships simply cannot provide that. They believe they search for romantic relationships, but the qualities they seek and the ways they love are more akin to the search for God. As Zelda phrases it, the Fitzgeralds' characters are, in the absence of God, "sick with spiritual boredom," and they seek spiritual fulfillment (295). They search for the return of a God that grants eternal life, identity affirmation, a sense of purpose, and a "complete" love—all the things they are unable to find in their divinization of human love.

That romantic love is not enough is repeated frequently throughout both Fitzgeralds' fiction. Like Aristophanes' story teaches, love does seek unification and wholeness. However, it needs a transcendent touch to complete the process. Scott Fitzgerald's first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, serves as a good introduction to what I believe is a key theme throughout his fiction: God is needed to "complete" both romantic love and one's sense of self. In the novel, Monsieur Darcy acts as an older, Catholic double to Amory; they are, as the priest says frequently, similar in nature and thought.¹² Darcy meets Amory through Amory's mother, Beatrice, whom Darcy had loved passionately. After their relationship ended,

¹² Darcy is based upon Father Sigourney Fay, a priest and mentor to Fitzgerald. Under Fay's encouragement, Fitzgerald even briefly considered becoming a priest himself. Many of Darcy's letters are taken from Fay's letters to Fitzgerald, which also encouraged him to root himself in the Church. Fay left a great impression upon Fitzgerald, and he even dedicated *This Side of Paradise* to him, but Fitzgerald's faith seemed to have died when Fay did, as he left the Church soon after the priest's death.

Darcy renounced his atheism and converted to Catholicism. Darcy's romantic love eventually morphed into a love for God, and he encourages Amory to follow the same path.¹³ Though Amory finds religion unnecessary and irrelevant, Darcy argues that no matter what Amory's "métier proves to be," it "would be much safer anchored to the Church" (101). Though the image of an anchor could be considered restrictive, Darcy suggests that belief in Christianity will not restrain but enlarge Amory. Amory, who continually poses, pretends, and frequently changes his intellectual positions, tends to lose himself in whatever fleeting idea currently preoccupies his mind. He needs a steady sense of rootedness and purpose in order to understand himself.

Darcy believes a Christian anchor will prevent Amory from losing himself in romantic relationships. Amory tends to be rather ambivalent in love: one moment he is confessing his eternal love and the next all he wants is never to see his eternal love again. His most passionate love affair, then, is also the most dangerous, and Darcy cautions Amory to "beware of losing [him]self in the personality of another being," as he can already tell Amory sounds "shriveled" since meeting Rosalind (201). Darcy has learned, from his experience with Beatrice, that love is not complete if it is not centered on the love of God. He therefore implores Amory to reorient his love. He warns Amory that he makes

¹³ Beatrice's name references another instance of a man whose passion for his beloved Beatrice teaches him how to love God: Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

“a great mistake if [he] thinks [he] can be romantic without religion”¹⁴ (201).

Christian love, for Darcy, can temper, train, and purify Amory’s natural abilities and tendencies while human love will absorb and consume Amory.

By the end of the novel, Amory decides he wants to be like the Monsieur, but as a “romantic egoist,” he interprets this imitation egotistically: he wants to be admired, as Darcy was, by lots of people. In sum, he wants not to need God, but to be needed by others. The end of the novel thus reflects that, like the monk in *The Beautiful and Damned*, Amory is still looking toward the earthly; he decries the loss of Rosalind and his inability to find anything else to substitute for her. These final lines emphasize Amory's choice: instead of taking Darcy’s advice in anchoring himself to the permanent love of Christianity, Amory continues to worship romantic love, participating in a “form of divine drunkenness” that will likely only last a “year or so,” until he and his love “make the usual nothing of it” and wait for disillusion, and the subsequent self-isolation and fragmentation, to set in (“A Diamond as Big as the Ritz,” 235).

Although Amory and many of the Fitzgeralds’ characters’ relationships fail, their relationships do not fail because the characters loved too little or even too much, but because they worshiped the wrong kind of love. Aristophanes’ story expresses a wonderfully romantic idea, but, as the Fitzgeralds’ fiction

¹⁴ While Darcy uses romantic in a larger sense than romantic love, the situation still fits. Amory, for instance, explains his romanticism to Rosalind through the example of romantic love.

shows, pursuing the beloved in hopes of finding wholeness, purpose, and immortality will only lead to fragmentation, disorientation, and a keen reminder of one's mortality. As I have already shown, many of Scott Fitzgerald's works affirm these consequences and therefore suggest that love and marriage cannot serve as a substitute for the Christian God. The Fitzgeralds' marriage novels, Scott's *Tender Is the Night* and Zelda's *Save Me the Waltz*, make these themes even clearer. These novels particularly emphasize what I believe the Fitzgeralds' work demonstrates: even though romantic love and marriages often contain foretastes of the divine, they ultimately cannot replace the divine. Both *Tender* and *Waltz* are characterized by loss: loss of selves, loss of love, loss of marriage. Most importantly, they also subtly point to the loss of God and suggest, along with Monsieur Darcy, that the loss of God may be the underlying reason why the others are lost.

The Failure of Marriage in Tender Is the Night and Save Me the Waltz

F. Scott Fitzgerald was not pleased with his wife's first novel. Based partially upon their own marriage and time abroad, Zelda's *Save Me the Waltz* used what Fitzgerald considered *his* material (Brucoli 346). He was concerned that publishing her novel might detract from his novel, *Tender Is the Night*, which was also partially based on their time abroad. Zelda's novel was eventually published after Fitzgerald made some edits, and instead of detracting from

Fitzgerald's novel, the two works make for a fascinating he-said/she-said account while read as companion pieces. When read together, they act as a diagnostic for the kind of expectations and actions that make a marriage fail, primarily by pinpointing what marriage cannot do. In particular, both novels show that marriage cannot act as a god and cannot complete one's identity. *Tender Is the Night* and *Save Me the Waltz*, especially when read together, ultimately demonstrate that marriage cannot replace divine love but must learn to imitate it.

Critics have considered the issues of religion, identity, and love, but none have fully explored how intricately they are all linked. *Tender Is the Night* has clear religious connections, as Fitzgerald himself described Dick as a "spoiled priest" in his plan for the novel and several critics focus on Dick's failure to fulfill the role of priest. Joan Allen considers the various people Dick "ministers to, arguing that though he tries multiple times to enact his priestly role, he is only "ineffectual or corrupt" (127). He acts as confessor, judge, father, and intercessor, but cannot complete his tasks. Kenneth Tucker argues that Dick is a "secular priest, a would-be savior," but that he painfully fails to "create vital change" against the "unexplainable workings of mind and nature" (47). Tucker, though he parallels Dick's failures with biblical precedents, attributes Dick's failure to the "uncontrollable" and "incomprehensible" nature of the world rather than to any lack of faith from Dick, the supposed priest. Gordon

McConnell also considers the religious imagery within the novel, but he attributes the tension in Fitzgerald's novel to the "antagonism" "between the inwardness of romanticism and the rationality of the Enlightenment" (87). Economics replaces theological values, prompting divine rituals to "inevitably spill [...] over into secular life" (90). McConnell thus introduces the idea of desacralized rituals, but he sees these as a consequence of Enlightenment rationality and does not consider what the consequences of these spiritually emptied rituals are. Sam Girgus and Berry Scherr consider the problem of identity in the novel, with Girgus arguing that Dick loses himself in an attempt to become God and save the world. He argues that, through the character of Dick, Fitzgerald says life will inevitably lead to "exhaustion—the end of possibilities both for the individual and for humanistic studies of the individual" (181). Girgus focuses primarily on how Dick fails as a god and does not fully examine the ways in which Dick looks to Nicole as a god and how she also fails to be Dick's god. Scherr argues from the opposite approach and blames all of Dick's identity problems on Nicole, arguing that she is a "domineering, self-centered female" that absorbs Dick's selfhood into her own (15).

Jan Hunt and John Suarez's article on the "Evasion of Adult Love" and Pamela Boker's article on the psychoanalysis of love in the Divers' marriage both consider the problematic nature of love in Fitzgerald's work. Hunt and Suarez

critique Fitzgerald's presentation of love, arguing that he always depicts two women: one defined by her bitchery and the other by her idealization. They argue that Fitzgerald's characters, particularly Dick, cannot ever achieve "adult love" because their fantasies have "already committed [them] to the ideal woman" who does not actually exist (159). When Dick finds out Nicole does not match his ideal woman, Hunt and Suarez say that she then becomes a fake "monster-of-bitchery" (159). Dick (as well as several other of Fitzgerald's characters) is not capable of real, adult love because of his need to idealize women into forms they can never adequately attain. While Hunt and Suarez argue that the problem is due primarily to a lack of maturity and problematic relationships with fathers, more is at stake than just the illusions of youth.

Fitzgerald's characters are trying, as I will show, to fill a spiritual gap in their lives, and they discover that romantic love, in itself, simply cannot fill it. Pamela Boker shows, for instance, the problems of "transference love," a love that originally resides elsewhere but is transferred onto another. Nicole transfers her corrupt and problematic love for her incestuous father onto her psychiatrist, Dick, which Boker says results in a "blind valuation of the loved person," a "pull toward engulfment" that may become a "threat to the lover's wholeness and independence" (296, 304). Boker is more interested in the "case study" the novel offers for transference love than in the novel itself, but she does introduce a

valuable point: Dick and Nicole's love starts by being a "substitute," and, I believe, remains a substitute. However, I believe a consideration that synthesizes the three themes—religion, identity, and love—will show that Dick also uses Nicole as a substitute love, and that both are trying to fill the loss of a divine Father, not necessarily just a human one.

These same themes arise in Zelda Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz*. Zelda's novel also portrays a cycle of substitute loves, which critics have primarily considered through a feminist lens or through its autobiographical elements.¹⁵ As feminists note, men in the novel do not provide a lasting sense of fulfillment for the protagonist, Alabama Beggs, and she seeks something beyond them. Alabama is a young woman under her father's jurisdiction in the beginning of the novel who seeks a new identity and life through her marriage to David. When marriage, too, fails to fulfill her, she tries to find her identity in her work, ballet. Feminist critics, such as Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin and Sarah Beebe Freyer, see ballet as the culmination of her quest for identity. Tavernier-Courbin believes that "Dancing becomes for Alabama the process of life itself. Through it, she creates herself constantly, she expresses life [. . .]. Dancing, then, is a way of owning her life, owning herself, and creating herself anew each day" (37). Linda

¹⁵ See, for instance, Susan Castillo's "(Im)Possible Lives: Zelda Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz* as Surrealist Autobiography" and Mary E. Wood's "A Wizard Cultivator: Zelda Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz* as Asylum Autobiography" for treatments of the novel as autobiography.

Wagner also notices that Alabama is searching for something more large-scale than just vocational purpose through her suggestion that Alabama treats ballet like a “religious passage” that replaces her “former idols,” her father and David (206, 204). Yet, as Mary Wood points out, ballet is also not a satisfactory answer, since ballet, in that it treats the dancer as both “artist and material,” “splits” the dancer “from her own body,” a condition of schizophrenia (254). Thus, *Save Me the Waltz*’s critics have thus far pinpointed some of the major problems in the novel—including Alabama’s religious stance toward men and ballet, and the failure of both to fulfill her—but, like critics of *Tender Is the Night*, need to better consider how Alabama fails to find substitutes to religion because nothing can adequately substitute for religion.

Both Zelda’s *Save Me the Waltz* and Scott’s *Tender Is the Night* demonstrate that though “all gods are gone,” the desire for God is not. Questions about purpose, direction, and identity still arise, and the individual self still seeks out the ever-important “thou” to help answer them. Alabama, for instance, seeks a center with which to revolve her life. She does not want to live her life in isolation, but desires “a show to join” (20). Alabama’s desire to *join* a “show” rather than *create* a show signifies her need to live out a purpose and meaning larger than and outside of herself. She desires an “uncontested pivot from which to swing her equivocal universe” because without one, she feels like a “minor

character” in her own life (111-2). Alabama therefore connects a meaningful life with having a pivot—a center—which orders her life; she does not want to live in isolation, but to join the right show and find an important role. Alabama seeks something outside of herself that can act as the hub with which to understand the rest of her life; only then can her identity be shaped and formed. Without that pivot, she feels alone and lost.

Dick, in *Tender Is the Night*, also feels an acute sense of mourning for God and for the questions God could help answer. Dick’s father is a deceased clergyman, which symbolically indicates the role religion now plays. Fitzgerald called *Tender* his “confession of faith” and considered Dick a “spoiled priest” (*Letters*, 363), thus clearly intending his novel to consider religious questions even though traditional religion is mostly pushed to the margins of the novel. “Spoiled priests,” in the Catholic meaning, enter the priesthood but fail to complete their final vows. The phrase is fitting for Dick, then, because he has a priestly sensibility and a desire to save souls and live spiritually. However, he can never become a real priest because instead of following the religion of his father, Dick follows the religion of love and centers his life around women, particularly around Nicole, his wife.¹⁶ He takes marriage vows instead of ordination vows and cannot complete his vocational call. Thus, as a “spoiled

¹⁶ He even chooses his profession, psychology, because he wanted to be in the same psychology class a girl he liked was in.

priest," Dick still seeks the transcendent, but he is spoiled — ruined — by seeking it in the wrong way. Both he and Alabama try to relocate the spiritual world to the earthly by making their marriages into a kind of divine union that fulfills all their needs and desires. This attempt is destined to fail, however, as they quickly discover that their marriages, when lived out with these expectations, inhibit rather than complete them.

That Alabama and Dick cast the beloved into the role of a god is evidenced in their descriptions of their love: they use religious language and assign their mates godlike attributes and worth. By viewing their beloved as a divine creature, they believe that in loving this god-like person, they also will metamorphose into a god, with marriage acting as the ritual that marks the completion of the transformation and thus, represents the initiation into godhood. Alabama, for instance, knows that her "unequivocal pivot" must be something divine in order to suffice as her center and bestow her life with meaning and purpose. Thus, when she believes she has found her center in David, she confers religious qualities upon him. When she meets David, she notes that "there seemed to be some heavenly support beneath his shoulder blades" and that there was an "inspiration of his face" (35). Similarly, when she meets Jacques, the man she has a brief affair with, she questions if "he actually is a god" and compares embracing him to a "lost religious rite" (84, 89). Alabama

believes love can give her life the significance she feels it lacks, so she sees her paramours as gods who can rescue and fulfill her.

Dick and Nicole Diver's godhood attracts a larger following than just one another. They become even more godlike together, in marriage, than they are separately. Nicole is described as having "the face of a saint"; she is "an angel," a "Viking Madonna" who anoints herself when she bathes, "crosses" herself with her Chanel perfume, and receives "tithes." Dick is described as "fixed and Godlike," an "exasperated Christ" who, when he invites someone to a party, makes an "apostolic gesture." Dick's invitations are not just an invitation to a party, but an invitation to join in worshipping him and Nicole, the godlike couple. For example, young Rosemary, upon going to her first party at Dick and Nicole's, is "as dewy with belief as a child from one of Mrs. Burnett's vicious tracts" and experiences "a conviction of homecoming" (34). She thinks that the "table seemed to have risen a little toward the sky like a mechanical dancing platform," and that the other people at the table resemble "the faces of poor children at a Christmas tree" when they look at Dick and Nicole (34). Rosemary even hears a song "like a hymn" when she thinks of them (40). Their marriage transfigures them into the sacred, so that Dick feels the need to sign a "papal

cross" as he "blesses the beach" they had made theirs (314).¹⁷ Traits that once belonged to Christianity—hymns, Christmas trees—now pertain to Dick and Nicole. Richard Lehan has pointed out that parts of the novel echo sections of *Song of Solomon* (72), an appropriation that suggests the Fitzgerald lovers even have their own Scripture. Separately, they possess divine characteristics, but together, they become gods to be worshipped. Loving a god makes one a god, and they become immortal in their marriage.

If romantic love turns one into a god, couples should achieve their highest and fullest level of being in marriage. One should be able to feel complete and fulfilled after finding a mate. Alabama and the Divers look to their romantic mates to be the "Thou" that completes and shapes their "I": once they find their beloved, they also hope to find themselves. Before meeting Dick, for instance, Nicole was a psychiatric patient who had been sexually abused by her father. Her mental problems made her feel out of control and lost. She would often pause in front of mirrors, hoping that "the quicksilver could give her back to herself," signifying how distanced she felt from herself (137). Thus, when she

¹⁷ The beach acts as a sort of holy place where they started to find followers. They became evangelists, in a sense, for the beach, popularizing it and collecting apostles along the way. Gordon McConnell argues that the sacralization of the beach, and of the Divers themselves, is evidence of the "simplification of sacrament, language, and adornment in all things related to ritual," which "inevitably spills over into secular life," wherein people try to apply "the truth of the eternally divine" to "everyday life" (90). McConnell's argument makes sense of much of the novel's religious language, but conferring the sacred upon the secular is solely, for McConnell, a sign of the shift to capitalism and an economic way of looking at life. I believe, however, that the characters search for metaphysical, not merely economic, solutions and understandings.

starts dating Dick, she hopes that he will help her regain a sense of her selfhood. Dick heals her both as her psychiatrist and as her lover, so she willingly gives all of herself to him, believing he can be and provide everything for her. She tells Dick how she “stood waiting” for him “in the garden—holding all [her] self in [her] arms like a basket of flowers [...]—waiting to hand that basket” to him (155). She allows herself to be a “beautiful shell,” empty and willing to let Dick shape and fill her (162).¹⁸ He is her god, as evidenced by the “gifts of sacrificial ambrosia, of worshipping myrtle” she brings to his feet (137). He, too, is seemingly content to receive his identity through her. She is the lens through which he values his life. When they first kiss, he remarks that “he was thankful to have an existence at all, if only as a reflection in her wet eyes” (155). Dick and Nicole filter any sense of self-understanding through one another. They are each other's mirrors, and they hope to see the best of themselves in the other's eyes.

Similarly, Alabama searches for her sense of identity in her mates. As a young girl, she already seeks out self-affirmation from those around her. She begs her mother for stories about herself when she was younger, wanting “to be

¹⁸ Zelda also calls herself an “empty shell” in a letter to Scott during her mental health hospitalization, and Scott wonders, in a letter, why he should not “slay the empty shell” he had been pretending to fill for years (Z. Fitzgerald, *Complete Works*, 477, F. Scott Fitzgerald, “Handle with Care,” *Crack-Up*, 81). He also describes Dick's fate in his sketch of *Tender Is the Night*, saying that by the end, he is “only a shell to which nothing matters but survival as long as possible” (Brucoli 331). A shell serves as a fitting metaphor both for the emptiness of identity that they feel, a remnant of what they believe they could and should be, and also as a metaphor for my overall project, in that Christian theological forms, divorced from the Church and their Christian content, are vacant reminders of what should be there.

told what she is like, being too young to know that she is like nothing at all" (5-6). Alabama has "no interpretation of herself" and seeks outside validation (5). She, like Nicole, checks her reflection often, not out of vanity, but "in the hope of finding something more than she expected" (27). She believes that finding herself resides in finding "somewhere to enact the story of her life" (20). Alabama shows that she seeks a center—a pivot—to direct her life and give her a sense of direction and purpose. Alabama thinks that David Knight is the person to help her enact that story and fulfill her identity. She, like Dick, sees herself through her beloved's eyes, describing her love for him as a closeness that resembles "pressing her nose upon a mirror and gazing into her own eyes" (38). She believes that locating a mirror in a person, David, means she has finally found a mirror that can interpret and reveal her to herself.¹⁹ In acting as the source of her identity, David also becomes the source of the story she believes will provide her a major role. Alabama tells her daughter, Bonnie, that living in David's world is a choice she made: "I am so outrageously clever that I believe I could be a whole world to myself if I didn't like living in Daddy's better" (82). Alabama believes her life becomes more meaningful when she sees herself enacting an important

¹⁹ Erik Erickson, the psychologist famous for his theory of identity formation and for coining the phrase "identity crisis," warns of the dangers of seeing one's self through a lover's eye. He believes love affairs are sometimes "desperate attempts at delineating the fuzzy outlines of identity by mutual narcissistic mirroring: to fall in love means to fall into one's mirror image, hurting oneself and damaging the mirror" (167). The images of the mirrors in the Fitzgeralds' novels are therefore particularly fitting descriptions of the characters' desire to find their identity through their mate and also point to their inevitable failure in this quest.

role in someone else's story. She understands herself through a larger narrative, and believes that David's narrative is the one that will shape her own story. She desires a center with which to revolve her life, and she sees David as the axis with which to do so.

As Alabama shows, making romantic love the center and purpose of existence means one also expects romantic love to act as the arbiter of identity. The Divers and Alabama submit all of themselves fully over to the other person in the hope that their mate holds the key to their identity. Just as a Christian renounces himself prior to conversion, Dick, Nicole, and Alabama renounce themselves to their spouses as a means toward finding themselves. Nicole gives herself so fully to Dick that her personality and identity become completely his, and eventually, she realizes that she "is probably Dick" (162). Dick, like Nicole, loses himself in his spouse, noting that they had "become one and equal, not opposite and complementary" (190). Dick and Nicole both sign letters "Dicole," a telling description that they have simply absorbed one another. On the one hand, they do receive an identity through the other person, but as a consequence, their identity is no longer their own. They discover, as Becker argues, that though a romantic partner may represent a kind of fulfillment, he/she also "represents the negation of one's distinctive personality" (165), so that neither

feels like him or herself and both feel lost in the other.²⁰ They do not, as Dick notes, complement one another. Instead, their love is “a wild submergence of soul, a dipping of all colors into an obscuring dye” (217), signifying that all individuality, all sense of selfhood, has been lost to the other.²¹ Complementary colors make each color look brighter and better, but an “obscuring dye” mixes all the colors together so that both merge into a color that no longer resembles either individual color. Dick and Nicole cannot discover the various shades of colors and facets to their personalities because they are completely defined through one another.

²⁰ Boker argues similarly, saying that though love’s “initial motive is frequently self-improvement, a liberation from personal pasts, the pull toward engulfment into the beloved ultimately becomes a threat to the lover’s wholeness and independence” (304), something she sees as particularly evident in Dick and Nicole’s relationship.

²¹ Berry Scherr argues Fitzgerald is particularly concerned about this problem, which D.H. Lawrence dubbed the “mingling and merging” of relationships (7), and argues that the loss of “their individual identity and selfhood” to one another “leaves both members of the relationship partially crippled and unfulfilled, and corrupt” (7). Thus, the “obscuring dye” is, in a sense, a corruption of the pure colors Nicole and Dick are in themselves. Scherr also offers a helpful analysis of the relation to the Keats’ poem *Tender Is the Night* draws its name. He argues that in Keats’s poem, the speaker desires a “loss of one’s self in some kind of spiritual merging” with the female nightingale, which is associated with Nicole in the novel (9). However, Scherr’s argument loses ground when he blames all Dick’s problems on Nicole. He argues that Nicole is a “domineering, self-centered female” and thus can destroy the “selfless” Dick (15). Paul Giles argues along similar lines, suggesting that the novel echoes “old medieval myth[s] whereby a depraved woman leads a priestly man astray” (171). This conclusion is deeply unfair to Nicole, however, since she, too, gives of herself to Dick and since their marriage develops several of their problems once Dick starts to develop feelings for Rosemary. Sarah Beebe Fryer offers a counter-argument to critics who see Dick as the sacrificial figure who is devoured by Nicole. She argues that Nicole is instead taken over by Dick, that he denies Nicole “any significance except by association with him” (323), so that Nicole’s relationship with Tommy Barban becomes an attempt to define herself outside of her marriage. These critics all seemingly ignore that *both* Dick and Nicole lose their identities in one another, that they both let themselves become annihilated by the other. Neither deserves all the “blame” for the other’s problems since it is the way they both love each other that causes most of their marital strain.

The Divers eventually grow unhappy that each has been completely absorbed into and obscured by the other. Dick begins to “lose himself,” admitting that he’s “not much like [him]self anymore” (260). Nicole, likewise, has lost herself in her marriage. She becomes so defined by Dick that “when he turned away from her,” he “left her holding Nothing in her hands and staring at it, calling it many names” (180). Nicole eventually realizes that, no matter how much she gives of herself, she does not feel fulfilled or completed by David, but emptied. She decides to regain a sense of a self outside of her husband. She starts to “resent the places where she had played planet to Dick’s sun” and decides to “be something in addition, not just an image on his mind” (289, 277). Both Divers grow frustrated with one another for the “nothing” they have turned into. Submission of their selves to one another manages not to have created anything better or new, but to destroy and ruin. They thus decide to split, since both agree with what Dick vocalizes: “I can’t do anything for you any more. I’m trying to save myself” (301). They both finally recognize that the other person cannot bring about salvation, and that seeking salvation in one another can possibly lead, as *The Beautiful and Damned* suggests, even closer towards damnation.

Similarly, when Alabama does not find the right “center” for her identity in David, she begins to resent him as well. As Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin

rightly notes, David's fitting last name, Knight, "stands for deceptive emancipation" (34), and David ultimately inhibits her identity rather than fulfills it. Though he calls her his princess, he wants to confine her, not free her, "to keep [her] shut forever in an ivory tower for [his] private delectation" (Z. Fitzgerald 40).²² David wants to absorb her into his world, thus diminishing her own unique personhood. When he carves their names into a door post, he writes "David, David, Knight, Knight, Knight, and Miss Alabama Nobody" instead of their initials, exalting himself while diminishing her (37). David connects Alabama to himself, but she loses herself in his vision; their life together will be about his work, his choices, his friends, and she will dissolve into her husband.²³ She remains a "minor character" in her life, with David playing the major role. She does not receive herself back through him, but instead remains simply a reflection in his eyes, devoid of active personhood.

²² Zelda uses fairy tale language often, writing that she will have her "happily ever after" once she and Scott marry. Scott Donaldson also has an interesting article that considers the fairy tale references and allusions in *Tender Is the Night*. The fairy tale connection is interesting because fairy tales, like so many romances, end with the marriage and thus reinforce the idea that one has come to completion and finality with a marriage. Once again, the Fitzgeralds' novels are fascinating in part because they consider the "after" of the "happily ever."

²³ Many people might argue that ballet is her "true love" and her true fulfillment in the novel. While she may find greater fulfillment in ballet than in her husband, ballet is also deeply problematic. It does give Alabama a center, but it also severely fragments her from the rest of her life. She forgets about her husband, her friends, and her child, and no longer cares about anything other than her work. In an important scene in *Save Me the Waltz*, Alabama again turns to a mirror in order to "find something" after months of ballet training, yet she still "see[s] there is nothing" (149), signaling that ballet, too, fails her.

Both novels depict the perilous effect that idealizing marriage and divinizing romance may have on one's identity and relationship. However, the novels also show that shattering the illusion and breaking off the relationship do not solve the characters' identity problems either. Neither the marriage nor the dissolution of the marriage can bring about the peace and self-affirmation these characters seek. Nicole leaves Dick for Tommy Barban, but there is not much hope that this relationship will better fulfill her. Instead, the same pattern, where Nicole empties herself and subsequently takes on the personality of her lover, will likely be repeated. When she is with her new lover, she discovers that "moment by moment all that Dick had taught her fell away and she was ever nearer to what she had been in the beginning, prototype of that obscure yielding up of swords that was going on in the world about her," and she "welcomed the anarchy of her lover" (298). Nicole rids herself of Dick as she is made blank, "a prototype," but she also problematically yields to a different lover, as everything Tommy said immediately "became part of her forever" (293). Instead of having her identity affirmed, she is merely erased and then re-created in the image of a new lover.²⁴ Dick, likewise, is lost at the end of the novel. Fitzgerald's sketch of

²⁴ Gordon McConnell says Nicole's "rebirth" from Dick's wife to Tommy's lover represents a kind of "desacralization of baptism" wherein Nicole becomes "objectified" and her beauty "possessed" by the "barbarian" (108). He argues that this marks the transition from values with "theological origins" to those of "economic oppression" as Nicole chooses the stable provider rather than Dick, her priest/salvation (108). Again, this approach reduces Nicole and does not, I believe, do justice to her sufferings as Dick's wife.

his novel characterizes Dick as a “man divided in himself,” and he ends the novel as such, lost and wandering (*Letters*, 331). He goes adrift, moving from place to place, never seemingly able to settle down, and followed by rumors both of potential success and potential scandal.

Alabama simply never finds the center that she is searching for, the center that will finally allow her to play a significant role and encompass the totality of who she is. The novel ends with Alabama back supporting David and his art, still unable to find a center that can explain her life. Her last spoken line is indicative of her journey: “I just lump everything in a great heap which I have labeled ‘the past,’ and, having thus emptied this deep reservoir that was once myself, I am ready to continue” (212). Alabama never finds a center that does not require a fragmentation of her identity; she continually cuts off part of herself each time she finds a new “world” to inhabit. She desires to play a key role in a story, but each story that she enters requires her to give up part of who she is, to empty that reservoir of her selfhood and be filled with something else.

The desire to divinize one’s partner and to find a center with which to understand one’s identity signifies the characters’ need to fill a God-shaped hole. Frye argues that the “desire to encounter God remains deeply rooted in the hearts of Fitzgerald’s characters” (73), and their efforts to make the earthly into the transcendent shows a real desire to encounter the sacred. They even

admittedly long for some kind of religion. Dick, for instance, wishes he could return to the faith of his youth. When his father dies, he finds himself mourning for his father-priest, the Church, and all that they represent to him, wishing that he had been "as good as he had intended to be" (204). Alabama, too, remembers how close she once got to being religious, reflecting upon a "Negro baptism" she encountered when she was younger that made her feel "very rapturous" and prompted a desire "to join their church" (196). However, though she has fond memories of the baptism, when she gets a chance to go again, Alabama simply gives a noncommittal "Maybe" (196). She later offers an explanation as to why she is reluctant to go back to the baptism, admitting to her friend, "There's a lot in religion, but it has too much meaning" (173). Alabama is thus drawn to religion, but she cannot yet commit to it. Christianity does not capture her heart the way romance does and it thus seems like a burden rather than a pleasure to try to figure out its "meaning." The Fitzgeralds' characters thus long for love, the kind of love that utterly transforms them both by loving and being loved. Though they cannot quite commit to Christianity, they still seek the kind of transcendent love Christianity provides and discover that romantic love cannot lastingly fill that role.

Christian Marriage

The lovelorn characters in the Fitzgeralds' novels live as if they believe in Aristophanes' myth. They believe they can only be whole and complete when they join together with their other halves. When they find their beloved, they want to solidify their love permanently in marriage. Likewise, in Aristophanes' myth, Hephaestus creates his own form of marriage when he volunteers to join permanently the two people together as one. He offers to "melt and weld [them] together so that [they] shall be one flesh, live a common life, suffer a common death, be still one, not two" (106). This seems a romantic and fitting conclusion, but while Hephaestus uses both terms, there is a significant and problematic difference between melting and welding. The Fitzgeralds' characters often demonstrate a desire for melting rather than welding. The characters, as I have shown, merge together into an "obscuring dye" and take on each others' personalities. Welding, on the other hand, is to join together, to remain distinct individuals while also forming a lifelong, solid bond. Welding also helps to create a tool with a distinct purpose. A blunt end welded to a small pole creates a hammer, making both pieces able to do more together than they could separately. Welded pieces do not necessarily lose the distinctiveness of their individual identities but join together in pursuit of a common *telos*. Christian

marriages ideally aim more towards this form than to melting: spouses are to be welded together in the pursuit of the common *telos* of serving God.

A marriage with this pursuit—formed in order to worship God and not one another—rightly orders love. While love is, as Paul Tillich says, “the dynamic reunion of that which was separated” (82), the separation that necessitates reconciliation is not the separation of Aristophanes’ double-creatures, but the separation, through sin, of humans from God. Medieval Christianity constructed the idea of the *ordo salutis*, a ladder toward reconciliation with God and salvation (Dyrness 662). A pilgrim gradually progresses up the steps of the ladder as one learns how to order and live out love. At the top of the ladder resides the only object completely worthy of all of our love: God Himself. Because God is the Source of Love, only by communing with God can one reach and understand the fullness of love.

Loving God is also the means toward properly understand one’s identity and purpose. Thomas Aquinas argues that a person can only really learn to love and understand himself by loving God. For Thomas, human beings were created in the *imago dei*, which means that they can only know themselves by first knowing God, the Creator and prototype (*Summa*, Q93). Consequently, when a pilgrim advances through the *ordo salutis*, she better comprehends her own order in the world and thus also begins to understand and love herself. What the *ordo*

salutis provides, then, is a path toward the fulfillment of what the Fitzgeralds' characters continually sought—but failed to find—in their romantic partners. Communing with God, the Source of Love, allows a sense of oneness and wholeness while still maintaining a sense of individuality, of playing a distinct part in an underlying pattern. It pursues the kind of love that grants the completion, purpose, and transcendence the Fitzgeralds' characters diligently sought in their mates.

Consequently, though the Fitzgeralds' characters seek love, they seek the wrong kind of love. Augustine distinguishes between two forms of love, *cupiditas* and *caritas*. He describes *caritas* as “the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and of one's neighbor for the sake of God,” and *cupiditas* as “a motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of one's self, one's neighbor, or any corporeal thing for the sake of something other than God” (*On Christian Doctrine*, 3.10). *Caritas* is rightly ordered love, the love that recognizes that one can love properly only when love is directed toward God. Since God is the ultimate end, one cannot rest until cleaving to God. *Cupiditas*, on the other hand, is love directed toward earthly things. It is still real love, but it makes one bent toward the wrong direction—toward the earthly—rather than toward God. Thus, like the monk in *The*

Beautiful and Damned shows, bending toward the earthly causes one to lose sight of God, and can, if one bends too far, cause one's damnation.²⁵

The Fitzgeralds' characters' marriages embody the effects of *cupiditas*. The characters continually try to find wholeness in the earthly—in their material partners—believing the relationship will make them transcendent. They marry, hoping their passionate and fierce love will go on forever. Marriage for most of the characters does not, however, symbolize the beginning of a lifelong love affair, but the culmination and end of love, as noted by Gloria's FINIS in her journal after her engagement to Anthony in *The Beautiful and Damned*, (111).²⁶ Like Aristophanes, they see the story as finished once two people are melted or welded together. The courtship is the exciting, passionate buildup, the marriage ceremony itself is generally skipped or glossed over, and then the marriage relationship quickly deteriorates. Marriage, in the Fitzgeralds, seems to fulfill Ambrose Bierce's definition of love in his *Devil's Dictionary*: a "temporary insanity curable by marriage" (155).

²⁵ In *This Side of Paradise*, Amory references the idea of "bending" toward heaven or the earthly, telling Clara, whom he calls "St. Cecelia," that she would be quite the devil "if the Lord had just bent her soul a little the other way" (146).

²⁶ In Scott Fitzgerald's "The Hotel Child," Fifi echoes this sentiment, saying she had seen enough movies to know that once a girl got married, "after that there was nothing" (625). Zelda reflects a similar sentiment in one of her essays when she comments that a flapper "goes where all good flappers go—into the young married set, into boredom" (399).

Nearly all of the Fitzgeralds' characters believe that the best of love has happened before marriage, so that marriage becomes the rite of passage not into love and commitment but into disillusion and dissipation. It does not mark the beginning of a life of love, but the disintegration and end of love. Anthony, for instance, sees his and Gloria's romance as an "eternal romance that was to be the synthesis of all romance" (109), but as soon as they get married, he realizes that he "had the best of love" already and would now simply "settle for what remains" (117). He admits that "beautiful things grow to a certain height and then they fail and fade off," and his relationship with Gloria follows the pattern of failing and fading off soon after their marriage (124). Marriage is thus more akin to death than to a new life and family, an indication that marriage in the Fitzgeralds does not stand for the permanence and solidification of love, but for loss: loss of love, loss of identity, loss of youth and one's illusions, and seemingly—as Scott's story of the monk suggests—loss of one's salvation.

While marriage, when it serves as a substitute for the divine, can lead to the kinds of problems the Fitzgeralds depict, human love and marriage in the Christian understanding can be an earthly preview of heavenly love. In Dante, for instance, the protagonist's love for Beatrice leads him to see the greater love of God. In Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, an adulterous affair morphs into an affair with God as the couple realizes how their love for one another also

helps them understand and love God. Pope Benedict XVI argues in his *Deus Caritas Est* that *eros* is the highest form of human love and can serve as a stepping stone to *agape*, love of God. However, if *eros* does not point toward *agape* and is an end in itself, it will likely eventually stagnate, because it cannot be enough on its own. Romantic love itself is not bad, but it must be properly ordered, with God—not one’s paramour—serving as one’s *telos*.

Christianity encourages love and marriage as a way to understand God’s love and God’s relationship to the Church. Song of Songs, for instance, portrays a lover and the beloved in an extended metaphor conveying God’s delight in and passion for each person. The New Testament frequently returns to the bride and bridegroom analogy, comparing Christ to the bridegroom who eagerly awaits his bride, who signifies both the individual, redeemed sinner and the universal Church. In many ways, then, *eros* and marriage can serve as models for God’s love. Marriage promises a singular, eternal, and devoted love—traits that all could describe the Christian God.

John Paul II offers a helpful, Christian counter to Aristophanes’ story. He agrees with Aquinas that humans can only know themselves when they understand themselves as the *imago dei*, and he argues that it is in marriage that

people truly fulfill that image.²⁷ The human body, he says, “bore in itself, in the mystery of creation, an unquestionable sign of the image of God” (*Theology of the Body*, 113), so that the body itself does not contain the image of God, but is the image of God. John Paul II believes that since God created human beings together as “man and woman,” it is in the conjugal act—when they become “one flesh” and exemplify the “unity of two beings”—that they reflect “the definitive creation of man” that is the *imago dei* (45). Man and woman therefore need one another to complete the divine image in each other.²⁸ The Pope’s assertion relates, then, in a sense, to Aristophanes’ view of love: in order to fulfill one’s divine origins, love and marriage are needed. However, John Paul II’s description nuances this conclusion through his emphasis on the importance of rightly ordered love and marriage, something that can only be understood through knowing and loving God, who is the prototype of the *imago dei*. The Triune God is by nature a communal and loving being, so marriage, a communal and loving partnership, is intended to closely reflect God. Christian marriage is

²⁷ To clarify, John Paul II considers ordination into the Church a kind of marriage, so that abstinence, especially in the clergy, is considered the highest kind of marriage.

²⁸ The first being is called ‘*adam*, and ‘*adam* becomes *ish* and *ishshah* to differentiate between man and woman. ‘*Adam* is created solitarily, in the Pope’s understanding, but only to recognize his need for a relationship with God and other people. Man’s transference from being simply man to being male and female does not split the *imago dei* into two halves; it completes the *imago dei*. At the moment of becoming male and female, man participates in an “original unity” that is the completion and fulfillment of man’s discoveries in his “original solitude.” Original solitude sets man apart as being formed in the image of God, and original unity realizes the image. ‘*Adam* is thus created for relationship and as relationship.

supposed to always move toward the communal, toward reconciliation, and thus be centered upon the act of binding together what is separate.

The Fitzgeralds' novels show the opposite kind of union: marriages separate people rather than binding them together. When characters use the beloved as a replacement for God, even their earthly loves, their *cupiditas*, become disordered and bent out of shape. Their marriages do not allow them to see God better because they have turned their spouses into gods. Yet even though these seemingly "divine" characters do not serve as shining models of marriage or faith, much can still be gained from examining them. Scott Fitzgerald called *Tender Is the Night* a "confession of faith" even though neither Dick nor Nicole ever has any religious revelations. Instead, his novel, and much of his and Zelda's other works, confess a need to have faith in the right things and to love with the right kind of love.

The Fitzgeralds describe the captivating, transcendent, and transformative nature of love, a description that powerfully demonstrates that what we love drives who we are and what we do. What captures our hearts, in other words, is what defines us. Their work thus acts as a kind of warning that not all kinds of love are the same and therefore provides an invaluable corrective to a cultural tendency to worship romance and marriage and exalt romantic love into a role it simply cannot lastingly fill. At the same time, their work also reminds the

Church that it must be the model of love that is worth pursuing wholeheartedly.

The Church, as the bridegroom of Christ, should exhibit and return the kind of perfect love with which Christ loves it. It should teach, therefore, that though *eros* can never fully fill the role of *agape*, we should pursue agape love with *eros*-like fervor.

CHAPTER THREE

A “Hell of a Biblical Name”: Scripture in Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway’s fiction frequently asks how one might understand suffering without the guidance of religion. His characters find belief in God to be impossible after witnessing the devastation of World War I, yet they also miss the comforts that Christianity once provided. They still turn to rituals, forms, and prayers to help alleviate their suffering and give meaning to their lives, but they refrain from fully believing in what those forms represent. Hemingway’s oft-quoted and infamous “nada” prayer, for instance, is a perfect example of a character turning to a religious form while emptying it of its content. The waiter in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” makes this unusual prayer: “Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada and nada us our nada as we nada our nadas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada” (*Collected*, 383). The waiter substitutes “nada” for almost every word of religious significance or meaning: Father, heaven, hallowed, forgive, debts, temptation, evil. The prayer remains recognizable as the Lord’s Prayer, but it has been divested of any sacred meaning. Without the religious content behind it, the prayer may help to temporarily alleviate the old waiter’s suffering, but it

ultimately signifies “nada.”¹ This nada prayer could have been spoken by any number of Hemingway’s characters, and it provides a cohesive thread for understanding Hemingway’s depiction of religion throughout his work. The nada prayer connotes the desire to participate in Christian forms without believing in the Christian narrative; as the old waiter shows, the tradition and rituals of Christianity are an appealing retreat from suffering, yet, at the same time, believing in God after witnessing such suffering is seemingly unfathomable. Hemingway’s characters seem to test out, therefore, a faith lived out “technically,” through emptied mechanical action, but they also appear to find that rituals, when divorced from their role in the narrative of the Christian faith, do not offer much more than temporary comfort.²

Criticism on religion in Hemingway is complex, but critics generally tend to follow one of three differing interpretations. Some critics, like John Killinger,

¹ Hemingway ironically recasts religious forms often. For instance, he also wrote, in a letter to Mary Welsh, a variation on “Onward Christian Soldiers”: “Onward Christian soldiers / Marching to a whore / With the cross of Mary Welsh / Going on before. / You must do it all alone / (Throw your love away) / You must do it slowly now / Slowly now and pray / Pray to all of nothing / Pray to all of nil / Throw away your own true love / Walking up a hill” (qtd in Verduin 35). His “Neo-Thomist Poem” also riffs on Christianity: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not/ want him for long.”

² That it is a temporary comfort is emphasized in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.” The drunken old man seeks the shelter of cafes in order to help him get through his day. However, the light of the cafes is artificial, and cafes have a closing time. Consequently, the old man never finds a permanent shelter or fix for his suffering. The cafes do help him abide it, but they ultimately cannot transform it. The nada prayer, likewise, provides a temporary outlet, but it has no lasting value because all the words that grant it greater significance have been taken out.

believe that Hemingway's world is one of dead gods and that we are now left to figure out life on our own. Others, like H.R. Stoneback, swing far in the other direction and try to justify both Hemingway and his characters as Christians. Stoneback asserts, for instance, that both Hemingway and Jake Barnes are professing, committed Catholics. He views Jake as a man on a pilgrimage who "lives a true pilgrim's code" and "quests renewal and redemption" (52). He sees Jake as standing up to his secular friends as he fights for faith. While Stoneback does inject some needed religious hope in Hemingway's novel, as C. Harold Hurley notes, Jake, "despite his claims of being pretty religious, seems ultimately more committed to the *toreros* of the bullring than to the precepts of Catholicism" (81). Hurley's point reflects the other strand of criticism, probably the most dominant, which argues that Hemingway creates possible substitutes for a dead God, particularly through sports such as fishing and bullfighting. Patrick Cheney says Hemingway shows that "in God's absence, man must play a part. God may be dead, but the god in man is not" (188). Joseph Waldmeir makes a similar argument, asserting that each of Hemingway's heroes "must his face struggle alone, with no recourse to otherworldly help, for only as solitary individuals can they assert their manhood," a struggle that is reflected in sports (164).

Hemingway's own religious beliefs are difficult to categorize. Some critics, such as Stoneback, believe Hemingway showed devout belief throughout his life and died a very faithful Catholic. Critics such as James Light believe that Hemingway died a staunch atheist, while others such as Wirt Williams, Waldmeir, and Cheney believe Hemingway abandons his Christian beliefs in favor of a religion of man. What is certain about Hemingway's beliefs is that he grew up in a very Protestant household where he learned Scripture and hymns quite well; that he converted to Catholicism to marry his second wife, Pauline Pfeiffer; and that he died outside the Catholic Church. While Stoneback makes persuasive arguments for Hemingway's Christian beliefs, the general consensus among Hemingway critics and biographers is that he was, like Jake Barnes, only "technically" a Catholic and did not fully believe in, or participate in the life of, the Christian faith.

The debate over both Hemingway's Christian beliefs and his depiction of Christianity has such a wide range of conclusions and interpretations because of Hemingway's variety of Christian symbols and ideas in his work. Even several of his titles are clear references to Scripture or to Christian hymns, including *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Garden of Eden*, *In Our Time*, "God Rest You, Merry

Gentleman," "Now I Lay Me," and "The Light of the World."³ Meanwhile, other stories, such as "Today is Friday," are directly connected to Scriptural stories. Still others, such as *The Old Man and the Sea* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, invoke christological symbolism to connect the texts' protagonists, Robert Jordan and Santiago, to Jesus. Hemingway's fiction is thus deeply connected to the Christian Scriptures, and the narratives he tells are often linked to the Scriptural narrative. While many critics have noted Hemingway's use of Scripture and considered his use of Christian symbolism, there is no in-depth study of Hemingway and Scripture. This chapter will serve as an introduction into the topic and will also help unite and refine the strands of Hemingway religious criticism by arguing that there is still religious hope in Hemingway's novels even though his novels do, as Killinger asserts, portray God as dead and religion as empty. I will not argue that bullfighting or fishing are substitutes for religion, nor that Hemingway's novels advocate a religion of man. Instead, I will argue that both sports and the empty religious allusions in Hemingway show readers how deeply Christianity and its narrative are missed. I will contend that Hemingway's use of Scripture and narrative does not mean that Hemingway or his characters are necessarily Christians, but that they long for the faith and attest

³Hemingway admits, in a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, that he scours the Bible for titles to his work and finds in there "the source of practically every good title you ever heard of" (*Letters* 260). *Sun* is from Ecclesiastes 1:5, *Garden* from Genesis, *Time* from the *Book of Common Prayer*, "God Rest You" from the same-titled hymn, "Now I Lay Me" from the children's prayer, and "Light" from Matthew 5:14.

to the failure of any substitutes. Even the most frequently suggested substitute for Christianity in Hemingway, bullfighting, acts, as Agori Kroupi suggests, not as a substitute for but a mirror of religion (114), so that the narrative and drama of bullfighting reflects the narrative and drama of Scripture.⁴ The need for narrative, the empty religious references and symbols, and the way Hemingway describes bullfighting suggest not that God should be forgotten, rejected, or replaced due to human suffering, but that God and God's narrative of Scripture are needed to understand suffering properly.

Suffering, Narrative, and Scripture

Hemingway characters often understand themselves through narrative. They construct narratives as a means toward shaping their lives into some kind of coherent whole. In several of his novels, Hemingway's narrators call attention to the practice of narrating and writing the story in which they are living (or have lived). In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Robert Jordan desperately wants to record his experiences and capture the tales of those he meets. After Pilar tells a

⁴ Kroupi's analysis is helpful, though he takes a different approach than I do. He sees sports as a way to explore the "problem of redemption," particularly by comparing a matador to a saint, wherein a "saint fights against his fallen nature—his 'old self'" as he aims to be "reborn as a 'new man' in Christ" (116). The bull, in other words, represents the beastly, fallen nature of human beings, and it must therefore be slain. While I like Kroupi's analysis, I do believe his article, like Stoneback, relies too heavily on Hemingway trying to implement Christian themes in his work, and convincing evidence for that is just not there. I, on the other hand, aim to avoid arguing that Hemingway intends to encourage Christian themes, but that his characters and his work still present a need for Christianity.

particularly moving story about the execution of a few fascists, for instance, he wishes that he could “get it down as she told it” since her telling “made him see it” (134). Pilar’s narrative is so vivid and captivating that Robert is able to enter it, so that he did not just hear the story but lived it. This characteristic of narrative—of being able to enter a story in its telling—is a continual theme in Hemingway’s fiction and suggests that his characters feel the need to enter a larger story in order to understand their own identities.

In *The Garden of Eden*, for instance, the importance of being able to live a narrative is particularly evident when Catherine, the narrator’s (David Bourne) young wife, becomes increasingly jealous of the stories David writes which are not about her. David had been working on a narrative of their story, a newlywed couple on their honeymoon, when he began to work on stories about his experiences in Africa with his father. Around the same time, Catherine begins making “changes” to the narrative they had been living as a couple and wants to make herself and David stand out from the rest of the world. She begins cutting her hair short, dying it extremely white, getting as dark a tan as possible, and persuading her husband to allow her to become a boy and sodomize him. When Catherine brings a new person, Marita, into their relationship, she realizes that as David and Marita grow closer, she is getting pushed out of the narrative completely.

David and Catherine's story testifies to how fundamental a teleological narrative is for the formation of identity. When Catherine begins to "change," David decides to leave "the ongoing narrative of their journey" and write a different story (93). He becomes "detached from everything except the story," and "as he built it," he "was living in it" (128). When he begins the story, it "was not him, but as he wrote it was" (128), so that the story he is shaping also shapes him. He escapes into his story in part to avoid the unfolding narrative of his own life, as noted by his feeling "completely real" while in his fictional Africa and "unreal and false," as if he were a character "in some unbelievable play," in his real life (174, 195). He even thinks of himself through the lens of narrative, telling himself he is not a "tragic character" (149). Catherine also seeks a life through narrative, and the beginning of her "changes" occurs when David receives an envelope of clippings praising his recent book. She realizes that David has a life—a narrative—outside of her own, and that he has created narratives without her. She thus desperately wants to be written into a narrative, which is only hers and David's. As David continually works on his Africa stories and grows closer to Marita, Catherine realizes that she is being written out of David's narrative, and she acts out by burning all the rest of his stories. The only one that remains is the narrative of their time together that David had put aside. When he angrily tells Catherine that he is "through with the narrative," she begs

him to reconsider, saying he “must write it” if he “really loved” her because she “can’t write things” for herself (188, 223). Catherine’s desperation to be in David’s story may seem like a selfish and silly request, but Catherine simply understands that, unless she is part of a larger narrative, she is nothing. She tries to set herself apart in as many ways as she can think of, but she ultimately needs some kind of narrative to form her identity. Just as David feels more “real” when he enters into his narrative, Catherine does not feel real outside of an ongoing narrative. She feels excluded and unsure of herself and is thus slowly driven mad.

Catherine’s lack of identity (along with David’s own uncertainty of his identity) is reinforced by the frequent use of mirrors in *The Garden of Eden*. Catherine insists upon a large mirror being hung up in the café that they frequent, and both she and David continually look at themselves and at each other through the mirror. Mirrors only give an immediate reflection of what is happening now while a narrative explains where one has been and points toward (or directly says) where one is going. Consequently, the mirrors signal an uncertainty of identity and a need for a clearer, more long-term projection, so that David and Catherine’s identities are not so fragile and fluid that they can easily be interchanged, but are both developed into strong and clear roles within a bigger story.

Other characters demonstrate a desire not just to narrate themselves into a coherent story, but also to join a larger narrative and become part of something else. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Robert feels the need not just to record his and other stories, but also to understand his role and purpose within a larger story. He justifies his actions as being part of a greater task, so that he can believe that the particular acts he does now will contribute to larger goals that could have a lasting impact. He continually, for instance, reminds himself that even though lives are sacrificed and actions may seem trivial, his mission to blow the bridge could be the “point on which the future of the human race can turn” (43), and he is thus willing to sacrifice his own and his friends’ lives for the events he hopes to see unfold in the Spanish War. If he feels insecure or unsure, he finds comfort in seeing himself as an “instrument” to his “duty” (43); the orders “do not come from” himself, but from the “good general,” and he thus believes that this task must have an important role to play in the overall war (162). Robert finds reassurance in not being the sole constructor of a narrative and instead is happy to play a role in what is a larger drama; he thus readily obeys the orders of the director (the good general) who has a clearer view of the direction of the narrative. Robert knows that his life and those he befriends are at stake, yet his belief that they are part of a bigger narrative that is unfolding gives him the courage to risk it all. His life is meaningful because of its connection to the

greater narrative in which he sees himself living. Consequently, suffering can be justified for the sake of this greater purpose.

In *The Sun Also Rises*, narratives also shape and give purpose to the characters, though they struggle to find a coherent, overarching narrative for their lives. They, like David Bourne, both write narratives and lose themselves in them. Robert Cohn and Jake Barnes, for instance, are shaped by texts. Cohn uses a book he read by W.H. Hudson as his “guide-book to what life holds,” decides where he wants to travel and live based on whether or not he has “read a book about it,” and gets his “idea[s] out of a book” (17-8, 20). He also, according to his mistress, fuses his real life with the books he writes and feels the need to “get some new material” by living in a new way (57). Cohn sees himself as fulfilling and living some kind of narrative, which is one of the reasons why he becomes so confused by his relationship with Brett; he believed they were living one kind of story (a grand romance) while she saw it as another (a fleeting affair). And, while Jake critiques Cohn’s tendency to view his life through texts, books are important to Jake. Like David Bourne, he uses texts as an escape. He reads Turgenieff before bed as a way to get lost in the narrative and forget about his own problems for a while. The descriptions in the book allow him to enter the narrative and leave his own behind; as he reads, the descriptions in the book become “very clear,” and with that clarity the text provides, the chaos of his own

life lightens and the “pressure in [his] head seem[s] to loosen” (151). The text offers a focal point of entry into a clearer, more coherent narrative that releases Jake from the pressures and difficulties of his own life. He, like Cohn, David Bourne, and Robert Jordan, enters the narrative and allows it to become part of him, as evidenced in his admission that after reading a story, he feels “as though it had really happened to [him]” (153). Consequently, Jake is not as distant from Cohn as he believes. They both are narrating their own stories and using other texts as a way to interpret and focus their lives.

As often as Hemingway’s characters turn to narrative in order to shape and give meaning to their lives, Hemingway often calls the success of their chosen narratives into question. David Bourne may have decided to end his narrative with Catherine and begin one with Marita, but Marita is more a double of Catherine than a divergence from her, as echoed in Marita calling herself, as Catherine often dubbed herself, David’s “good girl” (*Garden*, 245).⁵ David also uses his narrative as an avoidance from his real life, causing him to passively

⁵Tim Jackson argues that Marita is David’s “second Eve,” an Eve who, unlike Catherine, has had her “personality shaped in [David’s] own image and likeness” (426). While this is somewhat true, Marita is still strikingly similar to Catherine, in both her actions and speech, and throughout the whole novel, she is presented as the “dark one” to Catherine’s light hair. She, too, cuts her hair short and enjoys many of the same activities Catherine and David do. It is hard to believe that, by the end of the novel, his switching partners will be beneficial, especially since he ends the novel rewriting his torn up story, with nothing changed, a sign that though he may have switched out characters, his narrative will still go in the same direction.

accept many of Catherine's antics and suggestions and thus move away from innocence toward being "damned" (*Garden*, 178).

Even Robert Jordan's attempt to be part of a larger narrative that is being written not by himself but by something greater outside of himself is problematic. Though he fights for Spain's rights to be free of fascism, he notes that one's "nationality" and "politics did not show" once one is "dead" (238), an admission that death equalizes everyone and does not give special treatment to the allegiances someone has in life. Likewise, Pilar's story of the Republicans' brutality during the execution of a few fascists signifies that neither side is completely noble or infallible. The Republic, too, is capable of savage hatred and grave mistreatment, and the mob that forms and kills the fascists exemplifies behavior just as—if not more—tyrannical than the fascists that they execute. Robert therefore wonders if his actions are all for naught, and if his narrative, instead of progressing in a clear, forward direction, is instead a great, never-ending circle. He compares it to a "merry-go-round," but one that is neither fun nor contains any "prizes," but simply "lifts you back and down to where you started" (225). He heavily emphasizes the futility of the wheel: "it has been around twice," "down to where you started," "you are back where you have started," "we are back again now" (225). Robert's description of the wheel places a lot of skepticism upon the larger narrative in which he aligns his life. He

wonders if this war can end, and even if it does, he realizes that there will simply be other wars, so that no one war can create the “point on which the future of humanity will turn,” the goal Robert strains to accomplish (43). Robert’s questioning of his grand narrative is especially confirmed upon the realization that the blowing of the bridge is, in fact, meaningless in the scope of the war. Consequently, Robert sees his friends die and gives his own life for orders that serve no end purpose; they die for nada.⁶

The characters in *The Sun Also Rises* also express disappointment in the direction of their narratives. Both Cohn and Jake, for instance, discover that their love for Brett can only bring them more pain rather than the fulfillment they seek in her. They realize that their narrative is not, as they believed, to make Brett their “promised land,” the “image [they could] dance around” (29, 159). They are instead the castrated steers who are slaughtered in the name of the grand drama, a role neither of them is pleased to live out. Jake also realizes that as appealing as bullfighting and fishing are, they are only temporary respites and cannot contain a narrative that encompasses his entire life. Consequently, he may seem tough and content during the day, but at night, he is plagued with depression and a sense of directionless loss. He “look[s] at things differently

⁶There is admittedly a beauty and nobility in their self-sacrifices, so one could argue that in some respects, their deaths are not for nada. However, in terms of fulfilling the larger intended good—the end for which they dedicated their lives towards—nothing changed or was even seriously affected. Thus, in respect to the larger narrative in which they understood their roles, their deaths meant nada.

from when it is light" (151), an indication that the bright lights and activities in the day cannot satisfy him in the dark of the night. The narrative he is living out during the day "seemed like some bad play" (196), and he wants to escape from it and find a new one.

What arises in Hemingway, then, is a great interest in and quest for a cohesive, grand narrative, but a failure to find one that is fully satisfying. This is particularly troubling for attempting to understand suffering. Hemingway's fiction suggests that, without a narrative with which to justify it, suffering becomes utterly inexplicable. Within a narrative, suffering has meaning since it serves a larger purpose and end goal; outside a narrative, however, suffering is not redeemed or given a form, but can instead only be avoided or endured.

To avoid or endure suffering is not to act, but to be passive. Chaman Nahal argues that the chief characteristic of Hemingway's characters is not, as many critics deem it, that of active heroism, but is instead passivity. Nahal's observation aptly describes how most of Hemingway's characters undergo their suffering: they passively accept it and then simply endure it.⁷ Wirt Williams also sees the characters' responses to suffering as a "central thematic line" in Hemingway's fiction, arguing that Hemingway's fiction shows that since the

⁷Robert, for instance, insists he is merely following orders, Jake continues to see Brett according to when she dictates it, Frederic only leaves the war once the army is in full retreat and killing officers, and Santiago keeps holding on to his fish even when he knows death is likely.

“universe will exhibit its power through our suffering,” we “can dignify ourselves only by the manner with which we endure” (53). Nahal, likewise, sees the passivity of Hemingway's heroes as a kind of heroism; their passivity is a “creative passivity—a passivity by choice—“which reminds us that we are small in comparison to the “larger universe” and that the real theme, is, as Hemingway said of *The Sun Also Rises*, that the “earth abides forever” (26, 30).

The passivity of Hemingway's characters does possess a dignity and nobility, encouraged by Hemingway's frequent comparisons of his characters' suffering to Christ's suffering. Christ's death on the cross is called the passion, from the Latin *passio*, which means suffering, particularly passive suffering. As Kathleen Verduin suggests, Christ's suffering on the crucifixion becomes, in Hemingway, a “divine prototype” that “elevated all suffering and imparted meaning to the tragedy of human existence” (32-3). Jesus' selfless sacrifice and suffering on the cross act as a guide that instructs on how to bear suffering nobly. In “Today is Friday,” for instance, the three Roman soldiers who put Christ on the cross reflect on the event afterward, admitting that Christ was “pretty good in there today” (358). He bore suffering nobly, a trait that Hemingway's protagonists try to emulate.

Since Christ is the model with which to understand suffering, Hemingway correlates many of his characters' suffering with Christ's suffering. In *A Farewell*

to Arms, Frederic tells the priest that he believes that "it is in defeat that we become Christians," that defeat makes them "like Our Lord" (178). For Frederic, it is accepting defeat and suffering that unites people with Christ since Christ is primarily understood through his defeat and suffering on the cross. Other Hemingway characters enact Frederic's espousal of becoming more like Christ in defeat and suffering. Robert Jordan's name refers back to the Jordan River, the river Jesus was baptized in and a symbol of repentance and redemption, and Robert, like Christ, is betrayed by a member of his group (Pablo), has his feet dried with a woman's hair, willingly sacrifices himself for others, and is concerned not with his own suffering, but others' suffering (289).⁸ The christological references are even more evident in *The Old Man and the Sea*. By the end of the novella, Santiago (another biblically symbolic name, meaning St. James) pierces his hands, falls while carrying the mast of his ship, sleeps in cruciform position, and is associated with the symbol of Jesus as *ichthus* (fish) due to his role as a fisherman.⁹ Hemingway's characters experience many

⁸For a more in-depth analysis of the comparisons between Jordan and Christ see Kathleen Verduin, "The Lord of Heroes: Hemingway and the Crucified Christ," and Patrick Cheney, "Hemingway and the Christian Epic: The Bible in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*."

⁹For articles on the Christian allusions and themes in *The Old Man and the Sea*, see especially John Bowen Hamilton, "Hemingway and the Christian Paradox," Melvin Backman, "Hemingway: The Matador and the Crucified," John Halverson, "Christian Resonance in *The Old Man and the Sea*," S. Cooperman, "Hemingway and Old Age: Santiago as Priest of Time," and Ben Stoltzfus, *Gide and Hemingway: Rebels of Our Time* (41-79).

different forms of suffering, and the endurance they exhibit and the bravery with which they confront suffering are truly Christ-like.

However, their passive acceptance of suffering still remains far from Christ's *passio*. Christ transforms and redeems suffering while Hemingway's characters grow to accept and endure suffering. Their suffering may be compared to Christ's, but they do not join nor understand their suffering through Christ's suffering.¹⁰ The characters thus find themselves trying to fill in the narrative gaps with other narratives that leave them unfulfilled. Consequently, though there is a nobility and dignity in their suffering, the characters also express a fear that their suffering means nothing—that their suffering could be like Robert Jordan's circle and be futile.

Hemingway's descriptions of bullfighting suggest that suffering does not have to be futile. Bullfighting places suffering within a narrative and encourages participants to confront their suffering head-on. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake

¹⁰ "God Rest You Merry, Gentleman" is another interesting example of Hemingway connecting defeat and suffering with Christianity. In the short story, a young boy struggles with sexual purity and therefore desires to be castrated. When doctors refuse to perform the operation, he does it himself and then has problems stopping the bleeding. While Nicole Camastra suggests the story signals the need for harmony among humankind (which is what the last verse of its namesake hymn stresses), her suggestion that the boy turns his "defeat" into a reconciliatory act is troubling. Her article is a good example of those that try too hard to make Hemingway's Christian references into signs that he aims to promote Christianity. She says, for instance, that the story reveals the need to "surrender to God's will in the knowledge that he will keep men merry" and "safe from despair" (63). This is an extremely optimistic reading of the story, and it also negates his other work, particularly "A Natural History of the Dead," which mocks the idea that God, who watches so carefully over a flower, therefore protects human beings even more avidly. In the story, Hemingway describes the inherent un-naturalness of death by war and disease and in doing so, implicitly questions the concept of God-as-protector.

explains that those who complain about the brutal suffering a horse must endure during the bullfight misunderstand and distort the event. He says that one must see the entire drama of the bullfight, “so that it became more something that was going on with a definite end, and less of a spectacle with unexplained horrors” (171). Thus, to concentrate on just one segment of the entire narrative of the bullfight is to misinterpret its end purpose and to contort the beauty of its full drama.¹¹

This focus on the whole of the narrative is a model for understanding Christ’s crucifixion, because to focus on just the event of Christ’s death and suffering is to misinterpret its place within the larger narrative; it becomes an “unexplained” spectacle of a noble, sacrificial death that lacks “a definite end” and larger purpose. Viewed just through the lens of the crucifixion and separated from the narrative of God’s redeeming actions toward God’s people, Christ’s death becomes rather like the horse—a model of endured suffering, but a model that does not contribute to a larger story. Hemingway’s fiction thus

¹¹ In *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway further emphasizes the importance of placing the parts within the whole of the bullfight: “The bullfight is so well ordered and so strongly disciplined by ritual that a person feeling the whole tragedy cannot separate the minor comic-tragedy of the horse so as to feel it emotionally. If they sense the meaning and end of the whole thing even when they know nothing about it; feel that this thing they do not understand is going on, the business of the horse is nothing more than an incident. [T]he minor aspects are not important as they relate to the whole” (8-9). Hemingway thus stresses the complete narrative and critiques those who try to over-analyze parts of the drama without seeing it within its proper place and function within the whole.

testifies to the missing elements of the larger part of the Christian narrative. Like his *nada* prayer indicates, the form of Christianity (and the form of Christ's suffering on the cross) has been divorced from what gives it substance and meaning.

Something, Hemingway's works suggest, is missing. For example, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Anselmo and Robert Jordan contemplate how to find forgiveness without God. Anselmo asks Robert, "Since we do not have God here any more, neither His Son nor the Holy Ghost, who forgives?" (41). He admits that he "do[es] not know," but that he "miss[es] Him" (41). Both Anselmo and Robert conclude that "a man must be responsible to himself" and therefore will be able to grant forgiveness to himself, yet this answer does not seem to satisfy Anselmo, as he later suggests there must be some kind of public penance, "something very strong to atone" for all the killing that has happened (197). Both men still seek the forms of the Christian faith and still designate killing as a very bad "sin," yet they do not express any kind of faith in Christianity itself anymore. The form—not the faith—is what they seek.

Rituals and forms of Christianity may be more appealing because they are specific and concrete while faith in the religion of Christianity seems vague and impossible for Hemingway's characters. After the war and the propaganda used to appeal to one's values, buying into "big ideas" became difficult since both

sides used the same kind of values to justify all the killing and death. Frederic Henry reflects on this during the war, admitting that he is “embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice” because he “had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it” (185). Consequently, to Frederic, “abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates” (185). In this passage, Frederic testifies not so much to the failing of the meaning of glory, hallow, or sacred, but to the abuse of these terms for the purpose of war. The words have been appropriate and used for other means besides their intended meaning. Instead, the specifics, like streets and villages—those things that make up the details of a narrative—are what Frederick venerates. Thus, he can wear the St. Anthony necklace Catherine gives him, Santiago can mouth Hail Mary's as he struggles to hang on to the fish, and Jake can attend church and go to confession not because they all fully believe in the faith these forms represent, but because those forms can be “very useful” in enduring suffering (*Farewell*, 43).

Christianity and its forms therefore become “opium,” as the Mexican in “The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio” suggests (*Collected*, 485). They are used as a comfort and a distraction from real suffering. Christianity is a distraction to

help people bear their suffering, and, in much of Hemingway, Christianity is presented as a kind of opium for suffering. The example of Christ's crucifixion—his *passio*—helps others persevere through their suffering. And, if the story of the crucifixion is divorced from the larger biblical narrative, Christianity would primarily be an opium. It would tell the tale of how to bear suffering. Yet Christianity offers a larger narrative which teaches people not just to endure suffering but to redeem it. Bringing individual stories into the biblical narrative of God's redeeming actions in the world will reveal a larger *telos* for life—to have that “definite end” Jake urges is fundamental to the bullfighting narrative—and consequently to understand “unexplained horrors” within a larger dramatic story.

Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* makes the need for a narrative—specifically the narrative of Scripture—with which to understand suffering particularly evident. Jake is a man who is both writing his story and seeking a story, and though he performs his faith “technically,” he does not align his life with the Christian narrative and consequently cannot seem to inject what he loves about bullfighting into his own life.

The Sun Also Rises: “Lost” without a Narrative

Hemingway described *The Sun Also Rises* to Fitzgerald as an instruction in “how people go to hell” (*Letters*, 204), but he also mentions that he did not mean

to suggest that the characters are completely lost (229). The epigraph about the “lost generation” is supposed to be tempered by the epigraph taken from Ecclesiastes (*Moveable Feast*, 29-30). The Ecclesiastes epigraph and the title itself point not just to loss but to return. The fact that this message is taken from Scripture and the fact that Jake has a “hell of a biblical name” connote that the characters have gotten “lost” in their narrative direction, but that they may find it and return to it again (*Sun*, 30).

The characters are “lost” in part because they refuse to confront suffering. The repercussions of World War I haunt the characters, and instead of facing their suffering, they attempt to hide from it, spending as much time as possible in some kind of activity—sharing bottles of wine, engaging in love affairs, watching bullfighting—so that they can avoid the lonely nights, when the constant attempt “not to think about it” fails (39). They know that they “can't get away from [themselves] by moving from one place to another” (19), yet that seems to be, in their frequent travels, what they often try to do. They expect others, as well, to participate in the guise and despise those who do not follow along: they “hate [...] damned suffering” (186).¹²

¹² This comment is directed at Cohn, which is doubly significant considering how often Jake notes that Cohn is a Jew. The Jews' identity as the chosen people of God, but also as a group of people identified by their suffering, supports my argument in that suffering is not a mark of being abandoned by God, but sometimes a mark of being chosen by God: the difference resides in what kind of narrative one places the suffering.

With all the characters trying so hard to escape from suffering, it follows that they would view the primary purpose in life to cause no one else's suffering. Brett Ashley's comment that "deciding not to be a bitch" is "sort of what we have instead of God," is telling in that it reveals that her ultimate *telos* of life is not directed toward any end goal or purpose (249). Instead, the primary goal is to avoid, and to live to avoid is to live for nothing, for nada. Lacking purpose or direction, the characters in *The Sun Also Rises* thus represent the "lost generation" of the novel's epigraph.

After the devastation of the war, Jake and his friends do not know where to look to find meaning. As Frederic Henry stated, to pursue a life dedicated to honor, glory, and the sacred is no longer feasible because those words no longer have any meaning. Substitutes are therefore sought. Bill calls it a "simple exchange of values" (78), and Count Mippipopolous exemplifies the exchange of values taking place after the war. The count lives for surface level pleasures; nothing can go too deep. For example, the count does not want to "mix emotions up with a wine" or do anything with wines other than "enjoy them" (66), and he is "always in love" with a different woman (67). By practicing these "values," he "can enjoy everything so well" and avoid any of the pains that come with deeper living (67). The count owns confection shops in America, and the way he lives resembles his products: very sugary and sweet, with little substance. Brett

recognizes the shallowness of his values, knowing that if one is “always” in love, one is in fact “never” in love since real love requires substance and often some degree of pain, something the count clearly seeks to avoid. She therefore rightly declares that the count “ha[s]n’t any values” at all (67).¹³ He lives to find momentary pleasure and to avoid pain and therefore lives for nada.

Jake wants to escape a life dedicated to nada and to seek greater meaning, and his attempts to navigate how to make his life meaningful signal his desire and need for narrative. Jake attests, in some ways, to thinking that life is a simple “exchange of values,” since “you paid some way for everything that was any good” (152), yet he is ultimately unsatisfied with living in such a way. He is primarily concerned, he says, with “how to live,” and he decides that “maybe if you found out how to live in it you learned from that what it was all about” (152). Jake’s conclusion to focus on the “how” and hope for the “what” to follow attests to the necessity of narrative. Narratives express “how” it is lived without outright saying “what” it is all about. However, there is a sense that one understands what it is all about in the process of reading it.¹⁴ Seeing how

¹³Larry Grimes discusses the count in greater length, also arguing that he has “no code at all,” a code that “takes into account the nothingness experienced by the lost generation” (87).

¹⁴Flannery O’Connor responded to people seeking after the “meaning” of her stories by saying, “If I could tell you the meaning, I wouldn’t have written the story,” a tart testimony to the importance of narrative. She writes that “the meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it. A story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way, and it

someone lives allows one to understand what that person directs his or her life towards. For instance, the count primarily lives for good wine, food, and frequent love affairs; what one can therefore see that his life is “all about,” therefore, is pursuing pleasure. The “how” helps define and shape the “what.” Jake thus does not want a cause or a reason but a story he can enact.

Jake's understanding of bullfighting emphasizes the importance of a narrative for making sense of life, particularly for making sense of suffering. Certain bullfighters are better than others because they better enact the “how” that makes the “what” of bullfighting so powerful and beautiful to Jake. As I have stated before, Jake insists that the bullfight is a dramatic narrative that must be seen as a cohesive whole. Similarly, the best bullfighters are those who recognize and fully inhabit the role they are supposed to play. Some bullfighters use tricks to manipulate the audience into thinking that they are playing their role, but they are false and superficial compared to true bullfighters like Romero. Romero, unlike many other bullfighters, “never made any contortions” and was always “straight and pure” (171). Other bullfighters “twisted themselves,” so that what “was faked turned bad and gave an unpleasant feeling” to those who were watching the bullfight while Romero's bullfighting “gave real emotion” (171). The audience was able to see, through Romero's true enactment of the role

takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate” (96).

of a bullfighter, “how something that was beautiful done close to the bull was ridiculous if it were done a little way off” (171). The true bullfighter is one who knows his role is to confront danger and suffering in order to turn it into part of a larger narrative, so that the audience can see the beauty of the entire drama of a bullfight. To twist and avoid the possible suffering is to deceive, so that the entire bullfight is tainted by the bullfighter's falseness.

The difference between the bullfighters reveals much about how to handle suffering in real life as well. Many of the characters in *The Sun Also Rises* channel their suffering into something else—drink, love, etc.—yet they are merely only twisting and avoiding suffering. To live truly and to inhabit one's role properly, one must confront suffering without deception and place it within the larger narrative (as with the slain horse). Only then can they, as Romero does with the bull, become “one” with suffering and transform it into something beautiful (224).

However, the right actions alone are not enough to enact fully the beautiful ritual of bullfighting. One must have *aficion*—passion—in order to understand fully the “how” and the “what” of bullfighting. *Aficion* is akin to faith in the novel, and Montoya, the innkeeper who considers himself a particular judge of who has *aficion*, does not determine *aficion* by a “password,” “set of questions,” or the number of bullfights they have experienced, but by “a

sort of oral spiritual exam" (137). There is also, much like Thomas touching Christ's scars to see if it is really him, "actual touching" to "make it certain" someone really possessed *aficion*. The bullfighters with *aficion* are the true bullfighters while those without "did not mean anything" (136). Without *aficion*, a bullfighter may go through the technical motions, but he is still false and fragmented from the true narrative of the bullfight, and he cannot, therefore, truly inhabit his role in the drama.

While Jake sees bullfighting as a kind of faith or religion, what he does not seem to see is how similar his own faith is to his understanding of bullfighting. Jake is like a bullfighter without *aficion*; he twists, turns, and has lots of actions, but he does not have *aficion* and does not understand his role in a larger narrative. Jake, who calls himself "pretty religious" at times but only "technically" a Catholic at others, mostly goes through the motions of his faith.¹⁵ Jake seems to want to believe, but he does not face the "bull" of his faith and instead twists and distracts himself. For example, when he prays inside of a cathedral, he prays for his friends, himself, the bullfighters, himself again, and then prays "that the bull-fights would be good, and that it would be a fine fiesta, and that [he] would get some fishing." He finished praying by asking for money (103). Jake's prayer demonstrates how far away he is from the real narrative of

¹⁵ The idea that he is not a "real" Catholic is confirmed in the train scene, where he is denied lunch (communion) with the other Catholics who are undergoing a pilgrimage.

the Christian faith and represents how he instead views his faith as another “exchange of values.” The prayer asks for certain outcomes and events: Jake offers a service (prayer) and makes requests. God expects certain actions from Jake, and Jake therefore expects results back from God. Thus, though Jake engages in some of the “how” of the rituals of the faith, he has divorced them from the Scriptural narrative and placed them within the narrative of value exchange. He assumes that if he keeps up his part, eventually something will happen. He recognizes that he is “a rotten Catholic,” but he also figures there “was nothing [he] could do about it” and leaves hoping that “maybe” he would feel religious “the next time” (103), a view that highlights Jake’s passivity and inability to confront his problems. Due to this inability to face the bull and understand his role in the greater narrative, Jake cannot understand the “what” behind the technical rituals in which he participates, such as confession or prayer, nor find the same kind of *aficion* for faith that he has for bullfighting.

A step toward Jake’s recovery—toward becoming like a great bullfighter and possessing both *aficion* and a sense of his role in a grand narrative—may be understanding himself through the story of his “biblical name” counterpart and through the book of Ecclesiastes. Both the story of Jacob and Ecclesiastes suggest that forging out on one’s own will be futile, or, in the words of Ecclesiastes, “meaningless, meaningless.” In the face of the never ending cycle of life,

Ecclesiastes encourages pleasure in the daily things, like eating and drinking, which the characters (particularly the count) in *The Sun Also Rises* heartily support. However, before Ecclesiastes ends, it concludes that God is the only way to find any kind of meaning in one's life. If one tries to find it on his own, he will only find himself in a never ending cycle of futility.

Just as Robert Jordan compares his life to a merry-go-round that always ends where it began, Jake also finds himself in a cycle of futility. After he leaves *San Fermin* and spends time by himself, he does achieve a temporary peace. His swim is a highly symbolic act which signals, as he leaves the raft with a couple sitting on it to journey into the depths of the water on his own, that he has let go of Brett and the hope of a romantic relationship. Nevertheless, while the swim gives him a sense of peace, it, like fishing and bullfighting, cannot encompass his whole life, and therefore it cannot last or cure his dark, lonely nights. Once Brett calls him to pick her up from yet another romantic affair, Jake immediately returns to his old habits, namely distracting himself from his suffering through food and drink. While Wirt Williams believes that Jake's taking of the food and drink in Brett's hotel room suggests an act of "communion" that signifies Jake's moment of accepting suffering "face-to-face" and meeting it with "grace and dignity and responsibility" (63), his refuge in food and drink here is no different from his attempt to forget suffering through food and drink that occurs through

the rest of the novel; that this is a return to Jake's previous ways rather than a turn from them is reaffirmed in Brett's pleas to Jake not to "get drunk," that he'll "be all right" without getting drunk (250). Jake's story thus seems to be a futile circle so far, because instead of a sacramental moment, Jake's solace in food and drink is remarkably similar to the count's value-less values, which are, as Brett has mentioned, "no values at all." The novel therefore eerily echoes Ecclesiastes' message, which is that finding pleasure in food, drinking, and fleeting pleasures are not ultimately satisfying, but God is. What the Ecclesiastes epigraph and Jake's "hell of a biblical name" suggest, therefore, is that Jake is part of a grand narrative—the biblical narrative—but may not yet recognize it.

Scripture and Narrative

Hemingway's characters show an interest in narratives that help them understand their own lives, particularly one that helps them transform suffering from "a spectacle of unexplained horrors" to "something that was going on with a definite end" (*Sun*, 171). They seem discontent with writing their own narratives or with joining unworthy or fleeting ones (for instance, narratives of patriotism/country, romantic love, or exchange of values). An alternative narrative—a narrative that may be able to replace the "nada" with a deep and profound story of redemption—is the narrative of Scripture.

Scripture is not merely the story of figures from the past, but a story that makes claims upon our own stories. It is the narrative that envelops all separate narratives into its own. Scripture, as Erich Auerbach explains it, is all-encompassing:

[The Bible] seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history. [. . .] All other scenes, issues, and ordinances have no right to appear independently of it, and it is promised that all of them, the history of all mankind, will be given their due place within its frame, will be subordinated to it. (15)

What Auerbach's explanation emphasizes is the totality of the biblical narrative. Scripture creates a structure for each person's life: it narrates a beginning and an ending, and it also makes claims about how one is to live one's life according to that beginning and end. It envelops every part of its reader's life into its own stories and in doing so, shapes the person according to its narrative.

While the narrative of Scripture is all-encompassing and universal, it still affirms the individual and the unique identity and role an individual has within the narrative. The metaphor of eating Scripture can help explain how this can be so. In Revelation and in Ezekiel, a scroll is eaten, an act that signifies that the Word becomes part of us as we become part of the Word. Mariano Magrassi explains that in eating the text, we allow ourselves to be opened "to Christ's spiritual presence and action so that he might penetrate all our faculties and fill our life" (7). Magrassi explains that the deeper the text courses through us, the

deeper the personalization, so that as we become more immersed in Scripture, we also understand ourselves and our personal roles in the narrative better (7). Or, as Gerard Loughlin says, “rather than starting with a theory of the narrative self, of which Christ's story is but an example, it is the scriptural story that comes first, upon which individual and communal stories are then shaped” (67).

Hemingway's characters continually seek a communal, grand narrative that also holds an important role for each individual. Catherine, for instance, wanted desperately to be in David's narrative, but she could not write her own, and Robert Jordan wants to believe that his particular act and purpose of blowing the bridge will contribute to the overall purpose of overthrowing the fascists. The narrative of Scripture contains this dual-narrative of communal identity and personal identity. Though it is, as Auerbach dubs it, “tyrannical” in its all-encompassing claims and its aim to conform the reader to its text, Scripture also demonstrates the important and unique identity that each reader has in the text. By reading its stories, we understand our own better.

Jake, for instance, would perhaps better understand himself and his suffering if he looked to his “biblical name” and understood his own story through his biblical namesake. The biblical story of Jacob depicts a man who constantly tried to “manipulate/connive” (the meaning of the name Jacob) his way through the world until he finds his true identity after wrestling with God.

The biblical Jacob wrestles with God and receives a permanent limp in his hip socket; he is forever altered from his battle. However, he does not dwell on his injury or on his suffering. Instead, he asks for a blessing. He receives his new name, Israel, which means to “persevere with God,” a name that will define a nation. Unlike Jake and his friends, Jacob, who is fearfully heading home to face his brother, Esau, symbolically confronts his fears and even embraces his suffering when he wrestles with the stranger. In his wrestling, Jacob sees the face of God, and it forever changes him.

What Jake’s “biblical name” may connote is that he is a character who has not yet found his true identity.¹⁶ Jake (like Jacob before his encounter with the stranger) runs from suffering and avoids it all costs, and thus, the face of God and Jake’s true identity are hidden from him, so that he can only admire the “grand religion” and wish he “felt religious and maybe would the next time” (103). He also has been, like Jacob, permanently injured in battle. Yet he differs drastically from Jacob in that Jake has not yet wrestled with suffering nor come “face to face” with God, and he has thus not received his blessing of a new

¹⁶ Only two critics have considered Jake’s name in much depth. Alexander Tamke argues that the name primarily serves as an ironic reminder of a man who is the “epitome of patriarchal fertility and biblical fullness of promise” (2). Jake, on the other hand, has the “wasteland of postwar Europe” and the inability to procreate (4). Joseph Flora points out another possible understanding of Jake’s name, not a biblical one, but a slang: a “jake” is also used as slang for toilets and excrement (14). He suggests that this reference could connote a more comedic tone to the novel than critics have previously presumed. Tamke obviously makes an important connection with the fertility and promised land of Jacob but no one has yet considered how Jacob’s wrestling might also figure into Jake’s “biblical name.”

identity. Jake therefore seems on the cusp of belief, but he never seems to be able to embrace it. Even Hemingway's other characters who persevered rather than avoided suffering have not completed the transformation since they lack the second half of Israel's name: "with God." Jacob did not just persevere; he persevered *with God* and was thus able, with God, to transform his passive, perseverance of suffering into the action of building and defining a nation.

Jacob's Scriptural narrative offers two ways of being like a true bullfighter and confronting suffering. Jacob is a fighter who confronts his suffering—even wrestles with it—and overcomes it. He is injured in the process, but he has triumphed and defeated his fears of meeting Esau. He, like Romero in the ring, becomes one with his adversary and, in the end, better understands his role in the unfolding drama of the Israelite people. The figure he wrestles, on the other hand, introduces another approach to suffering. St. Augustine suggests that the figure Jacob wrestles and defeats represents Christ. Augustine says that the figure's blessing of Jacob after his defeat is a forerunner to Christ's defeat on the cross. Christ, too, blesses in his defeat, much like the figure in the Jacob story blesses Jacob after the wrestling (*City of God*, 16.39). Thus, as both aspects of the Jacob story suggest, suffering can sometimes be transformed and redeemed rather than just endured: it can become something with a "definite end" rather than a "spectacle of unexplained horrors."

Though Hemingway's works often do not clearly tell us what the "definite end" is, his writings remain a fascinating analysis of the role of religion and suffering. He particularly stresses the need for a complete narrative with which to understand suffering, and in doing so, provides a powerful testimony to the problems that may occur when parts of Christianity are divorced from its full narrative. His depiction of suffering also reminds the Church of its call to live out its narrative role and to, like the bullfighter, face suffering and figure out ways to transform it. Hemingway shows that if the Church does not do so, God may seem to have abandoned or even bullied those who suffer. For instance, after Frederic's baby died and Catherine was about to die, Frederic reflects on a time when he put a log full of ants on top of a fire. Instead of helping them and being their "messiah," he ignores the ants and watches them burn (328). Here, as well as in "A Natural History of the Dead," where even natural deaths are unnatural, the implication is that God, if he does exist, sits by, inactive, as people suffer and die. Hemingway makes a deep and difficult charge here, but his own works seem to help to respond to this charge: while we may never understand "what" suffering is all about, the Church needs to show the "how" of transforming it, particularly by emphasizing the Christian narrative as a way to understand our suffering and to give it a narrative shape and direction.

CHAPTER FOUR

A “Home-made God”: Idols and Icons in Carson McCullers

Carson McCullers always felt a deep need for God. She considered writing her “search for God” (White 12), often prayed to try to feel God’s presence, cried nearly every time she read or heard the twenty-third Psalm, and thought she felt “different” after being baptized (Carr 326, 19). McCullers grew up in the Christian tradition and joined a church during her adolescence, but around age fourteen, she stopped attending and stopped believing in many of the tenets of the church. She continued to believe in God—but a God that did not “depend upon dogma or ritual or whether she went to church” (Carr 326). McCullers still felt a desire for the sacred, but she also keenly perceived that what many worshipped in the name of God was something far from holy and transcendent and was rather something created for personal gain or justification. Especially from growing up in the South, where McCullers frequently heard God used as a means to support racism and the oppression of women, McCullers grew leery of what she called an individual’s tendency to create a “personal god” that may act as a “unifying principle” but is in reality merely that person’s own “reflection” (McCullers, *Mortgaged Heart*, 141).

Throughout her fiction, McCullers depicts characters who create these personal or “home-made God[s],” to use Biff’s phrase from *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, and she explores both the characters’ rationale for creating such gods and the reasons those gods fail (McCullers, *Heart*, 232). What McCullers suggests is that a “home-made God” is, necessarily, a god that is created in one’s own image. This god is so limited and small that it is even “inferior to [its] creator” (*Mortgaged*, 141). Her characters create these gods as a way to understand the world, ease the sense of restlessness they continually feel, and make life meaningful. Yet because these gods are “personal” and thus solitary, they cannot offer lasting peace from the restlessness. Rather than lasting peace, these “home-made God[s]” cause McCullers’s characters to struggle to find any constant and absolute truths, to establish a sense of community to alleviate their loneliness, and to see anything beyond their own image.

Searching for Icons: Restlessness, Truth, and Loneliness

The Christian God is either dead or incompetent in much of McCullers’s fiction, leaving characters to fend for themselves in a bleak world. McCullers’s strange array of characters and her harsh depictions of life suggest the possibility that “God had withdrawn His hand” from creation “too soon,” leaving everyone

“eternally unsatisfied” and searching (*The Member of the Wedding*, 365).¹ As Frankie, Berenice, and John Henry demonstrate during one of their regular evening discussions in *The Member of the Wedding*, there is a sense that nearly anyone could make—or be—a better God. The three of them often “criticize the Creator and the work of God,” always thinking of ways to “improve the world” if they had God’s power (337-8). As Frankie, Berenice, and John Henry construct their worlds, they become not just critics of God, but his usurpers, transforming themselves into “The Holy Lord God John Henry West,” “The Holy Lord God Berenice Sadie Brown,” and “The Holy Lord God Frankie Addams” (338). They blame the world’s deep flaws—such as racism, war, and injustice—on God, whom they believe failed to finish his divine work. They realize, along with Nietzsche, “that the way of this world is anything but divine; even by human standards it is not rational, merciful, or just” (Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 286).² Believing that the perfect and good God of Christianity could be the source of such a defective world is impossible to Nietzsche and McCullers’s characters. Nietzsche accepts God’s death and builds his philosophy around finding new

¹ All citations/references from McCullers’s short stories, *The Member of the Wedding*, and *The Ballad of the Sad Café* come from *Collected Stories of Carson McCullers*.

² Nietzsche is particularly *apropos* as commentary on McCullers because he heavily influenced her work. As a teenager, she even created dramas about his works (“How I Began to Write,” *Mortgaged*, 283).

methods to derive meaning from life while McCullers's characters, like Frankie, Berenice, and John Henry, try to create a god anew in their own images.

McCullers's characters search for some kind of god to assuage the sense of restlessness and insatiable hunger they feel in the wake of God's death. Horace Taylor characterizes McCullers's work as a depiction of "hollow" people living in "a society that is spiritually dead" and who must now searchingly wander for new ways to make their lives meaningful (159). McCullers conveys this sense of wandering and loss by frequently using words like "restless," "hunger," "hollow," "empty," "vacant," "wanting," and their variants in nearly every one of her novels and short stories. The narrator in "Court in the West Eighties," for example, describes herself as having a "queer sort of hungriness" that she "could not get rid of," and she also often describes herself as "restless" (12). Andrew, in McCullers's "Untitled Piece," has a similar hunger and is also restless. He has a "slow hunger" that makes him want to "go in search of something" (88). The kind of hunger McCullers depicts, like Andrew's, is clearly a spiritual hunger, as it cannot be filled with food or other physical pleasures.

Her characters try to fill their hunger with and find respite in God (or a god). For instance, the young girl in "Court" can only temporarily satiate her hunger when she confers godlike attributes upon one of her neighbors. She believes he has an innate wisdom and ability to solve problems, and he makes

her feel less restless. She says that she cannot easily explain “this faith [she] had in him,” but even after he “never did do anything” to solve the problems of her neighbors, she still compares his hair to a “halo” and believes “that there is something in him” that could fix everything (19). The girl’s belief reveals her desire to believe in something that provides a sense of coherence and purpose to the various conflicting narratives and insoluble problems in the world, a desire so strong she projects that ability onto an ineffectual neighbor. Likewise, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*’s entire premise is that people are continually searching—hunting—for something to fulfill them and give their life meaning. And they, like the girl in “Court,” end up creating a god out of Singer as a way to appease their hunger. McCullers’s characters may no longer believe in God, but they feel restless in God’s absence and search for a way to fill the gap God left behind, even if it means creating their own god.

While creating one’s own god may temporarily alleviate the sense of restlessness or hunger one may feel, the young girl in “Court” reveals that self-deception is a prerequisite to that temporary peace. Upon reflecting on her godlike neighbor’s lack of action (or even conversation), she still persistently believes he has powers and justifies that even if he will never be able to “change a lot of situations and straighten them out,” if she “feel[s] this way, in a sense it is true” (19). In this small rationalization are two fundamental problems that will

later help explain why McCullers's characters' personal gods fail. First, the girl's statement reveals a reliance on relative truth: truth is what the individual makes of it, so that if one simply "feels" a certain way, that is so. Truth does not have to be constant or correspond to reality but is determined solely by feeling and individual perception.³ Truth is traditionally understood as constant and shared since it is that which corresponds to reality, so saying truth is individually created is not just a new perspective but a complete redefinition. Secondly, as this young narrator shows, relativizing truth is really creating truth. Since the girl wants to accept her truth about the man even though she knows that she has made it up, she creates a dilemma for herself. She bases her truth on rather circular logic: she finds something to be "true" because it makes her "feel" a certain way, and whatever made her "feel" that way must be "true." She thus may convince herself temporarily that this man is godlike and can fix everything, but part of her also always knows that she fabricated it and that the reality is that he never actually fixed anything.

To do as the young girl in "Court" does—that is, to accept a "truth" even as she acknowledges that it is a self-construction—can cause a blurred distinction

³ In contrast, Christianity attests to God as the constant, unchanging, eternal Truth—the Source of all Reality and Being, the "I AM," the Alpha and Omega. Thus, while cultural "truths" may change and fluctuate and thus can be relative, God's truth is constant throughout all time, cultures, and peoples. Augustine explains in his *Confessions*, for instance, that custom is very different from God's laws. He writes that while the "morality of countries and times was formed as appropriate to those countries and times," God's law "has remained unchanged everywhere and always, not one thing in one place and something different elsewhere" (84).

between reality and fantasy, so that a person may eventually struggle to sort out any kind of truth claims. The young girl in "Court" used relative truth to describe her beliefs, but McCullers shows that there is a connection between what we believe to be true (and how we believe it) and how we understand the world. Not just beliefs, but also basic knowledge of the world can become fluid and reliant on individual perception. This problem is apparent in both "Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland" and *The Member of the Wedding*. Mr. Brook, a colleague of Madame Zilensky's who discovers that she chronically lies once she mentions she has seen the king of a democratic Finland, decides he must simply accept her lies rather than confront her about them and watch her "whole interior world split open and disintegrate" (117). Self-deception has become so intrinsic to Madame Zilensky that Mr. Brook believes that unraveling her lies will unravel her. She has become so bound to her vision of the world that she lives her lies and would, in Mr. Brook's estimation, be unable to live without them. She has defined her world, and it now defines her.

While Mr. Brook does not allow Madame Zilensky's self-constructed truths to hinder their relationship, a relative truth can be isolating and thus can damage relationships. In *The Member of the Wedding*, for instance, Frankie convinces herself that she will live with her brother and his fiancée after their wedding. At first, she refuses to acknowledge that she will not be living with

them and does not accept any evidence contrary to her plan; eventually, though, she must face the truth when she is pulled out of the newlyweds' car. Because Frankie did not understand the situation for what it really was—and instead lived by her own manufactured version of reality—she causes herself and those she loves pain.

“Madame Zilensky” and *The Member of the Wedding* demonstrate what results from a shift in people’s understanding of truth: after Descartes' *cogito* and the loss of God as the eternal and constant source of Truth, truth became more localized and thus unshared. The modern emphasis on “reason” encourages this kind of truth-seeking because it so heavily exalts the individual and the individual's personal pursuit of truth. Hence, as G.K. Chesterton posits, the madman best exemplifies the modern emphasis on reason because he “knows” without a doubt what the “truth” of the world is: “The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason” (*Orthodoxy* 24). Charles Taylor explains how this misconstruction of reality could come about, arguing that fantasies can become one’s “real world” truth because of the “new subjectivism” that arose after the “death of God,” a concept that “gives rise to the notion of a subject in its modern sense; [. . .] it involves new localization, whereby we place ‘within’ the subject what was previously seen as existing, as it were, between the knower/agent and the world,

linking them and making them inseparable" (Taylor, *Sources*, 188). The truth is no longer understood as an objective, shared correspondence to reality; rather it is an interior, subjective perception of reality. In other words, truth is relative.⁴ Thus, Frankie and Madame Zilensky may seem on the one hand to be self-delusional and crazy, but they are in fact simply products of the kind of subjective truth-telling that has become common. They do not believe they are mad because, in their minds, they *know* the truth and their truth is absolutely reasonable to them.⁵

Relative truth is by definition relative to the individual. The kind of over-emphasis on the individual that characterizes this kind of understanding of truth creates, in McCullers, narcissism and a sense of isolation or loneliness. The individual can create her own world entirely, and thus be narcissistic, but she can also grow rather lonely occupying that world all by herself.

Both narcissism and loneliness are evident in McCullers's "Correspondence,"⁶ a short story consisting solely of unrequited letters. Young

⁴ The problem of reality versus fiction becomes even more apparent in Bret Easton Ellis's work, which I examine in chapter six.

⁵ Oliver Evans also argues that McCullers's considers the "question of truth and illusion (or disillusionment)" (37). He posits that, much like Frankie and Madame Zilensky, the characters in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* substitute "private truths" that are so limited they cannot "include others" (40). He believes, as I argue, that the characters experience loneliness because of the isolating nature of subjective truth.

⁶ When considered in light of the correspondence theory of truth, the title "Correspondence" becomes ironic. Correspondence theory says that all truth has its

Henky Evans is very excited to start her pen pal relationship with Manoel, a boy from South America, and she eagerly tells him about herself, believing they feel “so much alike about life and other things” (121). She shares many details about herself and anticipates a response that she never gets. She gradually becomes disgruntled when she never hears back from him, telling him she “cannot waste any more of [her] valuable time writing” to him (124). In this one-sided letter exchange, Henky’s inherent narcissism and isolation are highlighted, as all we see are her unanswered letters which are entirely about herself. As Margaret McDowell points out, Henky does not recognize how self-centered her letters are. She says that she loves South America and dreams of visiting it, but she never asks Manoel questions about his life there. McDowell suggests that Henky exhibits the “essential narcissism of human beings” who long mostly for “reciprocity” —that is, for a “mirror” of themselves—rather than for genuine human relationships (93).⁷ Even if Manoel had written back, Henky would likely have been disappointed that he did not match her feelings exactly. Henky’s

correspondence in reality: I believe I have a brother, and there is, in fact, a man who was also created from the man and woman who created me. Henky’s beliefs, on the other hand, have no correspondence in reality. She believes so many things about her pen-pal that have no correspondence to whom she writes.

⁷ Horace Taylor also believes McCullers reveals the “unconscious but utter selfishness” of people (157). He believes that the characters in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* all show a general disregard for one another, and also an insular view that refuses to see how “completely oblivious” they are to “both the needs and character” of the people around them, even those they “worship” (155-7).

letters demonstrate a double-solitude, then; no one answers her letters or validates her thoughts, and even in her attempt to reach out to another person, she merely desires a reflection of herself. Henky's experience reinforces how quickly an over-emphasis on the "I" limits a person's life. It inhibits one's ability to connect to anything outside of oneself, so that one is left standing in the center of a large, self-created world—alone.⁸

McCullers admits that "spiritual isolation is the basis of most of [her] themes" (*Mortgaged*, 311), and her writing questions whether people will ever be able to overcome their perpetual sense of loneliness. Loneliness, for McCullers, seems "essentially to be a quest for identity," and she believes the only way to conquer alienation and achieve a sense of identity is to attach to "something larger and more powerful than the weak, lonely self" (293-4).⁹ McCullers claims, then, that belonging to something bigger—something that involves a "we" rather than just a "me"—can be the key to affirmation and acceptance of identity.

⁸ Sartre encourages us to accept this aloneness. In "Existentialism Is a Humanism," he says that "Man cannot will unless he has first understood that he can count on nothing but himself: that he is alone, left on earth in the middle of his infinite responsibilities, with neither help nor succor, with no other goal but the one he will set for himself, with no other destiny but the one he will forge on this earth" (158).

⁹ I take up McCullers's term of the "self" throughout this chapter. I understand her to mean here the individual personhood, and I apply this to particularly mean the self as a conscious attempt to discover, determine, and understand who one is and wants to be. The self is not necessarily steady, but always changing and forming. However, as I show in this chapter, it also desires a sense of steadiness. In my estimation, then, a fulfilled sense of self and identity are related in that though a person may still change, she will have a consistent center with which to understand herself.

The larger “we” helps to order all the disparate parts of the self into one coherent whole. The old man in “A Tree • A Rock • A Cloud” explains how attaching the self to something bigger can provide this kind of ordering and affirmation of the self. Before he met the woman he fell in love with, he felt as if everything was “laying around loose” in him, that “nothing seemed to finish itself up or fit in with the other things” (128). After he met her, he describes the change that overcame him: “There were these beautiful feelings and loose little pleasures inside me. And this woman was something like an assembly line for my soul. I run these little pieces of myself through her and I come out complete” (128). What this man’s reflection signifies is his recognition of his need for an “other” to help him order and give purpose to his life. With this woman as his center, all the rest of his life also fell into place and was given meaning.

Frankie, in *The Member of the Wedding*, inherently understands what the old man discovers about community’s role in shaping the self. In the beginning of the novel, Frankie feels like a freak who is “a member of nothing in the world,” and she desperately searches for “*the we of me*,” wanting to be part of her brother and his fiancé’s “we” so badly that she even changes her name to F. Jasmine so that she can better fit in with Jarvis and Janice (257, 291). To be a “we” shapes and gives meaning to the “me,” and Frankie believes that being

with her brother and his new wife will finally give her the sense of welcoming community and affirmation she seeks.

Her other major works also stress this need for community: in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, the “lonesome, sad” town that is “far off and estranged from all other places in the world” finds temporary solidarity and community when a rich woman, Miss Amelia, falls in love with a hunchback named Cousin Lyman and opens a café for the community to gather in (197), and in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Mick, Jake Blount, and Dr. Copeland all have a primary purpose—music for Mick, communism for the two men—but feel restless until they believe they have found a person—Singer for all of them—that understands and affirms them. McCullers frequently returns to this theme of needing community to order the self, and the emphasis on another person to center one’s life is reminiscent of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald’s depiction of love and relationships. Yet in McCullers, the person that acts as an “assembly line for [the] soul” does not have to be a romantic relationship.¹⁰ What matters most is that, no matter

¹⁰ In many ways, she understands the problem of worshipping the beloved, as evident in her description of the lover and the beloved in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. The lover is the privileged one in her account. The lover, upon finding the beloved, creates “a whole new inward world—a world intense and strange, complete in himself” (216). Being the beloved is “intolerable to many,” she suggests, because the ‘lover is forever trying to strip bare his beloved’ (216). Consequently, the relationship is nearly always uneven and problematic, with one always loving more than the other. This relationship intrigues critics, and two have already cast this problem as a religious one. Both Margaret Whitt and Donna Bauerly argue that McCullers depicts the beloved/lover to show the inevitable failure of romantic *eros* and the need for *agape* to be put in its place. This is a remarkably similar argument to my Fitzgerald chapter, yet it does not fit McCullers quite as well. In McCullers’s work, the beloved/lover is not limited to romantic

who it is—a brother and his wife, a deaf-mute man, a beloved hunchback—the feelings of restlessness, loneliness, and isolation vanish for a moment.

Unfortunately for the characters, it is only for a moment that these feelings vanish, and they are denied any lasting peace.

That these temporary communities fail to provide any lasting sense of respite from spiritual isolation is not due to the failure of community, but to the characters' use of these communities as the center and purpose of their lives: in other words, as their gods. These constructed gods, like Henry's pen pal, are small, limited, and based on self-deception because they are a self-projection and can thus only really reflect the self. McCullers's frequent use of images, reflections, and mirrors emblemizes this self-projecting tendency.¹¹

In *Clock without Hands*, for instance, the Judge defines hell as being utterly alone, yet he still transmits himself onto those closest to him. Even as his grandson, Jasper, attempts to explain how different his views are from his grandfather's, the Judge "ignore[s]" the challenges his grandson posits and instead summons "a mirrorlike projection" upon his grandson that "reflected his

love, so any person can become a beloved-like worshipped object. Many of McCullers's characters demonstrate an *agape*-like love, but it still fails them. Frankie is not passionately in love, for instance, with her brother and sister-in-law, nor are Mick, Blount, and Dr. Copeland in love with Singer. They feel an *agape*-like love for those people, but it is directed at the wrong object. *Eros* cannot replace *agape*, but neither can *agape* for any god-figure replace the *agape* of God.

¹¹ Just the word "image" is repeated over 15 times in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* and *Clock without Hands*.

own feelings" (31-2). He also calls himself and Jasper, as well as he and his dead son, "blood twin brothers" rather than grandfather and grandson (199). The Judge is one of McCullers's many characters who have an insatiable hunger unrelated to physical sustenance, and he tries to fill it, in part, by reaching out to his grandson. But his desire to see himself rather than the truth causes him to distort the relationship and distance himself from Jasper.

Captain Penderton, in *Reflection in a Golden Eye*, experiences the receiving side of this kind of projected self-love. As he looks at his "shaking image at the bottom of a well," he remembers his five aunts and how they "had used [him] as a sort of fulcrum to lift the weight of their own heavy crosses" (71).

Consequently, the Captain realizes he had "never known real love" and that he, in exchange, had "repaid them with the same counterfeit coin" (71). When he looks at his image, all he can see is the false love he experienced as a child. His aunts' self-projections upon him transformed him into a "counterfeit" himself.

The rest of *Reflections in a Golden Eye* is itself replete with descriptions of images, eyes, and reflections, emphasizing McCullers's theme that no one can see themselves and, subsequently, another person, clearly. They all look into "one immense golden eye" and see in it "reflections of something tiny" and "grotesque" (86). This image signifies the inevitable results of projecting one's

self into another: all that can be seen is an even smaller and uglier vision of the self.

What McCullers's characters discover is that they cannot form their identity in a vacuum. Since they inscribe their own selves upon the "other" that they use to try to rescue themselves from their loneliness, they still find only themselves and therefore remain lonely, isolated, and lacking a sense of identity. Charles Bradshaw uses Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy as a helpful explanation for the problem McCullers's characters have. Levinas explains that the "Self depends on the Other" in order to form a sense of identity, yet the Self "naturally reduces or totalizes the Other into digestible concepts," distorting the Other and the Self in the process (119). Levinas suggests that communication—genuine conversation—is the only way to move past totalization toward true formation and acceptance, and Bradshaw points out that McCullers's characters never move past totalization because they never experience true communication. Consequently, they both diminish the "Other" and themselves in the process (123). They are unable to move past the arrested development of the self since they are unable to see any kind of truth or image that is not their own.

Thus, for McCullers's characters, the quest to find themselves ends with them losing themselves even further. Malone, the dying protagonist in *Clock without Hands*, discovers Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death* while in the hospital,

and he is particularly struck by one of the sentences in it: "The greatest danger, that of losing one's own self, may pass off quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, that of an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc., is sure to be noticed" (147). Malone often thinks of this sentence, and McCullers also references Kierkegaard's book in *The Member of the Wedding*, when Frankie says she is "sick unto death" (269). Kierkegaard's work enlightens the heart of the problem of McCullers's characters: they have lost God and have thus lost themselves. Kierkegaard suggests that those who discard God and try to construct the world for themselves are "always building only castles in the air," building and building but eventually finding that "the basis of the whole thing is nothing" (*Sickness unto Death* 69).¹² Those who, like McCullers's characters, build these kinds of castles do so in order to find themselves through self-exaltation and creation, yet when that castle inevitably dissolves, all their work merely reinforces their sense of isolation and loneliness. They become so caught up in creating their visions for the world—for playing something akin to Frankie, Berenice, and John Henry's creation game—that they lose themselves. They have

¹² Kierkegaard also compares it to a "king without a country" who actually rules "over nothing" (69). He believes that "to venture wholly to become oneself" is a task "which can be done only through the relationship to God," through being a Christian (5, 30). Without a relationship with God, a person may try to "fashion out a self that he wants," but since man is spirit, such attempts will always result in "nothing" (69-70).

no way of finding an “Other” to affirm their identity since they have transformed the “Other” into just another image of themselves.¹³

They find their worlds—and their sense of selfhood—evaporated with the castles in the sky. As Irving Buchen points out, nearly every ideal—or, to use McCuller’s term, nearly every home-made god—McCullers’s characters try to live out is “shattered”: “Mick Kelly settles for Woolworth’s, John Singer commits suicide, Captain Penderton shoots his lover, Frankie Addams is shut out from the honeymoon, the well-lit café is darkened, the illustration of the square root of wonderful becomes the square root of sin, and Sherman Pew and his offense-giving white baby grand are consumed in flames” (541). Nearly every work of hers, Buchen asserts, “concludes with terrible endings” (541). What these terrible endings perhaps connote is that the characters are seeking the wrong methods to escape from the isolation they feel. They know they need something outside of themselves, but they also continue to create the very object they believe can save them in their own image.

¹³ Many of the great philosophers argue that all religion is a kind of self-projection. Feuerbach, in particular, argues that the Christian God is the ideal vision of how men and women wish to see themselves. While it is admittedly nearly impossible for anyone fully to avoid projecting themselves onto God and making God in their own image, Christianity has a sort of “check” on this. It has, through Christ, a more tangible depiction of God and it also has the community of the Church to interpret the book—Scripture—which reveals truths about God. I recognize, however, that this topic is far too complex to discuss here, so I will simply note, with C.S. Lewis, that “He whom I bow to only knows to whom I bow” (*Pilgrim’s*, 139). We pray not to whom we think God is, but to whom God knows himself to be.

What McCullers's work suggests, then, is the need for some kind of image that is not merely a reflection of the self, but actually represents that "something larger and more powerful than the weak, lonely self" (*Mortgaged* 294). This image should not merely be a "tiny" and "grotesque" reflection of the self, but should be something that leads the perceiver beyond the self. It should guide the perceiver to the truth—a truth that is not merely subjective and constructed and is thus a truth that does not isolate but joins together in harmony.

McCullers's fiction, in depicting several characters who construct a home-made God, is a testament to the problems of idolatry. As Margaret Whitt says, the "home-made gods" McCullers's characters create succeed in showing the need for God "precisely by way of ironic failure" (121). Worshiping a false, "created" god—an idol—merely reflects the image of the gazer and does not lead to community, self-affirmation, or redemption, but to uncertainty and isolation. What is needed instead is an icon, an image that, as one gazes at it, brings the perceiver into the truth it conveys so that she can join the story it represents and finally find the true "we of me."

No work of McCullers's reinforces this need more than *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. The main characters in this novel try to look to something or someone outside themselves in order to rid themselves of their loneliness and receive an affirmation of identity. They search for icons, but they instead create

idols, idols that are mere reflections of their creators and further emphasize their alienation and loneliness rather than rescue and redeem them. Though Frank Durham calls *Heart* an “iconoclastic” novel (499), the novel actually condemns idols and, in the process, makes one long for the return of true icons.

Idols in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter

In “The Mute,” the outline that would become *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers says her story is essentially that of “five isolated, lonely people in their search for expression and spiritual integration with something greater than themselves” (137). Each of the main characters attempts to look to something/someone outside themselves in order to rid themselves of their loneliness and affirm their individual identities. Mick Kelly, Jake Blount, and Dr. Copeland all turn to John Singer, a deaf mute man, as the answer to all of their problems. They believe he alone understands them and gives them a sense of belonging and acceptance. Singer, on the other hand, turns to his deaf mute and mentally handicapped friend, Spiros Antonapoulos, to provide meaning for his life. Though McCullers says finding something outside the self is the key to conquering the malady of loneliness, Singer, Mick, Copeland, and Blount seem to be, in the end, no better than when they started. In fact, except possibly for Blount, who enters the novel drunk and alone and leaves the novel simply alone, the characters are in worse shape in the end than in the beginning: Singer kills

himself, Mick is stuck in a job instead of school, and Copeland gives up his house and practice. So, if her characters attempt to do what McCullers prescribes and attach themselves to “something larger and more powerful than the weak, lonely self,” why are they not healed of their loneliness in the end of the novel?

Critics, as yet, have provided unsatisfactory answers to this question. Many note that the characters fail to achieve forward progress in their journey and interestingly place the blame on God rather than on the characters’ conception of God. David Madden wonders if McCullers is arguing that “perhaps religion, reservoir of man’s errors and hopes, is as much a myth as Singer, who finally kills himself when the object of his own illusion perishes” (130). Oliver Evans notes that if this book is understood spiritually, it is an “absurdly grim game of follow-the-leader” where “the ultimate leader, the power beyond the power, is a lunatic” (43). Since Singer is the home-made god for Copeland, Blount, and Mick, and Antonapoulos is the home-made god for Singer, then Wayne Dodd claims that this series implicates “an unending process” that culminates in a problematic ultimate God:

One is not in communication with one omnipotent god, but rather with an infinite series of limited gods, each of whom is as dependent on another as those who worship him [. . .] Singer, a god to man, is a deaf-mute, and [. . .] Antonapoulos, a god to Singer, is a moron. The effect is to suggest that God is somehow deformed or abnormal. (207)

Instead of blaming the characters' deformed notions of God, the critics claim that God is the source of all of their problems. A God just as imperfect as humans cannot rescue and redeem, leaving humans even more alone in the world.

I will argue, however, that the religious ideas in the novel do not indicate that God is a failure, but that attempts to create God in our own image (i.e. create idols) fail. McCullers argues that "the fundamental idea of the book is ironic" (159), and I believe that the irony of the novel is not that all the characters are in search of something futile and will forever remain lonely, but that in their search, they misdirect their faith. McCullers herself admits that one of the main themes of her novel is a distorted image or notion of God. She says the book demonstrates that "there is a deep need in man to express himself by creating some unifying principle or God. A personal God created by a man is a reflection of himself and in substance this God is most often inferior to his creator" (*Mortgaged*, 141). Thus, while many critics have pointed out that God is "inferior" in this novel, not enough thought has been given to *why* God is inferior in this novel. McCullers's novel depicts characters that, instead of finding "something larger and more powerful than the weak, lonely self," put their faith in idols, which are mere distortions of their own images, and they are then left lonely and lost. The characters need icons, but they instead find idols and consequently an "inferior" God.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter portrays the fallout after the death of God, wherein people do not believe in—but desperately miss, need, and try to replace—God. Biff Brannon discovers a Bible verse, “All men seek for Thee” (31), which suggests the characters are still “hunting” for God even after they accept atheism. In a particularly revealing conversation, Portia explains the cause of Mick’s restlessness to her. After Mick admits she does not “believe in God any more than [she does] Santa Claus,” Portia realizes that Mick reminds her of her father, Dr. Copeland, in that neither “have nair peace at all” (50). They are both restless spirits, destined to “roam all over the place without never being satisfied” and to “traipse all around like [they] haves to find something lost” (51). Indeed, though Mick does not want to believe Portia, Portia’s prediction is correct, and she spends all that day “roam[ing]” and unable to “get settled” (51). Portia says that since neither Mick nor Dr. Copeland loves God, they are also destined not to love people, meaning they will always be searching alone. Hence, Mick and the others continually feel insatiably “hungry,” but “just what this real want was” is a mystery to them since it is never satisfied by food (52). Combined with the unifying theme of Biff’s verse, Portia’s analysis unveils the fundamental problem behind McCullers’s characters’ restlessness and hunger: they are lost without God.¹⁴ Without the centering effect of God, they feel like

¹⁴ This is not to say that Portia is a beacon of the Christian faith or that McCullers extols

lonely wanderers, searching for coherence and purpose, for a way to make sense of their lives.

McCullers's characters try to do so by creating idols and constructing meaning, particularly through enhancing, transposing, and embellishing human relationships. Mick, Dr. Copeland, and Blount ascribe Singer godlike characteristics, believing that the deaf-mute man understands and affirms them. They make him the "Thou" with which to understand their "I." Singer alleviates their loneliness while they are with him, since they finally are able to express themselves to another person. The rest of the world does not understand them, but when they are with Singer, they can finally unload all of their burdens and share all of their most intimate dreams and feelings, "knowing" that he understands and embraces their every thought.

Just as the old man in "A Tree • A Rock • A Cloud" believes that his former wife was an "assembly line for his soul," so do the characters in *Heart* believe they have found someone who orders their lives and gives them meaning. Blount, Mick, and Copeland turn to Singer to alleviate their restlessness and loneliness while Singer himself turns to Antonapoulos. They all believe that only that one person can understand them, so when they are with that person, they

the Christian faith as the perfect answer in the book. Christians in the novel are often very simplistic and not very deep thinkers (Portia included); hence Dr. Copeland grows very frustrated with Christians who believed they should not fight racism and injustice, and he turns to Marxism instead. However, Portia's analysis is still very important because it is the only time in McCullers that a particular cause of this restlessness is actually identified.

talk and talk and talk, letting all their dreams and frustrations out. Biff observes that it is a human tendency to need to express one's self "before it ferments and poisons" (32), but it is also these characters' means toward feeling affirmed in their identities and feeling a sense of place and purpose in the world. For instance, when Jake's thoughts "had careened in several directions and he could not get control of them," he feels the urge to "go berserk" and "fight violently" with someone, but when he sees Singer's face, the mute's eyes "understand all that he had meant to say and to hold some message for him," bestowing Blount with the ability to feel "calm again" (69). Dr. Copeland, too, sees Mr. Singer in order to "blunt[...] the feeling of loneliness in him" and feel "at peace with himself" (148). Copeland and Blount feel out of control and out of touch with themselves until they are able to share their experiences with the mute. The telling of all their innermost thoughts—the thoughts they believe define them as selves—to someone who they believe understands them gives them a sense of affirmation and well-being they are unable to achieve elsewhere.

Singer himself perhaps most clearly exhibits the tendency to understand himself only through his god-like figure. Though he has people around him all the time, Singer feels lonely without Antonapoulos. He has only known Antonapoulos for ten years, but his time without his friend "never seemed real" (11). Consequently, he becomes "restless" and feels "a great aching loneliness"

when Antonapoulos moves away (11). The only times Singer feels calm and at peace with himself is when he is able to visit his friend in the hospital and sign with the same speed and passion to Antonapoulos that Mick, Copeland, and Blount bring to their visits with Singer. Life only becomes “real” for Singer when Antonapoulos centers his life, so that Singer can only understand and find meaning in his life through his relationship with his friend.

What Antonapoulos provides for Singer is what Singer provides for the others: an “other” that acts as a center for their lives, eases their restlessness and loneliness, bestows a sense of purpose, and gives their life meaning and direction. In other words, they find human gods to fill the role of God. This substitution is made even clearer through their ascription of godlike characteristics onto their human god, such as knowing “things no one had ever guessed before” and “not seem[ing] quite human” (25).¹⁵ These characters know they need to look outside themselves in order to find respite from the

¹⁵ Singer is often considered a Christ-figure because of his “divine” attributes. However, he is clearly a flawed substitute Christ. As Laurie Champion points out, Singer’s death, unlike Christ’s, is selfish and “lacks redemption” (51). He “forsakes his worshipers and they are left to suffer with feelings of loneliness and desertion” alone (51). Singer thus may serve as a Christ-figure for the characters, but he surely cannot qualify as an actual Christ-figure since the others project these qualities upon him, turning him into someone he never intended or wanted to be. As D. E. Presley suggests, the other characters “create a messiah in their own image” out of Singer, an act that “depersonalize[s]” him (28). Making Singer an unwilling and unknowing Christ-figure does not extol the deaf-mute but instead condemns him; by trying to make him divine, they make him even less than human.

restlessness and loneliness they feel, but since they no longer have God, they construct a new god.

Biff's remark that they have made "a sort of home-made God" for themselves is therefore a particularly acute observation (232). They rely on a person to fill the God-shaped hole in their lives and to fulfill the needs that belief in God once met. This progressive chain is symbolized in Singer's dream. He sees Antonapoulos holding an "unknown thing" and looking "at it as though in prayer" while Singer, kneeling, watches Antonapoulos, and Copeland, Mick, and Blount watch Singer (217). The object Antonapoulos holds is likely the little brass cross he often uses in his prayers,¹⁶ and the dream emblemizes the shift from a mysterious, uncontainable object (God) to the worship of human beings who simply worship other human beings. There are other people kneeling before and gazing at Mick, Copeland, and Blount, so that the chain simply continues. The dream depicts how the worship of idols puts more and more distance between a worshiper and the object worthy to be worshiped. Rather than gaze at the central object, gazes are often directed elsewhere, at people who,

¹⁶ Oliver Evans believes instead that the object is a "pagan cross" though he provides no textual evidence or reasoning to back up his point. Connecting it to Antonapoulos's rosary cross is more clearly supported textually. Though Singer does not identify this "unknown thing" in his dream, he sees Antonapoulos's cross while visiting his friend, and when he notices the cross, he immediately "thought of the dream" (222). Since the cross is not explicitly mentioned as part of Antonapoulos's accessories or clothing in the dream, one can only deduce that the cross reminded him of the dream because it was the object Antonapoulos held in his hand, the thing that "fascinated him."

in turn, are also gazing elsewhere, distancing themselves farther with each home-made god.

These home-made gods are not worthy of worship because a home-made god is, by definition, self-constructed and thus cannot be anything greater than the individual self. Instead, it simply reflects the self. All of the “idols” the characters create are deaf, allowing them, as Biff notes, to ascribe “all the qualities they wanted” their worship object to have (232). The narrator also notes that “each man described the mute as he wished him to be” (223). Consequently, Mick believes that Singer understands everything she tells him about music while Copeland and Blount believe Singer agrees with all of their political beliefs. Singer cannot speak to tell them differently, so they believe he understands everything about them because they have projected all their own qualities upon him: in other words, they make Singer in their own image. Likewise, Singer makes Antonapoulos in his own image. When he speaks to Antonapoulos, he sees in the eyes of his friend “the little rectangled pictures of himself that he had watched a thousand times” (220). He even admits he does not know “just how much his friend understood,” but he concludes “it did not matter” since it is easier to create what one wants from a blank canvas (5). Singer and the other three look into the eyes of their home-made god and see only themselves. They

construct an idol, and their idols are only their own selves, slightly deformed, looking right back to their origins.

What *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and the rest of McCullers's work suggest, then, is the need for something beyond the self to define the self properly. The themes McCullers frequently repeats—subjective truth, loneliness and alienation, restlessness, self-projection—all represent problems of idolatry. An idol is nothing more than a constructed god which, as she has repeatedly shown in her work, cannot save the self because it is even smaller than the self. McCullers's characters search for something greater than themselves to redeem and fulfill them, yet all they find is an even more limited version of themselves. Since they believe their own truth and construct their own gods, they make in their hearts, as John Calvin said, "a factory of idols" (108).

What may offer them the transcendence they seek is the icon rather than the idol. An icon unites all of McCullers's characters' disparate desires and characteristics and shows how, through the right image, their restlessness and hunger, as well as their desire for order, identity, and community, could perhaps be resolved.

Christian Icons

One of the starkest visual representations of the Christian faith is the icon. Since Christ is an icon of God that also participates fully in the being of God, so

too do visual icons participate in who or what they represent. Consequently, to venerate an icon is not to venerate a piece of artwork, but to venerate that which is signified. As Basil of Caesarea writes, "The honor paid to the image passes over to the prototype" (Ayer 693). The icon thus leads one away from the self, toward the source of truth and redemption it depicts.

Jean-Luc Marion describes the important differences between idols and icons in *God Without Being*. He explains that an idol acts as a mirror and cannot point to anything beyond the idol. An idol cannot raise the gaze of the one who is looking at it because it is essentially a "reflection of the individual" (27). Or, as Feuerbach notes, it is "man who is the original model of his idol" (qtd in Marion 30). An idol cannot exist outside the gazer's perception of it because it is defined by the worshiper. Hence, the worshiper becomes higher than that which is worshiped. An idol can never lead its worshiper to see beyond his or her own gaze. An icon, on the other hand, "summons the gaze to surpass itself," to see the invisible made visible (Marion 18). An icon does not have its source in the person who is looking at it, but it "comes to us from elsewhere," from an "origin without original" (20-1). Icons do not reflect the person looking at them but instead transform the person into the "visible mirror of the invisible" (22), signaling that the gazer now becomes the object of the transcendent gaze. An idol leads only to the self, to what McCullers would dub "loneliness." The icon,

on the other hand, transforms the person who is gazing at it and welcomes one into a true connection to “something larger and more powerful than the weak, lonely self.”

An icon is a true connection because it manages to order permanently the soul and to perfect us. St. Dionysius argues that in gazing at an icon, “all that was disorder [...] becomes order; what was without form acquires form, and this life [...] becomes fully illumined by light” (qtd in Oupensky and Lossky 34). Or, as Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky say, “Every manifestation of human nature acquires meaning, becomes illumined, finds its true place and significance. Thus it is precisely in the icon that all human feelings, thoughts and actions, as well as the body itself, are given their full value” (39). As these theologians suggest, an icon acts as the “assembly line for the soul” the old man in “A Tree • A Rock • A Cloud” desires.

In focusing one’s eyes on the image, the gazer also discovers a focal point for one’s life: Christ, who in the incarnation becomes the image of God, shows us how to live as beings created in the image of God. The same Greek word we use for icons, *eikon*, is used in the Septuagint to describe man’s creation in the image of God and in Paul’s description of Christ as the image of the invisible God in Colossians (Baggley 1). Since Christ is the focal point to order one’s life, he is, as John Baggley points out, often in the center of icons that depict multiple

people; Christ draws the gazer's eye to him in a depiction of the "harmony and balance" of the man in whom Colossians 1:17 says "all things hold together" (80). The icon centers its beholder because it leads the gazer to the centering effect of Christ. It provides a cure for the restlessness so many of McCullers's characters experience because the harmony, balance, and centering of the icon (and thus, of Christ) lead, as St. John Climacus says, to a "stillness" offered to those who have "arrived at the very centre of the mysteries" (Baggley 116).

Icons inscribe sacred meaning even to the physical distortions that are so characteristic in McCullers's work. Many of her characters are dubbed "freaks," and several have physical deformities or abnormalities. In McCullers, these abnormalities are part of the "proof" that God had "withdrawn His hand [...] too soon."¹⁷ In icons, distorted bodies are not representative of God's negligence but of God's completed and fulfilled work. Saints are often portrayed with exaggerated heads, disproportionate eyes, and a hunched back. These physical "deformities" are not flaws, but are representative of God's work in their lives,

¹⁷ Alice Hamilton, for instance, argues that in McCullers, even when "bodies are not freakish, souls are." Consequently, since souls "have colours and shapes like bodies," they are "so marked that they give the impression of abnormality even in a normal body" (216). McCullers is drawn to the "freakish," and icons provide a helpful counter to the negative way distorted bodies are usually viewed. In icons, the soul is shaped toward perfection, so that the "bodily distortions" in an icon are not marks of shame, but grace. McCullers even makes the connection to the wonderful strangeness of icons in *The Member of the Wedding*, where Frankie admits she likes the "touch of strangeness" in her new friend, Mary, who was a Catholic and said to worship "graven images" (389). Icons accept and embrace "strangeness" and give a "freak" like Frankie a community of "we" to help her understand her "me."

so that an exaggerated head symbolizes the depths of divine knowledge one has attained, large eyes the ability to focus on the spiritual rather than the material, and a hunchback the mark of true humility. Icons extol the abnormal and the strange as the ideal because the lives they depict are otherworldly and divine. Icons both defy the idea of needing to belong as well as invite the gazer into the state of complete belonging. They instruct the gazer to move beyond the material and not concern themselves about belonging to the world. Instead, icons invite the beholder to a spiritual life and the eternal communion of believers.

The icon leads gazers to a true understanding of the “we of me” that welcomes and affirms them. While community in McCullers generally fails the individual and reinscribes their loneliness, an icon is intrinsically welcoming and inviting. As John Baggley points out, the “essence” of an icon is to “establish a communion between the event or persons represented in the icon and those who stand before it” (81). Consequently, the icon makes the beholder feel “essential to the completion of the icon” (81). Since icons are painted with reverse perspective, so that the lines of the icon converge at the beholder, the icon opens up toward the gazer. In this way, it invites the gazer into the community and the story it tells. It gives the beholder an important role and a place within a narrative that shares a communal truth.

In offering its gazers a focal point, a community, and a place of respite and belonging, icons can help resolve the question of identity. Beholders are able to attach themselves to the “something larger and more powerful” than the self and therefore finally understand the self. Rowan Williams explains that icons are what bring us “face to face with Jesus,” and it is “there and only there,” that “we find who we are” (78). Since “we have been created to mirror [Christ’s] life” but have frequently turned away (often toward idols), beholding an icon allows us to “look at him looking at us, and try to understand that as he looks at us he looks at the Father. [...] When we look at him looking at us, we see both what we were made to be, bearers of the divine image and likeness, and what we have made of ourselves” (79). The icon thus helps the gazer to see, finally, not the subjective truth, but the Source of Truth, and in so doing, the beholder finally understands the truth of the self.

McCullers’s work therefore contains a strong testimony about the problems of idolatry. Her texts critique the self-made idols that have been constructed to fill the hole left by God’s absence, but they also remind the Church to separate its idols and icons, so that it, also, does not create false gods. Both McCullers and her characters had a deep desire to believe, but they could not find the transcendent image they sought in the Christianity they experienced.

It was instead often exclusionary, oppressive, and racist.¹⁸ McCullers's texts therefore bear an important reminder that believers should strive to be the true image of God, not a distortion that is really their own image.

McCullers's characters rely on their idols to try to fulfill "this real want" they "did not know," the want that gave them a feeling that "was a whole lot worse than being hungry for any dinner, yet it was like that" (52). Idols, however, are icons stripped of transcendence, so no matter how hard the characters try, their "real want" to find, in idols, something larger than themselves will go unfulfilled. Their home-made gods do not reflect anything more than a mirror could and thus cannot rescue the heart from its lonely hunt for transcendence.

¹⁸ Copeland, for instance, believes that Christianity does not confront the issue of oppression or racism nearly enough. He grows very frustrated with members of the black community who are Christians because they, like his daughter, Portia, are very complacent and rather unwilling to fight against injustice.

CHAPTER FIVE

“A Ritual for Being Born Twice”: Baptism and the Eucharist in Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath frequently admitted that Christianity appealed to her, but that she could not abide by its doctrines. After reading the book of Job, for instance, Plath jotted down a note in her journal that shows her interest in religious symbols and ideas, even as she denies their reality: “Shall read the Bible: symbolic meaning, even though the belief in a moral God-structured universe not there. Live As If it were? A great device” (*Journals*, 462). Her desire to find meaning in Christianity’s components without belief in its entirety typifies Plath’s relationship with religion. Plath is drawn to Christianity’s all-encompassing narrative that provides meaning for its believers, its formational quality, and its rituals, yet she ultimately rejects the Christian religion as intellectually unfeasible.

Plath, more than any other author in this study, personally expresses the desire to invoke Christian forms without belief in their source. And, because Plath’s own life has so informed both her own work and critics’ views of her, an examination of her personal beliefs builds a foundation for better understanding her poetry and fiction. Studying her beliefs will be particularly helpful in understanding how Plath’s use of baptism and the Eucharist, two Christian

rituals she frequently invokes and references, unifies and illuminates many of Plath's themes, especially the fragmented self, the body, and rebirth.

Plath believed in the "religion" of humanism rather than in any traditional religion. While Jennifer Holden-Kirwan argues that Plath did not outright reject the Christian God and instead held a tentative belief in him, Luke Ferretter emphatically argues that Plath had a "desire for but firm unbelief in God" and is clearly a "poet of the death of God" ("What Girl," 103, 113). Her unbelief in God is well-documented in her journals, as is her belief in humanism. Salvation, she says, is no longer connected to religion but is instead to "help others [...]. To keep love of life, no matter what, and give to others. Generously" (*Journals*, 202). What Plath believes in, then, is humankind's ability to save itself; each person is responsible for her own life and for contributing to the overall good. Since there is "No God," Plath says her "faith" is "in battering out a good life" (269). "Battering" is not an easy task, but signifies the continual, strenuous work of creating meaning for one's life, no matter how arduous the process. Though this method is not easy, for Plath, it is all that remains for those who cannot feasibly believe in God.

Since "battering out a good life" is such a difficult task, Plath recognizes the appeal of religion and even occasionally turns to it, but she ultimately considers religion to be a too-easy escape from the responsibility of finding

meaning for oneself. She addresses prayer-like journal entries to “God, whom I invoke without belief,” and she often talks to what she deems to be an empty sky (39). When she nears the threshold of belief, she quickly chastises herself for being weak. Her journals act as a witness to her internal struggles with faith: “Believe in some beneficent force beyond your own limited self. God, god, god: where are you? I want you, need you: the belief in you and love and mankind. You must not seek escape like this. You must think” (187). Here, Plath begins to address God in genuine prayer, but she corrects herself and instead resumes her typical journal style. Her desire for God is her desire to find “something to cling to for a center of calm” (136), but since she never allows herself to fully believe and enter into the comprehensive narrative of Christianity, she instead concludes, with many other postmodern writers, that “the center does not hold” (Plath, *Journals*, 149).

Plath charges people with the self-responsibility to create their own center and to make a meaningful life for themselves while she simultaneously despairs over how daunting and difficult a task it is. Plath bewails the “grimness of atheism” and its inherent self-accountability, wherein she recognizes the isolation of believing that “only I can choose, and only I am responsible” (102). She wonders how she might “justify” herself and her “bold, brave humanitarian faith” when her “world falls apart, crumbles” (149). Without an “integrating

force," she feels fearful and "hollow," unable to understand herself or her role in the world (149). She admits, "I do not know who I am, where I am going," but knows she is "the one who has to decide the answers to these hideous questions" (149), prompting her to want to free herself from her "humanitarian faith" and surrender the isolating responsibility of shaping her own identity. She wishes to go "anywhere anywhere, where the burden, the terrifying hellish weight of self-responsibility and self-judgment is lifted" (150). Yet as much as she desires this surrender, she will not allow herself to "give up" and indulge in the escape of religion. Her studies of St. Therese reveal the tension she feels between admiring Christianity and considering the faith to be a weakness. After reading Therese, she reflects that "it's a hell of a responsibility to be yourself. It's much easier to be somebody else or nobody at all. Or to give your soul to god [sic] like St. Therese and say: the one thing I fear is doing my own will. Do it for me God" (435). She believes so strongly in this personal responsibility that she decides that even if it means she "will never integrate [her] life, never have purpose, meaning," she will maintain that "it is [her] own mess" and will refuse outside help (151). Consequently, Plath goes on "serving [her religion], which is that of humanism, and a belief in the potential of each man to learn and love and grow" (*Letters*, 163), no matter how challenging, isolating, and dissatisfying she finds it.

Plath's spiritual journey is particularly compelling because she finds both Christianity and other alternatives false. Christianity is beautiful and appealing to her, but she feels it lacks substance. Influenced by Freud and other intellectuals who took a similar position on Christianity, Plath viewed the faith as a weakness and self-deception. Yet she ultimately cannot find a satisfying replacement either. Thus, though Plath is primarily considered as a writer concerned with gender identity, she is also a writer greatly affected by religion and identity, and her depiction of fragmented selves is not just due to the growing advertisement culture or strict gender roles, but also to a searching quest for an elusive center that cannot be found. That she seeks some kind of center—a frame with which to understand life—is particularly evident in her frequent use of ritual, particularly rituals that affirm identity and the body and are the means of rebirth, transcendence, unification, and an escape from fragmentation.

Fractured Identities and the Quest for Rebirth, Transcendence, and Unification

The question of identity is one of the most significant themes in Plath's works, verified by the prevalence of criticism on this issue. Several critics believe that Plath's personal concerns and questions about identity affect her work. Consequently, some take a psychoanalytical approach, arguing that understanding Plath's mental state is imperative for understanding her work.

Critics such as Edward Butscher, David Holbrook, Murray M. Schwartz, and Christopher Bollas consider how Plath's familial and romantic relationships and her mental illnesses illuminate her writing. Jeremy Hawthorn takes a psychoanalytical approach, but argues that fractures in characters' identities are caused by society rather than the individual's personality. This supports several feminists' arguments. Caroline Smith, for example, argues that the magazines for which Plath wrote confuse their messages, simultaneously encouraging "women to navigate beyond the private sphere of the home while limiting those options by simultaneously discouraging that navigation" (4). This divide causes a confusion of purpose and self. Women must suppress the "real self" in order to become the "expected" self. Marjorie Perloff analyzes *The Bell Jar* through this lens; she sees the "starting point" of the novel as "the attempt to heal the fracture between inner self and false-self," so eventually a "real and viable identity can come into existence" (509). Diane Bonds points out an important distinction in studies of the self in Plath, however, when she critiques the constant use of the "separate" self. She argues that our very definition of the self is problematic, and that an ideal of a self "uncontaminated by others" denies the "relationality of the self" (50). *The Bell Jar* suggests that Esther is both "alienated and fragmented," that she desires "relatedness with others" and a "reconnection" to the whole (50). Bonds comes closest to locating the heart of Plath's identity concerns with her

identification of the “double bind” in Plath’s work. Bonds argues that the self is either “presumed to be autonomous and whole, entire to itself and clearly bounded,” or defined “primarily through relationship[s]” to men (61). While Bonds categorizes the bind in gender terms, I believe that, even without the gender issue, a double bind of the fractured self would still occur.

The fractured self is not caused solely by gender roles but also from the center that Plath desires but cannot find. She admits that her humanist commitment to finding meaning for herself pulls her in different directions. She confesses to feeling like a “blind girl playing with a slide-ruler of values” and wants something outside of her to “aid [her] in understanding [her]self” (*Journals*, 151). But since Plath considers seeking outside help to be an escape from self-responsibility, she decides, instead, that “masks are the order of the day” to “cultivate the illusion” that she is not in despair (151). She therefore splits herself from her real feelings and puts on a false identity. Subsequently, even if she does manage to eschew outside help and find a satisfactory framework with which to live, she will still feel false: “I, too, will find a set of beliefs, of standards to live by, yet the very satisfaction of finding them will be marred by the fact that I have reached the ultimate in shallow, two-dimensional living—a set of values” (31). Plath struggles with choosing her “set of values”

because she knows that whatever she chooses would not encompass the totality of her life, and that she may be alone in whatever standards she decides upon.

Her difficulties in choosing this set of standards signify how making meaning for oneself can lead to the isolation and fragmentation of the self. Individually “battering out” a meaningful life makes one feel alone in the quest for purpose, and Plath affirms this with an interjection of “God, but life is loneliness” (31). Choosing one thing means eliminating others, and it also means choosing something that others may not choose. There is not a sense of community in discerning values and purpose; instead, there is the heavy burden of self-responsibility and the continual self-questioning of whether one made the right choice.

Consequently, Plath knows that finding a set of standards or beliefs is necessary for ordering her life even as she acknowledges that whatever she chooses will fail her. She believes that any ordering center will be a false construct: “If I am to express what I am, I must have a standard of life, a jumping-off place, a technique—to make arbitrary and temporary organization of my own personal and pathetic little chaos. I am just beginning to realize how false and provincial that standard, or jumping-off place, must be. That is what is so hard for me to face” (45). Plath therefore believes that finding a center, a “jumping-off place,” is the only means of achieving self-understanding,

establishing a sense of identity, and finding purpose, but she also believes that finding that center will isolate her and fracture her identity. Plath therefore finds herself in a double bind with no conceivable solution to this identity problem.

The issue of the double bind in Plath is particularly apparent in *The Bell Jar*, where Esther continually struggles with her inability to reconcile different parts of herself. Esther's fig tree vision captures the panic she feels over being pulled in too many directions. In her vision, she sees one fig as a husband, home, and children, another as a poet, another a professor, another an editor, and others with various other "lives" she could choose. Instead of choosing a particular fig, Esther envisions herself sitting at the bottom of the tree, unable to decide which fig she wants. She knows that "choosing one meant losing all the rest," and she is so paralyzed by the decision that figs begin to fall off the tree, overripe and past their plucking time (*Bell Jar* 91). While the fig tree vision emblemizes the choice women once had to make between career and marriage, a choice that haunted and troubled Plath because she always wanted both, the fig tree connotes more than just the marriage versus career choice. Esther knows she must choose a path and direct her life toward something, but she knows that whatever path she takes, part of her will always wish she had chosen some other fig. The vastness of the options—along with the inability to do all of them at once—overwhelms Esther. A part of her suits each fig in a different way, but no

fig can fully encapsulate her purpose or give her life all possible meaning. She seems, instead, to sample metaphoric bites of each. But rather than make her feel fulfilled, trying many figs further fractures her as she is torn between the different parts of herself.

Esther's fluctuating aliases and identities and the dismemberment imagery in the novel further emphasizes Esther's sense of fragmentation from herself. She frequently "tries on" new personalities and identities. When she goes out with Doreen, she becomes Elly Higgenbottom so convincingly that Doreen still calls out "Elly" the next morning, as if Esther "had a split personality or something" (25). To further highlight her split personality, Esther sees a varying range of faces in the mirror—Indian, Chinese, etc—that reflect how dissociated she is.

Esther's isolation from others and lack of attachment to her self is also symbolized in the images of shrinking and dismemberment that are so prevalent in the novel. Within the first three chapters, she frequently envisions a cadaver's head floating about her breakfast plate (2), feels herself "melting into the shadows like the negative of a person" (11), thinks of a baby pickled in a lab jar (15), sees various stuffed animal heads at a man's apartment (17), starts "shrinking to a small black dot" (20), feels "like a hole in the ground" (20), considers Doreen's vomit an "ugly, concrete testimony to [her] own dirty nature"

(27), and is “unmasked” by her boss, her falseness revealed (35).¹ These descriptions signal both the reduction and the fracturing of Esther’s sense of identity. As she is pulled in multiple directions, she feels small and limited, as if she were a severed head or an undeveloped baby, and she wears a metaphorical mask so that others will not see her in full, particularly the parts of her that she believes resemble Doreen’s vomit.

This isolation and self-fracturing are not just about gender. The choice between marriage and career is clearly there, but so is the choice between multiple kinds of careers, or even where to live.² Esther is choosing a purpose—a *telos* for her life—and that is what truly paralyzes her. As evidenced in the above discussion of her journals, Plath feared choosing any sort of standard to act as the center of her life, and choosing a path for one’s life is strongly reliant on which center one has chosen. Esther fears choosing a fig because she does not

¹ Other critics have noted Plath’s use of dismemberment. Susan Bohandy notes how Lady Lazarus’s body is “alienated from her mind or soul” and “is in fragments,” a state that is echoed in the “choppy three-lined stanzas” Plath uses (17). Marilyn Boyer writes about the “disabled female body” in *The Bell Jar*, pointing out the many times Esther’s body is broken and separated from her self throughout the novel, Marjorie Perloff believes Esther undergoes a continual “disembodiment” as she sees the various images in the mirror and grows more and more alienated from herself, and Diane Bonds asserts my position in claiming that the “pervasive imagery of dismemberment” in the first half of the novel conveys “Esther’s “alienation and fragmentation” (50).

² Esther feels uneasy about making a choice between living in the country and the city, admitting that she wants “two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time” (111). Her admittance of this paradox signals that it is not just gender boundaries that plague Esther. She wants many things at the same time and struggles to make choices that even gender would not affect.

yet know (to employ an extension of the metaphor) what kind of dish the fig will be part of. She is unsure of which direction she wants her life to go and thus does not know which branch points that way. A fig, as just a fig, will not be satisfying for very long, but as part of a bigger meal, it may be able to fully satisfy her. The different figs are merely fragments of life that she can choose, and she has not yet figured out the whole she wants her life to be.

In her journals, Plath verifies how important “the whole” is to identity formation. She struggles to believe that she is “a whole person, not merely a knot of nerves, without identity” (26). There is “no sun,” no center around which her world can circle, and she thus feels no sense of affirmation or rest, “only continual motion” as she is “torn in different directions, pulled thin, taut against horizons too distant for [her] to reach” (27). While discussing her writing, she re-emphasizes the importance of a center in joining varying fragments. She decides “it does no good to jot down fragments of life and conversation, for alone they are disjointed and meaningless. It is only when these bits are woven into an artistic whole, with a frame of reference, that they become meaning-ful and worthy of more than a cursory glance” (83). Plath’s and Esther’s despair therefore comes not just from having to choose from among different “figs,” but also from having no “whole” or “frame of reference” with which to make that choice.

Plath depicts the apparent irreconcilable tension between the desire for wholeness and the fragmented self. She suggests that once one becomes aware of selfhood and feels autonomous, she will also feel isolated and fragmented from the world, never able to achieve a sense of unity again. In her essay, "Ocean 1212-W," she remembers the "awful birthday of otherness," the day she realized that she was an "I," something different and distinguished. She says she noticed "coldly and soberly, the separateness of everything," that "I am I. That stone is a stone" (*JP*, 24). She then knew her "beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over" (24). For Plath, autonomy is the beginning of fragmentation and separation, as an awareness of the self also means an awareness of being alone in the world, separated from everything else. She suggests that after becoming separated from a beautiful fusion with the world, the self also becomes distanced and separated from itself. Life becomes a series of fragments that lack a unifying force, and the self is torn into following all these "chaotic fragments" without being able to weave them into a whole and thus provide them with meaning. All these fragments become false selves that hide and distort one's true identity, so that one chases the fragments and feels more and more distanced from one's real self.

The split between the real self and the false self is important in Plath, and several critics have pointed out the distinction Plath makes between these two

kinds of selves in her work. Garry Leonard suggests that the advertisement culture commodifies the self by convincing a woman that her sense of worth depends on which products she consumes. Eventually, she is torn apart by the different claims, unsure about which will “make” her into that which she wants to—or feels she should—be. Luke Ferretter also analyzes the magazine culture in which Plath was engulfed, by considering how her themes echo advertisement headlines, such as a product that claims it can release a “delightful second self” and help the user discover that “fascinating stranger—your inner self” (*Fiction*, 168). He argues that Plath depicts this advertising culture, asserting that “many of Plath’s women are postmodern characters, whose identity endlessly recedes in layer after layer of image and identification, without a clearly distinguishable original over which these images are laid” (166). Consequently, Ferretter believes that much of Plath’s work depicts a “journey through false appearances that make up the image of oneself to the hidden, true self beneath,” a journey that is also the “journey from filth to purity” (81). Judith Kroll studies the split-self phenomenon the most extensively. She says that Plath depicts a “split” of the “false and true selves” (10), a split that Plath, in her poetry, tries to transcend. The false self “can be overcome only by dying,” a death that is necessary in order to “release the true self and establish an authentic existence” (13). Marjorie Perloff looks at this issue particularly in *The Bell Jar*. She believes that the

fundamental purpose of the novel is to weigh how to “heal the fracture” between the false selves and the real selves. The false self, for Perloff, is the mask Esther wears in order to be socially accepted, but the more she wears it, the more it starts to crumble.

As both Kroll and Perloff conclude, Plath proposes rebirth as the means to destroy the false, fragmented self and find the authentic, true self. She writes in her journals that sometimes, all we can do is “put away the fragments left, and begin the cycle of growth over and over again, birth and death, birth and death” (178-9). Death may thus be the only way to stop the fragmentation and be reborn into a sense of wholeness.

Plath frequently employs this cycle of the interrelationship of death and rebirth in her poetry and fiction. In “Stopped Dead,” the poet asks if there is “A squeal of brakes./ Or is it a birth cry?,” connoting that rebirth sequentially follows death (*CP*, 203). The fragmented selves die while a pure, whole, and complete self is reborn. The other selves are so inconsequential to the “real” self that they are easily shed. In “Fever 103,” the speaker is seemingly able to transcend the pain of dying and sees her “selves dissolving, old whore petticoats” (232). Similarly, in “Ariel,” the speaker “unpeels” and becomes a “white Godiva” in her self-death (239), in “Lady Lazarus,” she can “peel off the napkin” of her skin to arise more powerful and pure out of her ashes (244), in

“Face Lift,” her skin “peels away easy as paper” in order to “grow backward” and allow her to give birth to herself (156), and in “Widow,” she steps “from this skin of old bandages, boredoms, old faces” to become “pure as a baby” (249). The mention of plural “selves” and the use of “peeling” connote a multiplicity and layering of false selves. There is not one self, but many, and to achieve wholeness and unity, all the false selves must, like a snake’s skin, be shed, since they are merely a hollow shell of the real self.³ Death is therefore not final, but regenerative and purifying.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther also seeks death in order to shed her fragmented, false selves and be born anew. She sees herself as “blank and stopped as a dead baby” and seeks some sort of rebirth in all her suicide attempts (282). When she tries to cut her wrists, she admits she is not necessarily trying to kill her body or even herself, but something in her: “It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn’t in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but something else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at” (176). Since Esther does not know who she is and tires of seeing a different face every time she looks in the mirror, she tries to kill the fragmented, false self so that she will be whole,

³ Luke Ferretter compares Plath’s understanding of the self to Virginia Woolf, particularly pointing out Jess Greenwood’s reflection on identity, where she describes leaving a “kind of dead shell or chrysalis of yourself,” a description that aptly fits Plath’s imagery of the shed selves (*Fiction*, 18).

purified, and new.⁴ This goal is particularly evident in her nearly successful suicide attempt. After taking several sleeping pills in the crawlspace of her home, Esther's return to consciousness resembles the birthing process. What she experienced "was completely dark," and a "hard weight smashed against [her] cheek" as she "was being transported at enormous speed down a tunnel into the earth" (203), descriptions intended to echo an infant's trip down the birth canal. Instead of symbolically killing off a false identity by throwing out a suitcase of clothing, as she does earlier in the novel, Esther tries physically to kill that "deeper" part of her identity through suicide. She can therefore be reborn seemingly without this false self and find a sense of peace and wholeness.

Esther's attempts at rebirth, however, are less revelatory and more ambiguous than many of Plath's poems. Even after her "birth" scene, she does not attain the rebirth she seeks, and she tells her mother that things are "the same" (206). The novel also ends ambiguously, with Esther "scared to death" that "somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, [would] descend again" (286, 90). As she awaits the psychological review that will decide whether she is considered mentally healthy enough to leave the hospital, she wishes for some kind of ritual that would ease her transition into another try at

⁴ David John Wood affirms this interpretation, suggesting that Esther's attempt to kill what is "more secret" in herself does not suggest that Esther dislikes herself, but only what "she has become," so that she seeks "personal transformation, not "physical death" (50).

life: “there ought [...] to be a ritual for being born twice—patched, retreaded and approved for the road” (290). The language here reveals several question marks for Esther’s future. She wishes for a ritual, meaning she has not found one and thus, feels slightly incomplete. And, rather than being new and pure, Esther considers herself “patched” and “retreaded,” signaling that she is merely “fixed” rather than reborn. A patch, as opposed to something new, carries the connotation that it may soon be broken again, that the original problem has not necessarily been removed but has merely been altered.⁵ Thus, while Plath’s poetry depicts some success stories in the desire for rebirth, *The Bell Jar* evaluates the longer-term, post-birthing effects and questions whether a kind of self rebirth

⁵ Critics are split on the ending of the novel. A few deem it as a positive end. E. Miller Budick says that Esther does achieve a “self-birth,” though she is “born twice,” not “born anew.” She sees the language of being “retreaded” as an admittance that Esther must “wed” herself to the male world but can also “marry herself to her own female self” at the same time (883). Marjorie Perloff believes that there is a resolution in Esther entering a “new phase” after freeing Bobby from the snow drift. She suggests that Esther discovers it is best “simply to be oneself,” a realization that allows the bell jar to lift (521). Linda Wager-Martin also interprets the ending as “thoroughly positive” for Esther, at peace with herself “as a flesh and blood person” (84). However, as Diane Bonds, Garry Leonard, and Luke Ferretter suggest, a completely positive interpretation of the ending negates some the questions and uncertainty in the text. Bonds finds it surprising that other critics ascribe a positive redemption to Esther, saying that the tire image suggests a utilitarian object that can easily be disposed, repaired, or replaced, and is therefore emblematic of Buddy’s mother’s kitchen mat and “domestic servitude” (54). She also believes that Esther does not arrive at an “authentic self” but is even more isolated since she has separated both from people who represent the patriarchy (men, her mother, Dodo) and those who exemplify a different kind of womanhood (like Joan). Leonard interprets Esther’s being “approved for the road” as her commoditization: she has been “packaged” anew and is therefore ready for re-entry into the “marketplace” (312). Consequently, Esther is not healed, but simply has been reborn as a “commodity” (312). Ferretter provides the most convincing evidence for an ambiguous ending by pointing out that Plath originally wrote a coda to the novel that depicted Esther’s life after the hospital but chose not to include it, a decision clearly meant to emphasize the “question marks with which her story ends” (*Fiction*, 85).

can fully succeed. Killing off false selves may feel powerful and freeing at first, but *The Bell Jar* suggests that the kind of rebirth Plath's poetic personas and fictional characters seek may be nothing more than a temporary patch for one's problems.

One of the possible hindrances in Esther's rebirth is her inability to be rebirthed into a new body. Susan Bohandy argues that in Plath, self-definition "begins with the human body," so that there "is no 'self' unrelated to the body" (1). And since, as Diane Bonds suggests, the second half of the novel conveys a "symbolic rebirth" rather than a physical one, the self is not, then, fully reborn or re-defined (50). Her identity is still defined by the same body and thus is still the fragmented, dismembered body she envisions of herself in the first half of the novel. For true rebirth, an entirely new body, free from the split self and completely unified in itself and to the world, is required. Or, as Judith Kroll suggests, since the cycle of rebirth simply keeps creating a new self, the only way to actually surpass the false self is to transcend it. Kroll believes that Plath moves away from a narrative of the mythic rebirth, which depicts physical death and reincarnation, toward a rebirth that is an "absolute transcendence of self" (172). Since the "cause of suffering is the self" for Plath, Kroll suggests that transcendence moves beyond the self, so that nothing is left to be reborn (177).

This transcendence may leave behind the self, but it does not mean leaving behind the body completely. Plath does not depict a transcendence that is solely spiritual, disembodied, or dissolves any sense of identity because that would be counter to Plath's emphasis on the relationship between matter, the body, and identity. She says in her journals that she is a "matter worshipper," that truth "is matter, not spirit," because "something IS" (120). Humans, she says, cannot see that truth fully because everyone has personal distortions and interpretations of the truth, causing everyone to "make and re-make our own personal realities" (120-1). Plath believes, then, that there is an "absolute, "whole truth" in matter (122), but that human beings cannot see it absolutely because they are hindered by their own self-distortions.

The body is the form of matter we know most intimately and thus is of greatest importance. Plath so emphasizes matter and the body that she rejects "life after death in a literal sense" primarily because she believes that "if we leave the body behind as we must, we are nothing" (*Journals*, 44). Even in poems like "Lady Lazarus," where the body is completely disintegrated, the new, transcendent form is still embodied and not solely spirit. Lady Lazarus's sense of identity is closely connected to her body, and both are exploited in the poem, with people "eyeing" her "scars" and paying "for a touch/Or a bit of blood/Or a piece of [her] hair or [her] clothes" (*CP*, 246). When she "melts to a shriek," she

becomes “ash, ash,” with no trace of “flesh” or “bone” (246). While Bohandy argues that the speaker’s resurrection is a sign of her transcendence, which she believes suggests that “perfection requires absence of body” in Plath (19), this counters Plath’s emphasis on the material and on the body, for Plath believes that if the body is completely annihilated, so is one’s identity. It also counters the poem, which has the speaker rising “with [her] red hair,” signaling that she is embodied, not a pure spirit (Plath, *CP*, 247). What Plath suggests instead is that perfection is the annihilation of self and the affirmation of the body and identity. The goal is to reach the pure state of form—a body that, as Plath describes of matter, simply “IS”; this state participates in the “absolute” without the self-distortion that “fragments” this “whole truth” (*Journals* 120). The embodied self is a sponge that soaks up fragments of the world, creating itself to be a “rubber stamp,” an “assimilation of various things” (*Journals* 47). But the selfless body is able to “permeate the matter of this world” (201), since it is at one with it and no longer needs to create or interpret reality but can simply live in it. Identity is not lost, but the sense of isolated autonomy has been shed so that one feels united, whole, and complete.

Though Plath frequently refers to the Lethe and to the newborn baby in her depictions of rebirth, she also suggests that true rebirth—transcendence—is not a forgetfulness or a complete divorce from the past but is instead, as Kroll

suggests, similar to a religious conversion, wherein the past is not completely forgotten or discarded but “leads into and so completes itself in transcendence” (171), so that the body and its past have not been discarded but freed from constraints and the enslavement to the self. The past and body, in other words, should not be completely rejected, but redeemed and transformed. In *The Bell Jar*, for instance, Esther’s mother suggests that they treat Esther’s suicide attempt as a “bad dream” (282). Esther ponders if she should, as her mother suggests, allow forgetfulness to “numb and cover” her experiences, yet she concludes that “they were part of [her],” that they made up her “landscape” (282). She wants to grow, move beyond, and transcend those experiences, but she also does not want to lose them because doing so would once again fragment part of her identity. Consequently, a true rebirth, for Plath, means that the body and its experiences are not abandoned but brought into the fullness of being which transcends time and coalesces into the “beautiful fusion” Plath seeks (“Oceans,” *JP*, 24).

Nevertheless, as evidenced in the end of *The Bell Jar*, Esther cannot experience the rebirth that affirms her body, remembers and redeems her past, transcends the fragmented self, and brings her into a “fusion” with the world. Instead, all she is left with are “question marks” (290). She seeks a “ritual for being born twice” (290), a ritual that will not just signal her re-entrance into society but actually give her the rebirth she seeks. Two rituals present in Plath’s

fiction and poetry, baptism and the Eucharist, are rituals that, traditionally, effect the death of the fragmented self so that the true self can be born, affirm the body and one's identity, remember and redeem the past, and bring one into a sense of fusion with oneself, one's community and the world. But in Plath, these rituals no longer work. Instead, they become ineffectual or even dangerous.

The Eucharist and Baptism in Plath

One of Plath's most recurrent themes is that of rebirth, which, when coupled with her frequent use of water and her desire for transcendence and wholeness, evokes Christian baptism. This is particularly evident in *The Bell Jar*, wherein Esther continually tries to heal her fragmented selfhood through death, rebirth, and water. Esther feels so distanced from herself that her sense of identity is either distorted or void. She sees other faces in the mirror, calls herself by other names,⁶ is writing about doubles for her college thesis, cannot choose a course for her life (as evidenced in the fig tree story and her conflicting desire to live in both the city and country), and feels "empty," "used up," "unmasked," and like a "negative of a person," a "hole in the ground," and a "ventriloquist's dummy" (3, 22, 35, 11, 20, 120). She tries to shed those feelings by starting anew,

⁶ Esther seems not only to confuse Doreen about whether she is Elly or Esther, but herself. When she mentions moving to Chicago, she says that there, people "would take [her] for what [she] was": "Elly Higginbottom, the orphan" (157). Esther here begins to identify herself more with her created persona than her own self, since she now views Elly, not Esther, as really "what [she] was."

tossing her clothes out the window “like a loved one’s ashes” in an attempt to kill part of her self when she leaves New York (132). However, her symbolic gesture of death does not work, and Esther goes home depressed and seeking a more literal death.

Esther seems to believe both that she has already died but also has never been fully born. She lives her life both seeking death and already living it. Symbols of death permeate her writing, especially that of tombstones: Esther feels like a trophy on a mantel “with a date engraved on it like the date on a tombstone” (90), lets a mattress fall across her “like a tombstone” (146), puts flowers in a basin that feels “as cold as a tomb” (193), and Joan, her double, has “tombstone teeth” (69). The death imagery suggests that Esther already feels dead, which is reinforced by her admission to the pastor that “certain people, like [her], had to live in hell before they died” since they did not believe in God (243).⁷ And in many ways, her life does seem like a hellish afterlife: she is lost in a cycle of despair without any kind of pleasure or conceptualization of regular time. She does not sleep, wash her clothes, or mark any days as separate or distinct. She feels she simply exists without cause or purpose; consequently, she seeks to externally complete the death she already feels inside.

⁷ Plath's belief that we can only judge ourselves and that this world—not any kind of afterlife—is what really matters is also the theme of her 1956 poem, “Dialogue Between Ghost and Priest.” In the poem, a priest confronts a ghost and tells him to go to the afterlife and receive judgment, but the ghost swears to him that “There sits no higher court/Than man's red heart” (*CP* 39).

Esther also feels as if she has never really been born. She is haunted by the babies in the bell jar that she sees, “bottles full of babies that died before they were born” (73). She relates herself to them, seeing herself as “blank and stopped as a dead baby” (282). She feels undeveloped, incomplete, and thus destined to sit “under the same glass bell jar, stewing in [her] own sour air” (222). This is what leads to her feeling like a void or blank: she has not moved beyond the development stage and therefore is but a form stopped before becoming a complete person. She does not have other people to help her grow, develop, and understand herself, but she is simply surrounded only by her “own sour air.” The baby in the bell jar is suspended and unable to grow beyond its fetal stage because it has been disconnected and separated from the source of life: the watery womb. It cannot get the vital requirements for survival and development because it has been abandoned to itself.

Consequently, to triumph over her disjointed self and the suspended bell jar, Esther continually seeks rebirth, a rebirth that will make her feel whole. Yet, as I have shown, Esther’s attempts at rebirth are ambiguous and incomplete since she is still seeking a “ritual for being born twice” that will help her transition from death and stillbirth toward an affirmation of life.

However, Esther seems to instinctively know what this ritual may be: baptism. Esther’s descriptions of the sea and baths are steeped with religious

imagery and signal a type of death and rebirth. Water is associated with death for Esther because her most frequent thoughts of suicide happen when she is in or by water, whether it be the bathtub or the sea. She also describes modern bathtubs as “coffin-shaped” and says that a bath helps her “whenever [she’s] sad [she’s] going to die” (23). She also continually turns to water for rebirth, for a cleansing and healing. A bath gives her new life, a fresh start, and as she takes one, she feels all the dirt and grime of her life “turning into something pure,” so that after her bath, Esther feels as “pure and sweet as a new baby” (24). Water can wash away the pieces of herself that she does not want and allow her to feel reborn, whole, and new.⁸

Infusing water with characteristics that signify death and rebirth evokes Christian baptism. Esther herself even connects her baths to baptism, saying that while she does not “believe in baptism or the waters of Jordan or anything like that,” she feels “about a hot bath the way those religious people feel about holy water” (24).⁹ Esther therefore intuitively feels that water can be a source of purification,

⁸ Water is also very significant because Plath connects it to her childhood. She felt most at one with the world while on the beach as a child, so her desire to get back to water signifies her desire to return to a state of innocence and to recover that “beautiful fusion with the world” she had felt. Her use of baptismal language to describe water still gives it a sacred quality, however, so that it is not just a return but a rescue.

⁹ Garry Leonard relates Plath’s correlation with baths and baptism to the cultural, commodifying language of women’s magazines. He argues that Esther’s description of a bath echoes the rhetoric of a *Mademoiselle* column about bathing that he has found; her language echoes the column’s “devout praise” of the bath and lacks only the list of products and how to use them (316). Though the religious language of the bath may simply be an absorption of

renewal, death and rebirth, but without the religious significance behind it, water purifies only the exterior body.¹⁰

In Plath, baptism is ineffectual because Christianity has become largely ineffectual. Its beliefs do not seem tenable, as evidenced in Esther's desire to become a nun hindered by her reluctance to "know all these catechisms and credos and believe in them, lock, stock and barrel," beliefs for which she has too much "sense" (195). Catechisms and creeds seem arbitrary and unnecessary to her, in part, because her experience of the Church is mostly as a social club. Various members of her family, for instance, have been Methodist, Unitarian, Catholic, and Lutheran, switching denominations not because of beliefs but because of marriages, moves, and deaths. That the Christian Church is mostly a social club and concerned more with social status and exclusivity than beliefs and practice is highlighted even further in Plath's short story, "Mothers." In it, a young woman is welcomed into church even though she outright tells the pastor she could not stomach the Trinity, the Virgin birth, or the like; the pastor informs

cultural language, the prevalence of water and rebirth throughout the novel affirm that the connection with water and religious ritual (particularly baptism) is not just a portrayal of the cultural sacredness of beauty rituals, but depicts the pursuit of the sacred as an escape from the mundane and corrupt in life (as evidenced in Esther's desire, in her depression, to stop doing all routine acts, like change clothes and wash her hair, and in her desire to take baths immediately after being around men that made her feel dirty).

¹⁰ As Chrysostom says, "not all water cures, but the water which has the grace of Christ cures. One is an element, the other a consecration; one an opus, the other an operation" (Begley 117).

her she is welcomed so long as she believes in the efficacy of prayer. Once she joins the church, however, she quickly discovers that it is mostly an excuse for a social club, and that they do not welcome people, including her divorced friend, whom they do not deem suitable. As Tim Kendell points out, the story's combination of the pastor's belief that prayer is enough to justify belief and the church's focus on "social cohesion" rather than trying to help its members "explain the universe" signals that religion is determined more by "convenience" than by a powerful message and practice (Kendall 115). With this view of Christianity, it thus makes sense for Esther to conclude that though Christianity may help prevent her from suicide since it is considered a sin, the trouble with Christianity is that it "didn't take up the whole of your life" (195). If it did not "take up" or transform "the whole" of one's life, then baptism into Christianity would not achieve the kind of rebirth Esther seeks.

Esther thus seeks rebirth not through Christianity but through self-affirmation and through the "God of our age," psychiatry (*Journals*, 151). Her suicide attempts are a way for her to take control of her own rebirth, and she does it as a means to affirm her identity. While she swims in the sea, she tries to drown herself, diving again and again into the water in hopes of tiring herself out. While doing so, she repeats to herself, "I am I am I am," words that clearly

echo the description of God as "I AM" (*Bell Jar* 188).¹¹ Like God's "I AM," which was an expression of God's being and identity, Esther "I am" tries to affirm, in herself, her own being and existence. Yet, at the same time, she seeks to kill herself, negating her own being and even resenting her body as a "stupid cage" housing a mind that had "gone" (189). Esther thus cannot seem to, no matter how hard she tries, completely affirm herself, so that she denies her existence even as she tries to confirm it.

The psychiatrists, too, do not seem to help Esther feel a sense of unity and completeness with herself. After several treatments and the lifting of the bell jar to allow the "circulating air," Esther is still only "practice[ing her] new, normal personality" (269), indicating that there is still a split in her and that she is still putting on masks. This is reinforced in the last page of the novel, where she thinks one of her examiners has a "cadaverous face" and another has eyes she may have seen "over white masks" (290). The last line describes the entire room of people simply as "the eyes and the faces" (290). All of this imagery echoes the imagery from the first few chapters of the novel, when Esther begins her breakdown. There are masks, dismembered parts, and death all present as she is judged by the board of psychiatrist-gods. Consequently, the end chapters of the novel seem not just ambiguous, but highly skeptical as to Esther's recovery.

¹¹ Plath's awareness and use of "I am" as a reference to God is evident in her use in "Johnny Panic," where she calls Johnny Panic the "great I Am" (159).

Even if she is not suicidal anymore, she still feels split and disconnected from herself, a sign that her rebirth and new “god” did not have their intended effects.

Consequently, neither baptism nor a self-birth seem to have any satisfying effects in Plath, and the Eucharist similarly fails. It is not only ineffectual, but it also has become dangerous. Plath’s juxtaposition of eating and death, especially in its frequent combination with rebirth, evokes the Christian practice of eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ. Plath also emphasizes the importance of the body and eating in her poetry so extensively in her work that Tim Kendall argues that “identity is often reduced to a mouth” in her poetry (118).¹² Both Kendall and Kroll agree that the Eucharistic images Plath invokes are far removed from their actual practice. Kendall points out that Plath’s use of the Eucharist does not emphasize unification but brutality, as Plath often focuses on graphic images and the butchery of the practice (119). Kroll, likewise, says that Christ’s sacrifice has been reduced to a toy; his “importance is empty, dead,

¹² While I have only concentrated on the poems that specifically invoke the Eucharist in this chapter, the prevalence of eating in her poetry shows how important it was to her. Often, eating in these other poems are similar to what happens with the Eucharist in her poetry: it is a danger, a power-grab, or, at times, a means of revenge or fighting back. She especially invokes eating imagery in her 1956 poems, particularly “Pursuit,” where a panther “compels a total sacrifice” and eats all of her without satisfaction, “The Glutton,” which again depicts a hunger that cannot be sated, “Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper,” which chronicles a “ritual” of the table and the sacrifice of the food, “The Shrike,” where an envious bride desires to “spike and suck out/Last blood-drop of that truant heart” of her husband’s, and “Spider,” which follows a spider trapping “his next martyr” in his “cosmic web” and is thus a poem that also compares God to a preying animal that eats his victims.

counterfeit, and harmless," so that "sacramentally partaking" in his body would be "an empty ritual" (188).

If one sees Christ as "devoid of essential power," Kroll is absolutely right to say that partaking in the Eucharist will be an "empty ritual" (188), and in Plath, that is what it has become. In "Mystic," for instance, the poem mourns the loss of a too-brief experience with God. The speaker asks, "Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?" (*CP*, 268-9). She suggests that the typical remedy for experiencing God, the Church, is corrupt—its "stains" cannot be removed. The speaker cannot abide by the Church's actions and beliefs, and thus, the "pill of the Communion tablet" cannot renew her union with God. What she desires is the ability to regain a past experience that affected her entire body, "without a part left over," a desire that emphasizes the importance of memory, particularly infusing the present with that memory. The Eucharist should be the perfect ritual for that; it is eaten "in memory" of Christ, but upon eating, time is transcended and the participant experiences Christ's sacrifice and is united to the body of believers. Yet in the poem, meaning is beyond her grasp; "meaning leaks from the molecules," unable to be captured or understood, and instead of a beatific vision of God, she sees "Christ in the face of rodents" (269). Likewise, in "Totem," the speaker invokes her audience to "eat it like Plato's afterbirth, [...] eat it like Christ" (264-5). Yet the speaker also says that Plato and Christ, though

they “were important,” are now “on a stick that rattles and clicks” and are “counterfeit,” since “the same self unfolds” after eating them (264-5). What Plath's poem conveys is that, due to both the “stains” on the Church and death of God, this ritual is now completely ineffective: nothing changes, everything is the “same.” Christ is not God nor has he been resurrected, and his body, the Church, has dirtied its hands, so eating his body—taking the Eucharist—means nothing. What is left of Christ and his rituals is a toy (the stick that rattles and clicks) that does not redeem but that provides a distraction as the same self unfolds over and over again.

Plath not only portrays the Eucharist as an empty ritual, but also as a dangerous ritual intended to inflict pain or exercise power. In “Nick and the Candlestick,” there is a reversal from the people eating the divine to the divine eating the people. The poem describes a “piranha religion” so violent that it is “drinking/ Its first communion out of my live toes” (241). Like the Church’s “stains” in “Mystic,” Plath critiques Christianity for not being a religion that properly embodies Christ’s sacrificial love and is instead an aggressive, consuming religion that makes its own sacrifices. Here, the speaker does not take communion in honor of Christ’s sacrifice, but becomes the unwilling sacrifice of a brutal, all-consuming power. In “Medusa,” the Eucharistic roles are still reversed, with the wafer acting as a means toward destroying those who

partake of it. The communion wafer in this poem is not the speaker but the speaker's mother, who becomes the new sacrifice. However, this sacrificial role is taken on in order to wield power, not give it up. The poem asks, "Who do you think you are? /A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?/ I shall take no bite of your body." The speaker rejects the subject's "eely tentacle" and refuses her sacrifices because she knows there are conditions attached to this wafer. The wafer does not offer life and freedom, but suffocation and strangulation. The mother is a "cobra" which is "squeezing the breath" from the speaker's blood and making her "overexposed, like an X-ray," so that she lacks the flush of life and is therefore "dead" (225). In both these poems, then, the Eucharistic imagery envisions the Eucharist not as a sacrament of unification but a ritual of division and discord. The Eucharist is thus associated with power in Plath, a power that is dangerous and predatory.

In "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," Plath continues to recast the Eucharist as a means to attain power. In the story, a woman who worships fear in the form of Johnny Panic describes electroshock treatment in religious language. She is "anointed on the temples and robed in sheets virginal as the first snow" (*JP*, 171). She listens to a "devotional chant" by the "five false priests" as they put "the wafer of forgetfulness on [her] tongue" (171), making the ritual of communion—the ritual that participates in the "forgetfulness" of

sins” — into something that reasserts the woman’s terror. Johnny Panic does not disappear; she is not “saved.” Instead, the woman sees him anew and stronger than ever. Her “wafer” further splits her off from reality and from her chances of mental redemption.

“Tulips”, in particular, combines baptismal and Eucharistic imagery and demonstrates how much these rituals have become emptied—to the point of effecting nothingness—in comparison to the renewal and fullness the sacraments are intended to offer. The speaker emphasizes the whiteness of the room and the nothingness that she sees at first, including herself, who is a “nobody,” and the blur of uniformed nurses that “are just the same as another” (*CP*, 160). She seems content to admit she has “lost” herself, and she turns to ritual as a means to further lose herself. She lets water go “over her head” and feels “pure,” like “a nun now,” a baptism that is not a welcome into the fullness of Christ but a step toward nothingness and oblivion, so that the speaker is not a Christian nun, but a nun of nihilism.¹³ She wants to be “utterly empty” and bask in the “numbness” the nurses’ shots bring her. She believes this peace is possible by simply giving

¹³ The emptiness/washing away to blankness is also evident in Plath’s “Tale of a Tub,” where the speaker outright says that the washbowl has “no more holy calling/than physical ablution.” The tub is described as “blank and true” and allows whoever sits in it to “create our whole world over” and to “mask our past” (*CP*, 25). The speaker even realizes that the cleanliness of the tub is only a temporary, false feeling, as the poem ends with her boarding an “imagined ship” until “death shatters the fabulous stars and makes us real” (25), an ending that seems optimistic but that also suggests that she is false now and cannot be “real” until death. What is “real” now is only “imagined.”

up that which gives a person an identity—"a name tag" and "a few trinkets," items like the pictures of her family that she dubs "baggage" and claims she is "sick of." She will happily sacrifice these possessions because they prove she is a being-in-relation and thus has an identity, and she would rather be whitewashed into the walls than stand out and be recognized. She compares her serene release of these things to a "Communion tablet," which the "dead close on" in order to find peaceful salvation in the nothingness of death.¹⁴ When tulips are brought into her room, the brightness of the flowers ruins her deathlike nothingness, injecting life and color into her sanitized and numbing white world. She resists the life of the tulips and still maintains that she has "no face" and wants "to efface [her]self." Consequently, though the vividness of the tulips does not allow her to drift into the nothingness she seeks, she still is "far away" from health and from an affirmation of her identity. In the poem, baptism and communion thus work against their traditional purposes in the Christian Church. They are the pathway toward annihilation and death rather than rebirth and eternal life.

Baptism and the Eucharist thus become something vastly different in Plath's poems than they are traditionally intended to be Christian theology.

¹⁴ Tim Kendall similarly discusses the "attractions of facelessness" for the speaker, noting that any attempt to bring the "speaker back into the everyday world of identity are to be regretted," so that even her husband and child are just "hooks" in her skin rather than a comfort (59).

Divorced from the practice of the Church or in the practice of a “piranha” Church, they cannot effect their intended purpose. Rather than affirm and unify, the rituals destroy and divide. Consequently, though Esther and several of Plath’s poetic personas seek a “ritual for being born twice,” baptism and rebirth do not ultimately achieve the intended results. Likewise, the eating of the Eucharist does not produce a unity of self, community, and God, but is instead an empty rite or a manipulation of self-sacrifice into a seizure of power.

Christian Baptism and the Eucharist

If Christianity avoids being a “piranha religion” or a mere social club that does not concern itself with belief or practice, baptism and the Eucharist can better respond to Esther’s request that “there ought to be a ritual” to act as a center, unify the fragmented self, provide wholeness and transcendence, and affirm the body. If the Church truly professed and practiced its beliefs, it would be able to better meet many of Plath’s concerns. For instance, one of Plath’s biggest concerns with Christianity is that she believed it to be a religion of the spirit rather than the body. She, like Esther, does not believe in life after death because she says that “if we leave the body behind we are nothing” (*Journals* 45). Because she considers herself a “matter worshiper,” whatever she believes in must hold the body and matter in high accord (120). It also must allow a fusion with the world and, as Esther suggests while she contemplates religion at her

father's gravestone, take up the whole of one's life and allow one to die to the self and be reborn to one's true and complete identity. Since Plath often negatively relates God to the masculine, particularly to her father and her husband, this religion should also embrace, welcome, and affirm—not exclude and diminish—the feminine. While the “piranha religion” or self-administered baptism and Eucharist fail to do all these things, the traditional sacraments encompass and fulfill all these desires.

Traditionally, both baptism and the Eucharist affirm the body and reject a purely spiritual understanding of faith. In baptism, both the matter of the body and of the water are fundamental to rebirth in Christ. Tertullian, for instance, emphasizes the “dignity” of water and its role in the creation and birth of all life. He affirms water in itself first, and then argues that it takes on a “sacred significance” in “conveying sanctity” (Whitaker 9). At baptism, the “spirit is in those waters corporally washed” while “the flesh is simultaneously in those same waters spiritually cleansed,” so that body and spirit unify. The spirit is connected to the corporal and the body to the spiritual. Matter (the body) is therefore not rejected, but affirmed and made sacred by being transformed and reborn.

Baptism also strips off and kills the fragmented self so that one can be born again and made whole. St. Cyril compares taking off one's clothing before

baptism to the “stripping off of the old nature” (Whitaker 32), a description that resembles Esther’s attempt to kill off the old self when she tosses her clothing outside the window. While she does not achieve rebirth in this symbolic shedding of the self because she cannot find new clothes—and thus a new identity—to put on, Christian baptism immediately provides a new garment for the baptized. As St. John Chrysostom explains, baptism is “burying the old man and at the same time raising up the new. [...] Instead of a man who descended into the water, a different man comes forth, one who has wiped away all the filth of his sins, who has put off the old garment of sin and has put on the royal robe” (Begley 109). Going under the water kills the tattered rags of the old self that was torn apart by sin so that in arising from the water, the newly baptized believer is covered by the robe of Christ. Baptism thus is intended to do what Plath seeks: the body is not shed nor forgotten even as the fractured, separate self is destroyed. In Plath’s language, baptism sheds the false self and reveals one’s true self so that a real identity is finally attained. Chrysostom explains what this means theologically, stating that the baptized believer is “resurrected according to the image of [the] Creator” (Begley 109), meaning that baptism allows the believer to become what she was created to be: as a particular incarnation of the image of God. To know who one is, then, in Christianity, is to embrace and assume what it means to be created in the image of God and to be

baptized, so that the believer will be freed from the sin that tears him away from God and from his own nature, which was created to seek God.

The act of baptism also welcomes one into the Church, the body of Christ, and is thus intricately connected to the Eucharist, the eating of the body of Christ by the body of Christ. Boris Bobrinsky points out the “bipolarity” of baptism and the Eucharist, noting that “every baptism tends toward the Eucharist and finds its fullness in it,” and every “Eucharist finds its source in baptism” as the “entrance” into the Church (qtd in Hall 25). The Eucharist continually reaffirms and edifies the newly baptized person. Baptism welcomes the person into the Church while the Eucharist unifies every member of the Church so that all members are not just externally “putting on” Christ but are also internally ingesting and becoming transformed into him.

The Eucharist brings together all those who have been baptized, and the early Christian fathers stress is the unifying quality of the Eucharist. The Didache’s liturgical instruction on the Eucharist emphasizes the coming together of many parts, a common theme in the early writings: “As this broken bread was scattered over mountain tops and after being harvested was made one, so let your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth to your kingdom,

for through Jesus Christ glory and power are yours forever” (Begley 2).¹⁵ By becoming baptized in the one name of Jesus Christ, believers who are “scattered” throughout different places and times become the body of Christ and therefore become one. Augustine, likewise, relates the pieces to the whole. He expounds what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:17, “We being many are one loaf, one body,” by comparing the variety of believers who comprise the body of Christ to the many grains that constitute one loaf of bread:

[O]ne loaf, one body, is what we all are, many though we be. In this one loaf of bread you are given clearly to understand how much you should love unity. I mean, was that one loaf made from one grain? Weren’t there many grains of wheat? But before they came into the loaf they were all separate; they were joined together by means of water after a certain amount of pounding and crushing. (Billy 224)

Augustine highlights the variety of believers and says that it takes every kind of believer to create a complete whole. What joins all the believers together is a common purpose: to be the body of Christ and therefore be, with Christ, the

¹⁵ The importance on the interrelationship of the Church and the Eucharist cannot be emphasized enough. Both are the body of Christ and are inseparable. Cyprian explains that since the Church is one, the Eucharist is one. He argues that “unity is one of the essential marks of the Church,” and there can “be no discord within the church because there can be no fragmentation or division in the Eucharist” (Billy 121). There thus should not be any sense of real separation between the Church as body of Christ and the Eucharist as body of Christ. Henri de Lubac, for instance, argues that the separation of the Church as the body of Christ, which has come to be called the mystical body, from the practice of the Eucharist is a separation the Fathers would never have made. Both inform, shape, and transform the other.

bread of life. By eating Christ's body, the various members of the Church become unified in their purpose: to be Christ's body.

The Eucharist, in its traditional practice and theology, thus offers the kind of unification and affirmation Plath's fiction, poems, and journals seek. It makes the fragments of one's life come together into the whole by entering into the narrative of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection, consequently offering a "frame of reference" to believers. The Eucharist affirms every member—since every different grain is important in creating the whole—while it also unites each member into a whole that gives their lives meaning.

The Eucharist also provides an affirmation of the body and transcendence. The Eucharist affirms both the flesh and matter since the matter of the bread is Christ's flesh and body, and it also signifies the bodily resurrection. The Christianity Plath was taught de-emphasized the body and focused too much on the soul, and she struggled with the idea of leaving the body behind in death. This view of the split between body and soul is a common teaching in Christianity, but it is counter to Christian tradition. The early father said Christians should not believe in a duality of the body and soul, but should instead believe that humans are embodied souls. Consequently, transcendence is not an out-of-body experience but is the entire body's reaching toward and experience of God. The Eucharist, as the body of Christ, is consumed by

believers as a way to transform them into Christ, so that upon partaking the Eucharist, the believer not just experiences, but becomes the divine. Plath mentions in her journals that she “want[s] to be a little god in [her] small way,” to “permeate the matter of this world,” and to live in the “present [...] forever,” never dying (22, 201, 10); the Eucharist allows her, in a way, to do all these things. Cyprian says that the mixing of a little water into the wine of the Eucharist is to symbolize the “process of divinization that takes place in the people of God. [The] blood and water represents not only Christ’s divinity and humanity, but our own humanity and divinity we hope to share with Christ by virtue of his paschal mystery” (Billy 123). Divinization is possible because “Christ became human so that we might become divine” (123). Hilary of Poitiers agrees, stating that in eating and drinking the body and blood, Christ himself “is in us through flesh, and we are in him while that which we are with him is in God” (Billy 153). Pope Leo the Great describes the Eucharist similarly, saying that “we become that which we consume” (Billy 230). By eating the divine, we become the divine. The Eucharist allows one to become Christ—to become divine—and in that, to become eternal. Ambrose thus calls the Eucharist the “leaven of immortality” (Hall 61).

Lastly, the Eucharist and baptism embrace the feminine and could act as an important counter narrative to the “piranha religion” that Plath associates

with domineering masculinity. While she rightly criticizes the Christian Church for contributing to and enforcing patriarchal notions, baptism is intended to be an invitation to all to “become one in Jesus Christ,” where there “is neither male no female” (Galatians 3:28), and St. Basil describes the waters of baptism as divine and “maternal” (Hall 34). The description of the Holy Spirit hovering over the waters during Creation signifies the womb, the maternal creating power, and the Eucharist also evokes the feminine, in that some of the early Fathers considered the Church to be the “new Eve.” Clement, for instance, writes that “the second Eve—the church—is created from Christ’s pierced side, from the water (baptism) and blood (the Eucharist) that flowed from Christ’s body” (Hall 33). Consequently, though Christianity has often placed “blame” on Eve for original sin, she is also the means of salvation: the fathers believed that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*—there is no salvation outside the Church—meaning that Christian baptism and the Eucharist thus offer salvation through rebirth and (in a sense) through the feminine body. If these sacraments are properly understood and practiced in the Church, Christianity can avoid being the masculine “piranha religion” and be a religion that better fits many of Plath’s criteria and beliefs.¹⁶

¹⁶ Ferretter describes Plath’s belief as a sort of “feminine materialism” (“What Girl,” 104), a belief that, reconsidered slightly, could be encompassed within Christianity if the Church is

Plath's works thus demonstrate how vastly different Christian sacraments can become when practiced incorrectly. If baptism and the Eucharist are not theologically rooted or are components of a "piranha religion," they can quickly become empty or dangerous, something her poems, fiction, and journals attest to over and over again. Consequently, Plath's work is a persuasive reminder to the Church of the damage it can cause if it does not act as it should and becomes either an ineffectual social club or a brutal, consuming power. Plath wanted to believe—sought to believe—and tried attending multiple churches, yet she never could commit fully to the faith. Thus, her life and her work are powerful testimonies for the Church to embody baptism and the Eucharist and also to show how these rituals may answer the call that "there ought to be a ritual" that can gather all the various bits of one's self and turn them into something divine.

considered feminine and the material understood in light of the Incarnation and the Eucharist, which permeates matter with the divine.

CHAPTER SIX

“This Confession Has Meant Nothing”: Confession in Bret Easton Ellis

Though Bret Easton Ellis does not believe in God, he certainly knows how to write about the devil. His morally bankrupt characters have made him one of the most controversial of contemporary writers. His characters are serial killers, fashion model terrorists, promiscuous college students, snuff film watchers, rapists, and hard drug users. Critics often complain about the flat style in which Ellis writes horrific scenes and about his refusal to punish or redeem most of his characters, which they see as a failure to provide a “moral framework” (Lehmann-Haupt).¹ Yet as Sonia Baelo-Allué points out, morality emerges from the narratives themselves (127), meaning that Ellis’s extreme depictions of an amoral world is, in itself, condemnatory of the kind of lives the characters lead.

Ellis’s characters are all wealthy and, on the surface, have everything they want,

¹ Carla Freccero believes that most of the negative reaction to Ellis’s work is because of this failure to provide a moral framework for his readers. She particularly critiques *American Psycho*, though it could arguably fit all of his works. She notes that Ellis uses the serial killer narrative without ever giving a psychological background that explains what drove him to kill, and he never allows his serial killer to be caught and punished. This offends the moral ordering readers expect from these types of novels, and they are appalled when Patrick gets away with it. The violence does not have a “positive productivity” that censors usually require (56), and thus has been condemned. I believe, however, that though the novel does not push a moral framework, it still speaks to morality in two interesting ways: 1) As I mentioned in chapter one, it demonstrates that without God, something like “morality” can easily crumble, since it merely becomes societal expectations and codes of rules. 2) The absence of morality, redemption, and justice in his works causes a desire for these things to return. Depicting a world that lacks them can stir a strong desire for their fulfillment.

but they are clearly not content or fulfilled; they seem to be trying to fill a void in their lives. While Ellis's characters are complicit in the problems around them, they also feel desperate to escape from them and to make some sort of sense out of their lives.

They turn to confession to order their lives and possibly find a center—particularly a center that helps them define right and wrong, rescues their lives from shallow consumerism, differentiates between truth and fiction, and reconciles the fragments of their identity. All of Ellis's novels are written in first-person present tense, with all of the narrators seemingly attempting to inscribe some sense of truth and meaning to their experiences: they confess. They confess their actions, their loneliness, their inability to feel, and their moral passivity. But as the characters, particularly Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, discover, confession within a culture that has made them who they are brings “no catharsis,” “no deeper knowledge,” and “no new understanding”: it will have “meant *nothing*” (377).

Searching for Confession: Direction, Sin, and Reality

A brief conversation that Victor has with a friend in *Glamorama* reveals the fundamental problem for Ellis's characters. His friend remarks that “the center cannot hold,” to which Victor responds, “What if there's *no* center?” (33). While modernity sought to replace religion with another “center,” such as Marxism,

nationalism, or science, postmodernism simply has “no center” upon which to frame one’s life. What remains for Ellis’s characters is a directionless void, as evidenced in Clay and Rip’s conversation in *Less Than Zero*:

“Where are we going?” I asked
“I don’t know,” he said. “Just driving.”
“But this road doesn’t go anywhere,” I told him.
“That doesn’t matter.”
“What does?” I asked, after a while.
“Just that we’re on it, dude,” he said. (195)

With no center to provide one’s *telos*, there is no direction or particular purpose to life. No roads lead anywhere, so choosing a direction does not matter. Ellis depicts these roads that do not go anywhere—that lack direction and purpose—and shows their consequences: moral bankruptcy, consumerism, and fragmentation.² His novels demonstrate how each problem that his characters face derives from and contributes to the other: moral bankruptcy causes a desire for the shallowness of consumerism, which causes the self to devolve into consumer goods, which causes moral bankruptcy and more shallowness.

² Jean-Francois Lyotard disagrees that a loss of narrative means a loss of morality. As he says in his *Post-Modern Condition*, “Most people have lost the nostalgia for a lost narrative. It it no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity” (41). Lyotard may be right that it does not necessarily follow—we have replaced several smaller narratives for the larger grand narrative, so not all systems or codes of ethics will inevitably break down. However, as Ellis presents it, those multiple small narratives can split a person in so many directions that they may lose any sense of morality or may turn to barbarity as a new meta-narrative for their life. Thus, regardless of what Lyotard claims and whether or not he’s wrong or right in general, Ellis clearly depicts his characters as both missing a narrative and reduced to barbarity. He depicts a Dostoevskian society where, since there is no God, “everything is permitted.”

Ellis's morally bankrupt characters are products of society.³ Violence is an everyday, common phenomenon. *Less Than Zero*, *Lunar Park*, and *American Psycho* all mention the brutality found in daily newspaper headlines. Even though troubling headlines are exaggerated in this selection from *American Psycho*, Ellis emphasizes the regularity with which truly appalling events occur:

In one issue—in *one* issue—let's see here...strangled models, babies thrown from tenement rooftops, kids killed in the subway, a Communist rally, Mafia boss wiped out, Nazis [...], baseball players with AIDS, more Mafia shit, gridlock, the homeless, various maniacs, faggots dropping like flies in the streets, surrogate mothers, the cancellation of a soap opera, kids who broke into a zoo and tortured and burned various animals alive, more Nazis...and the joke is, the punch line is, it's all in this city—nowhere else, just here, it sucks, whoa wait, more Nazis, gridlock, gridlock, baby-sellers, black-market babies, AIDS babies, baby junkies, building collapses on baby, maniac baby, gridlock, bridge collapses—. (4)⁴

³ In an interview, he explains his work "is really about a culture that pisses me off, and a world that we live in that values all the wrong things" (Wang).

⁴ In *Less Than Zero*, Clay begins collecting newspaper clippings: "one about some twelve-year-old kid who accidentally shot his brother in Chino; another about a guy in Indio who nailed his kid to a wall, or a door, I can't remember, and then shot him, point-blank in the face, and one about a fire at a home for the elderly that killed twenty and one about a housewife who while driving her children home from school flew off this eighty-foot embankment near San Diego, instantly killing herself and three kids and one about a man who calmly and purposefully ran over his ex-wife somewhere near Reno, paralyzing her below the neck. I collected a lot of clippings during that time because, I guess, there were a lot to be collected" (77). In *Lunar Park*, Bret is frequently worried about what he'll read in the newspapers. He says, "The newspapers kept stroking my fear. New surveys provided awful statistics on just about everything. Evidence suggested that we were not doing well. Researchers gloomily agreed. Environmental psychologists were interviewed. Damage had 'unwittingly' been done. There were 'feared lapses.' There were 'misconceptions' about potential. Situations had 'deteriorated.' Cruelty was on the rise and there was nothing anyone could do about it. The populace was confounded, yet didn't care. Unpublished studies hinted that we were all paying a price. Scientists peered into data and concluded that we should all be very worried. NO one knew what normal behavior was anymore, and some argued that this was a form of virtue. And no one argued back. No one challenged anything. Anxiety was soaking up most people's days. Everyone had become

In Tim Price's summary of the news, mundane events like traffic jams and the cancellation of a soap opera share space with murders, poverty, and terminal illnesses, blurring the line between which events really matter and which do not. People have become so numbed to violence that they can no longer distinguish between inconveniences and tragedies. Also, Price's inclusion of all the "baby" problems near the end of the list signals that these problems begin at birth: there is no innocence anymore, and everyone is affected by the corruption and implicated in causing it.

Murders, torture, and war should provoke outrage, but Ellis reveals that the frequency with which they occur has a numbing effect. Such a prevalence of violent, terrible events confuses the line between what is "right" and what is "wrong." Thus, in *Less Than Zero*, when Clay watches as Rip and his friends rape a twelve-year-old girl, he can only feebly protest by saying, "It's...I don't think it's right" (189). Rip immediately counters him with a new moral code: "What's right? If you want something, you have the right to take it. If you want to do something, you have the right to do it" (189). As critic Naomi Mandel argues, Clay's interjection is "the only recognizable moral code in the entire novel, and a

preoccupied with horror. Madness was fluttering everywhere. There was fifty years of research supporting this data. There were diagrams illustrating all of these problems—circles and hexagons and squares, different sections colored in lime or lilac or gray. Most troubling were the fleeting signs that nothing could transform any of this into something positive" (55).

notably inarticulate one” that does nothing to contradict Rip’s view, which asserts that “power creates its own morality” (6). Without a center, morality is one’s “right” to do something rather than doing what is “right.” Morality has disappeared and consumerism—getting what one wants and doing what one wants—has replaced it.

Consumerism is both symptomatic of and contributory to a culture that, in Ellis’s words, “values all the wrong things” (Wang). In some ways, consumerism becomes a response to the terrible newspaper headlines. For instance, Price immediately follows his long summation of the news with a shallow observation: “Why aren’t you wearing the worsted navy blue blazer with the gray pants?” (4). As Price notes, the newspaper contains traumatic story after traumatic story in just *one* day, which can leave one feeling helpless about practically everything but one’s appearance. Newspaper headlines are “the reasons you quit praying” since nothing ever seems to improve (Ellis, *Lunar Park*, 57). This feeling of anxiety and impotence causes, at least in part, Ellis’s characters to live superficially. If one cannot help fix these problems, the alternative seems to be focusing instead on lighter matters, such as the cancellation of soap operas,

which blazer to wear with which pants, and which restaurant which celebrity goes to.⁵

However, people begin to find meaning only in the surface. Living only on and for the surface leads to his characters “disappear[ing]” as they “slide down the surface of things,” two phrases that Ellis uses frequently in his fiction.⁶ For example, in *Less Than Zero*, a young girl dreams that the entire world is melting, so to try to save it, she changes her appearance: “So I thought if I, like pierced my ear or something, like alter my physical image, dye my hair, the world wouldn’t melt. So I dyed my hair and this pink lasts. I like it. It lasts. I don’t think the world is gonna melt anymore” (103). This girl’s interpretation of her hair shows how surface details, which may have started as an escape, have become the highest of values. If one looks right, one lives right. Yet the irony

⁵ Elana Gomel argues that because the surface is a unifying structure to turn to, it is the surface, particularly fashion, which may be a new centralizing force. While there is no “real” anymore, *American Psycho* may present that “the acceptance of simulacrum as a new order of epistemological and social organization might, in fact, become the foundation for a new cultural and moral code” (62). She argues that fashion is a “corset” that may be able to bind everything together and concludes that while “Vogue may not be much of a foundation for social solidarity,” it “is better than nothing” (63). Her argument is interesting but deeply problematic, since Patrick’s obsession with one’s appearance is part of what makes him long for something more. Vogue-as-center is not “better than nothing” because it promotes the idea of person-as-canvas, something to be looked at and used. As I argue, the turn to the surface is not just a symptom of a problem, but a contributor to problems. With everything on the surface, there is still no need for inner depth, which is what Patrick, and many of Ellis’s characters, crave.

⁶ “Disappear Here” started in *Less Than Zero* but is repeated in *Glamorama*, *Lunar Park*, and *Imperial Bedrooms*; Patrick also contemplates how easy it would be for him to “disappear” in *American Psycho* and how easily his victims can disappear without notice. “Surface” is a common motif, particularly in *Glamorama* and *American Psycho*.

here is that the pink dye in her hair will not last. It is temporary, as her hair will grow out and the dye will fade. Her solution is not merely shallow; it is also based completely on something that is inherently fleeting.

Ellis's characters build their lives around what is shallow and fleeting; looking right is the sole means to living right. Maintaining a "youthful surface" and keeping "everything on the surface, even with the knowledge that the surface fades and can't be held together forever," becomes the sole means of determining one's worth (*Imperial Bedrooms*, 52). Thus, all of Ellis's characters find purpose for their lives not in friendships or family or faith, but in wearing the right clothes, modeling the correct haircut, living in the nicest apartment, and dating the hottest person. Eventually, the surface is all there is, and "surface, surface, surface" becomes "all that anyone found meaning in" (*Psycho*, 375).

By focusing so much on their appearances, people both consume products and become products. They buy more and more products in order to achieve the correct look, but by focusing so much on their outward "look," they also begin to identify themselves as something to be consumed. Ellis's novels demonstrate that the pervasiveness of consumerism has turned people into commodities. One of the recurring phrases in *Less Than Zero* is "wonder if he's for sale," and Ellis's novels answer this question with resounding affirmation. In *Less than Zero*, Julian literally is for sale as a prostitute working off a drug debt. The man

who pays to have sex with him tells Julian that “all that matters” is that he’s “a very beautiful boy” (175), connoting that Julian has no purpose or redeeming value other than his appearance. His worth is what someone pays for him. The other people in Julian's life see him the same way: valuable only by some kind of exchange. Julian’s pimp, for instance, says Julian is “just like [his] own son” but refuses to find a new way for him to work off his debt and thus only really cares about Julian’s money-making body (171). Even Clay uses Julian as a way “to see the worst,” admitting that he “really [doesn’t] care” about Julian’s situation (172). Julian's purpose is to bring some kind of return—whether it is sexual, financial, or experiential (as with Clay)—and thus, even Julian's friends do not “care” about him at all. They only care about what Julian can do or bring for them, just as they would not care about a product other than what result it produces or benefit it can bring.⁷

Though Ellis uses prostitution as an overt demonstration of the commoditization of the body, he blurs the line between socially condemned commoditization—that is, prostitution—with more socially accepted

⁷ *Imperial Bedrooms* picks up the story of a now middle-aged Clay, Julian, and several others from *Less Than Zero*, and the characters are still all using each other. Clay becomes a screenwriter and a producer so that young actresses will try to sleep with him in exchange for a role in his film. He uses them, they use him. Julian has become a pimp with a girlfriend, Rain, who wants to become an actress. Julian thus tells her about Clay and they begin a relationship. However, since Clay occasionally tricks himself into thinking these exploited relationships are real, he helps Rip, who wants Rain for himself and is angry at Julian for dating her, capture Julian so that Rip’s men can kill him. Julian ends up being literally thrown away, as his body is found in a dumpster.

commoditizations of the body, namely fashion, celebrity, and sexual promiscuity. The very premise behind celebrity, as *Glamorama* shows, is to “sell” and “market” oneself to the public. All the public knows are the “surface” details: what a celebrity looks like, what movies he/she has been in, who the celebrity is dating, etc. Fame relies, in part, on generating the most buzz to keep one’s status alive. Thus, “all anyone is interested in is who’s fucking who, who has the biggest dick, the biggest tits, who’s more famous than whoever” (*Glamorama*, 99). Celebrity is a very fickle status to sustain, however, and even the most famous celebrity can “disappear” within just a few years. Magazine covers and blockbuster movies will eventually be discarded and forgotten. One celebrity is easily replaced by the next. Victor, a model, knows that he will likely be used for his body and then forgotten about. He admits that “there are a thousand guys who’ve got pouty lips and nice symmetry” that can supplant him once his image fades, so he wants to “do something where it’s all [his],” where he is not “replaceable” (90). Yet as the novel proceeds, Victor is replaced, and in a much more extreme and pervasive way than he ever imagined. He is not simply replaced as a model, but is actually replaced as a person, so that someone else pretending to be him takes over his name and his entire life. Victor’s fears are therefore validated in ways he had not even imagined. He realizes that he

can be removed and replaced just as easily as a new gallon of milk replaces the old.

Ellis's *The Rules of Attraction* demonstrates how easily one's sexual partners are also replaceable. All three protagonists sleep with one person after another, not caring who they end up with or developing substantial relationships. While the characters may not be literally paying to have sex, they use one another's bodies in a strikingly similar way to how Julian's client uses him: all they care about (and they barely care about this) is the other person's beauty. Beyond sex, even the names of their sexual partners become hazy as they quickly move on to new partners.⁸ The main characters tell their partners, they're "not ever gonna *know*" them because "no one will ever know anyone" (252).⁹ Their use-and-throw-away approach to sex reflects their approach to life: they do not recognize any kind of dignity in human life and thus see it all as disposable. There are three suicide attempts and several abortions mentioned in the novel, suggesting that life, too, can easily be disposed.

⁸ The novel also demonstrates that this is not so easy, however, as certain people leave a mark on others. Lauren is still in love with Victor, though he barely remembers her, and Lauren means much more to Sean than Sean means to Lauren, though Paul greatly desires a relationship with Sean. Even as they "long" for the one they "love," however, they still sleep with various other people, and their "love" for the person is often illusory and short-lived.

⁹ The King James Bible used "knew" to connote sexual relationships between a man and his wife, which is an interesting comparison to the novel's use of "know." In Scripture, sex was between two married people, a full "knowing" of the other person. In *Rules*, the characters have sex but never "know" the other person at all.

Patrick's serial killer actions in *American Psycho* simply carry the notion that life is disposable to its extreme. While feeling pangs of remorse for grinding a victim's body into meat patties, he reminds himself that "this thing, this girl, this meat, is nothing, is shit" (345). Patrick literally discards and throws away his victim's body parts after he is done using them for his pleasure; their lives and their bodies are—like the myriad of brand name products he uses—disposable once he is through with them. The logical conclusion of a society that values consumerism so highly that it begins to conflate human beings with products is someone like Patrick: a man who sees people as so disposable that they can be used, killed, and discarded with ease. If the highest value is the surface—that which can be achieved by consuming the right products—then even people only have value as consumed products.

Patrick chopping people into bits signifies another problem of the center-less, direction-less life and the pervasiveness of consumerism: a fragmented identity. With no center to rely on, one is torn in multiple directions, trying to fulfill multiple claims on one's identity, particularly from the media. Since the media is a fragmented medium, however, one's identity will consequently be fragmented.¹⁰ This theme is especially prevalent in *Glamorama*, which depicts, as

¹⁰ As John Fiske puts it, "THE MEDIUM IS *fragmented*. THE NATION IS *fragmented*. THE SELF IS *fragmented*. FRAGMENTS ARE" (77). Ellis notes the issue of fragmentation

Baelo-Allué points out, “two types of body fragmentation—one metaphorical (in Victor’s mind), the other literal (seen in the killings)—which in *Glamorama* mirror each other” (164). Victor, a model whose face is continually reproduced, is a slave to the media and his media image.¹¹ He immerses himself so far into the media that he begins to believe that his life is a film and his dialogue scripted. He becomes merely a character in a film someone is shooting, and he thus loses his agency, even participating in terrorist acts because someone told him to. This metaphorical fragmentation is mirrored in his terrorist acts, where people are literally fragmented into limbs, teeth, and skulls. Both Victor and the victims of the bombing “have lost all traces of human identity or personality to become the sum of their body parts” (Baelo-Allué 164). Once again, everything is reduced to the “surface,” but here, the inherent fragmentation of living on the surface is emphasized. The competing narratives from the media telling people what to use, wear, and think are disjointed from any kind of rich inner life, causing a

outright in *Glamorama*, as I discuss here, and in *Lunar Park*, when the fathers talk about how hooked their children are on technology. They call them “fragment junkies” (136).

¹¹ Alex E. Blazer argues that *Glamorama* demonstrates a “fundamental anxiety regarding body image in a world devoted to image consumption.” I would argue, however, that it is not just one’s “body image” but one’s identity. Victor, a model, knows that his “body image” is primarily what people want from him—a literal image of his body to consume. He continually seeks ways to avoid becoming just an image and thus wants to open clubs and be in movies. However, these attempts, too, are emblematic of how fleeting even his attempts to do something “lasting” are.

disconnect from one's own self. The characters end up very lost, unsure of any kind of reality.

Consequently, differentiating between fact and fiction has become a nearly impossible task, as may be finding one's "true" identity. Victor becomes confused about whether his life is reality or a film, Patrick films his murders as a way to "know" the girls he kills, and, when he is almost caught for a murder, his narrative resembles a movie chase scene. The lens of the media becomes more "real" to them than their own lives. Thus the only "reality" they can recognize—and the only "real" identity they can affirm—may be one that recognizes that it is constructed. When Jamie remarks to Bobby that "no one's being themselves, everyone's so phony," he simply responds, "That *is* being themselves" (*Glamorama*, 353). Phoniness becomes akin to a new reality to such a degree that what is "real" is continually questioned and blurred in *Glamorama*. Photographs can be doctored and replicated, and the same picture can be used with different headlines, creating entirely different narratives from the same image. For the celebrity, especially, one's image is created for them, and one's "real identity" is buried under simulacra.¹²

¹² Ellis admits that he struggled with this problem himself after the rapid success of *Less Than Zero*: "[Y]our identity—your real identity—is being consumed by this new narrative, this collective narrative, that's taking place with the public as well as the press. The real you is dying and this thing that's created is now going to be representative of you. And every time you meet someone, you know that they're going to have this entire set of associations, mostly fake, about

The media's claims on identity do not apply only to celebrities. The media also makes claims on identity by prescribing which products to use, which films to see, which books to read, which world events are important, which ways to be cool, or intelligent, or attractive. People model themselves after celebrities, who are already constructions of the media: simulacra piled upon simulacra.

Ellis's novels are full of signifiers (words and images) and lack the signifieds (what they represent). For instance, Michael P. Clark argues that in *American Psycho*, Ellis explores the limits of ethical rhetoric, which has become "impossible in a world lacking any transcendent standard or shared set of values" (22). The descriptions of violence, for instance, demonstrate the lack of any signifieds. As Clark points out, "words and images denoting fear, violence, suffering, and judgment are literally mobile, disconnected from any context, referent, or speaking subject that would lend them substance and immediacy" (24). Patrick writes, for instance, "I AM BACK" on Paul Owen's apartment wall and says that he made a drawing underneath it that "looks like this" (Ellis 306), but then the space below it is blank. Clark says this shows that in Ellis, "words have been stripped of their referential and expressive functions" (26), meaning the characters cannot form a "stable speaking subject" and a "coherent identity" requisite for having "meaningful relationships with others" (27). While Clark

who you are, and that is a difficult thing to process" (Pearson). He wrote *Glamorama* in part to process and satirize his own experience with celebrity.

just discusses *American Psycho*, his analysis of the lack of signifieds applies to most of Ellis's novels. In *Glamorama*, Ellis lists celebrity name after celebrity name, suggesting that what matters is just their names, not who they are or even what they have done.¹³ By listing people just as he lists products, Ellis suggests that people, too, are reduced solely to the signifiers, emptied of their status as human beings with purpose beyond simply a name. The surface, which can be replicated, replaced, and consumed, is all that is left. Referents, and any sense of "the real" or the "truth" connected to the referent, are lost.

The lack of any referents to make sense of the signifieds reinforces that "there is *no* center" with which to establish a foundation for life. Thus, in Ellis, morality becomes subjective (and thus, primarily about power and desire), consumerism becomes life's *sine qua non*, and identity becomes confused and fragmented amidst conflicting narratives. However, while Ellis's characters exemplify all of these traits, they do not exalt or glorify this de-centered world. Instead, they mourn it. It is my contention that the novels actually convey a sense of nostalgia for a center—particularly a Christian center—that could help absolve some of these problems.

¹³ In an interview for *The Atlantic*, Ellis says he hopes that eventually, the actual person behind the name might be forgotten, so that then the words will completely be separated from the referent: "I'm hoping that if the book is around and all these people are forgotten and we're all dead, then the names will function as just that—just clumps of names" (Blume).

While Ellis does not believe in God,¹⁴ he often references Christianity in his novels. Henry Bean argues that Ellis's novels "spring[] from grieving outrage at our spiritual condition" (1), and substantial evidence in Ellis's novels implies that at least some of the problems in the novel can be traced back to the lost center of Christianity. Victor continually admits that he is "soul sick" in *Glamorama*, and this same diagnosis could be applied to all of Ellis's protagonists. Christianity does not occupy a primary position in any of the characters' lives, but it is present in the margins, and it serves as a reminder of what was lost. Ellis's marginal references to Christianity represent a counter-narrative to the one that Ellis's characters are living, a counter-narrative that could provide a possible escape from the directionless void in which these characters live.¹⁵

Christianity often serves as an ironic juxtaposition to the events in Ellis's novels. In both *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms*, the action occurs around Christmas, and Clay frequently records when he sees Christmas trees or hears

¹⁴ When asked if he believed in God in an interview, he gave the following response: "Are you asking me if I was raised in a religious family or if I go to church? I was raised an agnostic. [...] But no, I don't believe in God. That's such a strange thing to admit in an interview" (Love).

¹⁵ Postmodernism is not necessarily all bad, and it can be, in many ways, an ally to the Christian faith. For a more detailed discussion of Christianity and postmodernism, see, for instance, James K.A. Smith's *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*, Stanley Grenz's discussion of the church's response to postmodernism in *A Primer on Postmodernism*, and the radical orthodoxy writers, particularly Graham Ward's *The Postmodern God*. As many of these writers attest, postmodernism can benefit Christianity. It frees people, in many ways, to explore an authentic faith, as Charles Taylor argues in *The Secular Age*. However, its excesses, as Ellis shows, are still deeply problematic when not met by a Christian response.

Christmas songs.¹⁶ The celebration and goodwill usually connected with the holiday are incongruous with the horrific acts he witnesses (including seeing prostitution, overdosing, snuff films, and the rape of a twelve-year-old girl). In *The Rules of Attraction*, Sean thinks of religion at his lowest points: he remembers “Christmas mass” as he attempts to hang himself, and he slows down the car for “anything that even remotely resembled a chapel, or a church” and would “stare at it” as he and Lauren consider having an abortion (262). Ellis also alludes to both Dante and Dostoevsky, Christian writers who are concerned with hell, the Devil, and redemption.¹⁷ Both Dante and Dostoevsky’s works depict what life can be like without God, and though his novels do not overtly appeal to God, Ellis’s novels likewise demonstrate the hell humans can create for themselves when separated from God. These small references to Christian practices serve as

¹⁶ Christmas is also mentioned in *American Psycho*. Patrick wants to escape from the Christmas festivities and tries to get Evelyn to leave with him. She protests, telling him “It’s Christmas,” to which he responds, “You keep saying that as if it *means* something” (193). Without its original referent, Christ’s birth, the holiday becomes vacuous. This is also made clear in *Glamorama*, when Jamie admits that she loves Christmas trees, but mostly just for their ornaments (399). Christmas, too, becomes solely about surface-level goods when divorced from Christianity.

¹⁷ Dante’s *Inferno* is quoted in *American Psycho*, and Ellis also uses a prescript from Dostoevsky in the novel. A girl steals Dante from the bookstore in *The Rules of Attraction* and Victor’s “replacement” starts re-reading Dostoevsky in *Glamorama*. He does not reference them solely because they have influenced his writing. In interviews, he frequently names Hemingway, Joan Didion, Raymond Carver, Don DeLillo, and Philip Roth as influences, yet he does not mention them explicitly in his novels. Thus, it makes sense to presume the presence of Dante and Dostoevsky in the texts are clearly thematic.

glimpses toward possible alternatives to the paths the characters are currently on—paths which, like Clay and Rip’s road, don’t “go anywhere.”

Ellis also clearly depicts that Christianity is not necessarily exempt from the cultural problems his characters struggle with. Christianity can be just as consumeristic and shallow as mass media—it can even cater to and become the mass media. For instance, in *Less Than Zero*, Clay considers a sort of conversion as he watches a religious program on television. He sees a “neon-lit Christ” and a pastor who asserts that this will “be a night of Deliverance” if he said “Jesus, ‘Forgive me of my sins’” (140). Clay “wait[s] for something to happen” for an hour, but “nothing does” (140), so he gets up and does some coke. Clay’s encounter with a televangelist demonstrates that Christianity, too, can become something to be consumed; one can simply order repentance and redemption just as easily as a product advertised in an infomercial. Also, as Clay’s other account of the televangelist program shows, Christianity can be depicted as something that not just is consumed, but consumes. The preacher yells, “Let God use you. God wants to use you. Lie back and let him use you, use you. Lie back [...] Use you, use you” (78). A God that can be “ordered” and then will use its believers is not an escape or change from the blank culture the characters live in. Clay’s “conversion” is the nearest any of Ellis’s characters come to a real consideration of faith, and he clearly walks away unchanged.

Ellis's coupling of appealing Christian references at the periphery of his works and Clay's inability to find something new in the Christianity that he witnesses seems to contradict itself. Christianity appears to be both a possible solution and part of the problem. In posing this conundrum, Ellis's works powerfully depict the necessity for Christianity to be a counter-cultural faith. Christianity's history is as a counter-cultural movement, and practiced as such, it can provide antidotes to the bankrupt morality, consumerism, and identity fragmentation of postmodern culture. However, when Christianity merges with culture, it becomes (like baptism and the Eucharist in Plath) ineffectual and even damaging.

One of the Church's most counter-cultural practices is confession. Confession is the practice of telling the truth and of reconciling to God. It asks for God, rather than culture, to define and shape us. Ellis's use of the first-person present in all his novels evokes a confessional tone, and as his characters chronicle their actions and thoughts and try to achieve some sort of wholeness or sense of truth about themselves along the way, they essentially engage in the act of confession. However, because they confess to those who are as defined by their culture and their culture's problems as they are, their confessions do not

bring absolution.¹⁸ Without a counter-cultural confession, the characters remain controlled and defined by their culture, destined to an identity fragmented by consumerism and a lack of a center.

While many of Ellis's works depict the failure of confession, the problem is nowhere clearer than in *American Psycho*. Patrick, the serial killer narrator, exhibits all of the problems of a center-less world: moral bankruptcy, consumerism/surface-level living, and identity fragmentation. He also explicitly calls the novel a "confession." *American Psycho* is Ellis's most well-known work and also provides a perfect case example for showing that in a God-less world, a confession cannot absolve; it simply "mean[s] nothing" (377).

Confession in American Psycho

American Psycho opens with the words: "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE" (3). This beginning warns readers that the world they are about to enter is reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno*. True to its warning, the Yuppie New York world Bret Easton Ellis depicts is a terrifying, brutal hell where the protagonist, Patrick Bateman, is a rich, handsome monster who cooks women's heads and pops out homeless men's eyeballs on his way home from dinner at a

¹⁸ *Lunar Park* is an arguable exception, though he finds peace more than absolution. By novel's end, Bret is divorced, on drugs, and unable to reconcile with his son, but he does seem to find an uneasy peace with his son and his father. Even still, his reconciliation is one-sided, since he is never able to talk either to his son or father. He primarily finds peace with their ghosts.

glitzy restaurant. As brutal as Patrick's acts are, however, he has occasional moments of conscience and clarity, and he seems to almost want to be revealed as the killer he is and punished accordingly. He continually blurts out the truth of his homicidal instincts to his friends and other people in the city, but no one actually pays attention to him. He seeks to confess but cannot find a confessor. Even the novel itself serves as a kind of confession, but he concludes that it still gives him "no catharsis": his "confession has meant nothing" (377), and he ends the novel without any growth or change. However, though Patrick's confession results in nothing—no redemption or happy exit from his life of murder—*American Psycho* ultimately points not to the meaninglessness of confession, but to the need for true confession rooted in a distinctively counter-cultural Christian tradition.

Only three critics, Sylvia Söderlind, John Pollock, and Daniel Cojocaru, have considered the novel's religious implications. Even Söderlind, who considers *American Psycho* an allegory, does not focus on the religious elements of the allegory; instead, she suggests that the American nature of *American Psycho* serves as a warning for the country to find "a way to abolish the national penchant for typological thinking and restore both agency and conscience to the individual" (76). She contrasts *American Psycho* with *The Scarlet Letter*, arguing that Hawthorne's novel was an "allegory of the heart" while *American Psycho* is

an allegory of “the void left where the heart used to be” (75). Pollock, on the other hand, does consider the novel a religious allegory, suggesting that Price may be Satan, sent to buy Patrick’s soul.¹⁹ His critique does not go much farther than that, however, leaving much to be done in terms of religion within the novel. I want to ask, with Berthold Schoene, if “there might be any conceivable way out” from the terrifying world of *American Psycho* (394). While Patrick’s fractured identity and violent actions are a product of his culture, he also attempts to escape both from himself and his culture. But because of his failure to do so, the novel does raise Schoene’s question of whether or not there is a way out. It is my belief that Patrick’s inability to escape suggests that the only one who can save us from our self-created hell is God.

Daniel Cojocaru’s article, which compares James Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* to Ellis’s *American Psycho*, begins to consider this question, as I do, through the lens of confession and its religious implications. He argues that both novels “are representations of worlds immersed” in “deviated transcendency,” a term he borrows from René Girard

¹⁹ Both Söderlind and Pollock rely heavily on Timothy Price’s character in their analysis. Söderlind effectively argues that Price is Patrick’s double in the novel, which is a common device in allegories. Pollock’s argument, while interesting, is also stretched. Much of it is based on Price’s absence and the smudge marks he has when he comes back. However, Sonia Baelo-Allué makes a much more convincing explanation, arguing that Price has HIV/AIDS since dark spots are one of the symptoms. AIDS awareness and fear was growing in the 80s, and earlier in the novel, Patrick and his friends joke that no white man would need to use a condom or worry about the disease, so having Price, who, like Patrick, is a quintessential yuppie, contract the disease would show how the clique’s fear of the “other” penetrates their “normal” group.

(186). For Cojocaru, the characters in each novel demonstrate deviated transcendency by looking to and copying other humans instead of looking to and imitating God. Consequently, their quest for transcendence fails and ends in violence. Cojocaru claims that the key to understanding the novel “is to acknowledge authentic transcendence, that is, to leave the level of internal mediation for external mediation” (194). Cojocaru pinpoints the problem in the novel, but he primarily focuses on the idea of deviated transcendency rather than the ritual of confession itself. Analyzing the rite of confession helps further demonstrate that a deviated transcendency cannot match divine transcendence. Considering why Patrick’s confession fails will reveal a deep need for Christianity to be counter-cultural and to practice confession as a counter-cultural act.

Ellis’s consequences of a God-less, de-centered world shaped almost completely by media culture are blindingly clear in *American Psycho*. Patrick is the quintessential consumer whose understanding of people as product-to-be-consumed turns him into a morally bankrupt serial killer. His identity is fragmented: he does not feel fulfilled either by his role as the “boy next door” Wall Street businessman or as an underground serial killer (11). He spends much of the novel trying to form some kind of connection—both to others and to

himself—but even the intimacy of seeing someone’s bodily innards cannot make him feel anything.

Even though his actions seem extreme, Patrick is also not an anomaly or an aberration; instead, he perfectly conforms to, and has been created by, his culture. Recognizing Patrick as a product of his culture is important for understanding why Patrick cannot be redeemed or punished in the end; it is also important for understanding the novel as a whole. Ellis includes a telling quote from Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* that clearly indicts the current cultural climate in shaping a person like Patrick. The preface reads, “The author of these Notes and the Notes themselves are, of course, fictional. Nevertheless, such persons as the composer of these Notes not only exist in our society, but indeed must exist, considering the circumstances under which our society has been formed” (1). Much of the criticism on *American Psycho* argues that Patrick is the “logical conclusion” of certain problems in our society, ranging from capitalism, masculinity, violence, and, the most common, postmodernism.²⁰

²⁰ John Conley argues that because the poor are so pushed to the margins, the novel is actually about the excesses of capitalism and the problem of poverty. Mark Storey argues that Patrick attacks “the other” (women, the homeless, homosexuals) as a way to try to reassert a declining masculine ideal. Vartan P. Messier argues that Ellis’s use of violence critiques the reader’s own voyeuristic tendencies for sex and gore. Like Patrick, our own boredom causes us to seek out violence (87). Theodore Martin and Martin Weinreich both applaud Ellis’s critiques of postmodern culture. Martin argues that Ellis’s novels are fitting “decade novels,” with *American Psycho* encapsulating the 80s and *Glamorama* the 90s. He argues that the two novels, which he sees as “bound together” (167), lack the “distanced historical perspective” of “historical novels,” and thus, as period novels, are “fully imprisoned in the immediacy of the present,”

Ignoring the societal critique by focusing too much on the “psycho” part of the novel’s title limits the depth and brilliance of the novel’s implications. As Cojocaru notes, “if Bateman simply suffers from a very severe psychotic disorder, it would absolve society from responsibility for the making of him” (194). Reading the novel without considering Patrick as a “product” of a “society of crass materialism” misses “the most poignant and disturbing irony in the novel”: our society not only creates him, “but is with eyes open encouraging him to continue his elimination of replaceable, hollow human beings” (194). All of Ellis’s novels critique, as Ellis says, “a world that we live in that values all the wrong things” (Wang), and *American Psycho* portrays an extreme version of these problematic values and the people they produce.

While Ellis’s critique of consumerism, for example, is present in all of his novels, it is particularly prevalent in *American Psycho*, where Patrick is obsessed with labels and brands. Patrick and his friends are consummate consumers, and Patrick sees himself and his friends as an extension of consumerism. When he

making it “all the more pressing” for the reader “to find a way out” (171). The reader realizes that the “shared vision” of these novels has not always been there, and will therefore “not, finally, have the last word” (174). Weinreich more particularly discusses the problems of postmodernity in Ellis’s novels. He argues that Patrick longs for “fixed categories of good and evil,” but in Patrick’s world, all that is left is a “free floating sign system without predetermined ontological values” (77). Consequently, all Patrick has are commodity signs, which he appropriates through his own repetition, an act that “spirals into meaninglessness” (75) as he fails to find any greater meaning in his actions. Alex Blazer argues that Patrick “constitutes the postmodern, pop cultural subject carried to its logical conclusion.” All these critiques, while taking a different angle, conclude that Patrick is not just a “psychopath,” but a development, a natural growth from society.

describes his own apartment, he mentions he has a “high-contrast highly defined model [...] digital TV set from Toshiba,” a “glass top coffee table with oak legs by Turchin,” several “Steuben glass animals placed strategically around expensive crystal ashtrays from Fortunoff” though he doesn’t smoke, and a “Wurlitzer jukebox” next to a “black ebony Baldwin concert grand piano” he doesn’t play (25). He even chronicles what brands of toothpaste and shampoo he uses, and his descriptions emulate catalogues and go on for pages.²¹ Patrick views people through the same consumerist lens and uses the same catalogue-descriptions to describe his friends. When he notes friends’ appearances, it is always through the brands they are wearing. For example, the first character we are introduced to, Timothy Price, is described as “wearing a six-button wool and silk suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie and leather wing tips by Fratellia Rossetti” (5). By describing people in the same way as products, Patrick demonstrates that he “has internalized the consumerist logic to such an extent that he literally sees no difference between a person and an object” (Baelo-Allué 110). Patrick whittles

²¹ The thoroughness with which he describes these is wonderfully satirical. He uses Rembrandt toothpaste on a “faux-tortoise-shell toothbrush,” Listerine, Probright tooth polisher, and an Interplak tooth polisher, which “has a speed of 4200 rpm and reverses direction forty-six times per second.” His shampoo is either Vidal Sassoon, for “getting rid of the coating of dried perspiration, salts, oils, airborne pollutants and dirt that can weigh down hair and flatten it to the scalp and make you look older,” or, on weekends, he uses Greune Natural Revitalizing Shampoo, because it has different vitamins (27).

his own and others' existences into the quality of choices they make and can afford.

However, with everyone's identity reliant on making the best choices and acquiring the best goods, Patrick and his friends are hard to distinguish from one another. When Patrick asks his girlfriend, Evelyn, why she does not date Timothy Price instead of him, since Price is rich, good-looking, and has a great body, her response is to say, "*Everybody's*" rich, good-looking, and has a great body (23, italics in text). Since the standards used to determine worth are all surface-level attributes, they are upheld to perfection by nearly all of Patrick's acquaintances.²² Consequently, nearly everyone is simply interchangeable, a characteristic that becomes a common theme throughout the novel: people are often mistaken for others because no one can really tell anyone apart or cares to tell anyone apart. Patrick is constantly mistaken for his coworkers or friends, and other men are constantly mistaken for Patrick. Without some other avenue for identity other than the items they purchase, everyone simply looks like copies of a catalogue and copies of each other.

²² Evelyn's use of "everyone" also connotes the limitedness of their group of acquaintances. The only people they know are people who value the same things they do and have the same lifestyles. Thus, other than some of the people Patrick murders, no one in the book is poor. John Conley analyzes this issue in his article, "The Poverty of Bret Easton Ellis," arguing that poverty's seeming absence actually critiques, in part, a contemporary push in New York to move the homeless out of the main parts of the city so that they would no longer be seen.

Patrick's violent secret life as a serial killer is almost his way of setting himself apart from all this interchangeability and creating his own identity, twisted as that strategy may be. While his violent acts are a product of seeing people as object-to-be-used-and-consumed ("this thing, this girl, this meat, is nothing, is shit" [345]), his murders are also a reaction against the consumerism that defines his life. Patrick grows increasingly frustrated with people being so absorbed in themselves that they neither notice nor care about anything around them. One of the other prescripts in the beginning of the book says, "And as things fell apart, nobody paid much attention" (1), and people's lack of attention—of caring—even in the face of extreme evil is central to the novel. Patrick finds this to be true, noting how "no one pays attention, they don't even pretend to *not* pay attention" (150).

His violent murders become his way of trying to shatter the consumerist façade that surrounds him.²³ He despises the shallow conversations everyone has (though he participates in them), and he wants his acquaintances to

²³ Several critics, particularly Alex Blazer, Martin Weinreich, David Roche, and Daniel Cojocaru, also believe that violence is an attempt to cut through his culture. They argue that Patrick kills to find some sort of feeling: "Bateman is an idea and an image, but empty and void of deep identity. [He] kills indiscriminately in order to feel for himself-in order to cause feeling, in order to shock some feeling, any feeling, into the hollow image that constitutes his very psychic identity (Blazer). Or, as Weinreich puts it, "It appears that Patrick Bateman murders in order to discover something authentic, something remotely meaningful, which might be hidden beyond the surface composed entirely of images and signs—as if killing could introduce a feeling of profundity into his otherwise shallow existence" (72).

recognize something real. For example, he considers cutting his own wrist and spurting blood at a friend who is describing his vacation just to see if “he would still continue to talk” (140). Patrick searches for something beyond the surface of things: he desires real emotion, real relationships, doing things that matter.²⁴

After another mind-numbing day, he admits that he is “seeking something deeper, something undefined” (163), which prompts him to kill a dog and a man in Central Park to try to appease that need. Nevertheless, his extreme acts do not provide him with a newfound sense of meaning to his life; nothing really changes, and he grows increasingly frustrated that no matter what his heinous acts, people will remain affectless behind their wall of shallowness. He starts to fantasize about killing someone in front of his friends or girlfriend just to see if it would momentarily shake them from their self-involvement, and he becomes more and more careless with his murders, killing homeless men on a public street, slitting the throat of a young boy at the zoo in the middle of the day, and revisiting the apartment of a murdered coworker.

²⁴ Being a serial killer allows him to make an actual impact since he is taking a life. Patrick seeks out destroying lives with a certain amount of significance. When he kills a young child at the zoo, for instance, he finds killing the child much less gratifying since the boy has less history and relational ties. However, violence also becomes just another shallow triviality. He describes his violent acts in a similar manner to his household products. To combat this banality of violence, he tries to stretch himself to the depths of horrible act, such as eventually trying to eat his victims, in a further attempt to push the boundaries of transgression in an attempt to stumble upon something real.

Patrick almost wants to be discovered for his crimes. He even begins to openly confess his murders to both friends and strangers. He admits he is a “fucking evil psychopath” (20), tells a girl he would like to stab her and play with her blood (59), tells another that he would like to “tit fuck her and then maybe cut her arms off” (79-80), tells Evelyn her neighbor’s head is in his freezer and that he would like to shoot her mother with a shotgun (118, 124), interjects “I’m utterly insane,” and “I like to dissect girls” while talking to a co-worker (216), and even coos “I’m a total psychopath, I like to kill people,” to a baby (221). However, no matter how explicit his confession, no one reacts to him. His conversation with Evelyn particularly reveals Patrick’s genuine desire to disclose—and have someone else recognize—the truth about himself. After a long, strange rant about killing two children, he asks her, “Is any of this registering with you or would I get more of a response from, oh, an ice bucket?” He notes that he has said all of this while staring straight at her, “enunciating precisely, “trying to explain” himself, and when she opens her mouth to talk, he “finally expects her to acknowledge [his] character” (121). He gets excited at this prospect, but he is disappointed and frustrated when she merely says “Is that... Ivana Trump?” (121). Immediately his “adrenaline rush turned sour” and he put his head in his hands, disappointed that even a confession of murder could not get through to her.

His most desperate attempt to confess occurs after the police chase him for murdering a saxophonist on the street. He flees to his work building and leaves a message for his lawyer, Harold Carnes. He says that he has finally decided to “make public what had been a private dementia,” and he leaves a message admitting every murder that he has committed, concluding with an admission that he is “a pretty sick guy” (352). However, once again, when Patrick runs into Carnes, Carnes mistakes him for another person and congratulates him on the hilarious prank message he left, telling him it was amusing but not believable, since Patrick is such a “brown-nosing goody goody” that picturing him chopping up a coworker was too far to stretch the joke (387). Patrick insists, however, that it’s all true, trying one more time to get through to someone. He says, “you don’t seem to understand. You’re not really comprehending any of this. I killed him. I did it, Carnes, I chopped Owen’s fucking head off. I tortured dozens of girls. That whole message I left on your machine was *true*” (388). Patrick actually pleas with Carnes to acknowledge his deeds, to uphold some sort of justice in a world Patrick has basically given up on, but Carnes refuses to believe him.²⁵

²⁵ Some critics argue that the other characters ignore Patrick’s confessions because the murders are all hallucinations. Jaap Kooijman and Tarja Laine, for instance, argue that Patrick’s violent acts are a figment of his imagination; he never actually kills but has split himself off from his shallow, consumerist Wall Street identity through a created double as a serial killer. There is definitely an ambiguity here, since Patrick is an unreliable narrator who even begins to narrate a brief chase scene in third person late in the novel. However, whether or not the murders are real does not deter from the fact that Patrick genuinely seeks a way out and that his society provides

Patrick's vehement confession fails to get through, his exertion drains him, and he "wonders why" purging his conscience in this confession "doesn't feel like a blessing" (388).

Even Patrick's own writing of the book as a confession fails. As he reflects on what he has become, he decides that he only holds on "to one single bleak truth: no one is safe, nothing is redeemed" (377). He writes,

Even after admitting this—and I have, countless times, in just about every act I've committed—and coming face-to-face with these truths, there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling. There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant nothing. (377)

This nothingness is reinforced by the very last lines of the novel, "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT," signaling that though the novel is ending, it does not mean that any change has come for Patrick. He exits even more fragmented, lost, and "sick" than he was in the beginning of his confession.

Patrick's confession fails because he confesses to others like him: to his society. Michel Foucault can help explain why this kind of confession cannot work. In several of Foucault's later essays, particularly "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self," "Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of 'Political Reason,'" and "Technologies of the Self," he explores the differences

no escape for him. He feels trapped and unable to reach through to anyone—everyone is so absorbed in themselves that they pay no attention to him.

between Christian confession and the modern appropriation of confession. He points out that Christian confession, whether dramatic or verbal, is always tied to a renunciation of self. He argues that in Christian confession, the “revelation of truth about oneself cannot be dissociated from the obligation to renounce oneself. We have to sacrifice the self in order to discover the truth about ourselves, and we have to discover the truth about ourselves in order to sacrifice ourselves” (“Hermeneutics,” 221). Truth about the self and sacrifice of the self are thus intrinsically connected and part of the Christian identity. Foucault says that when the modern age revised confession for its own means, the changes created problems in the formation of the self. He says that after the eighteenth century, confessional techniques were “reinserted in a different context by the so-called human sciences in order to use them without renunciation of the self but to constitute, positively, a new self” (*Technologies*, 249). To use confession “without renouncing oneself constitutes a decisive break” for Foucault, since it makes people “amenable to social control and dependent upon it” (*Technologies*, 249, “Hermeneutics,” 200). One still sacrifices the self by admitting one’s confessions, but it is not in order to deny the world, but to cohere with the world.²⁶ The

²⁶ Foucault does not necessarily encourage the Christian form of confession either. His ideal is the Hellenic dictate to “take care of your self” rather than to “know yourself.” He conceives the self as something to be created, in a sense, through exercises like self-writing. The self should always, for Foucault, be merged with the will, with an act, rather than just an examination of conscience.

main goal is not renunciation but normalization. People confess the truth about themselves—confess their identities—in order to be labeled, categorized, and possibly “fixed” to meet society’s standards.

Two of these new means of confession are mental health sciences (particularly psychology and psychiatry) and the justice system, both of which fail in Ellis's works. While Patrick admittedly has mental health problems, science alone cannot heal Patrick. Patrick never sees a psychiatrist, but Clay, in *Less Than Zero*, visits one on a regular basis. The psychiatrist does try to encourage Clay to be less “passive” and “more active” in his life (109), which is good advice, but when Clay actually shows emotion (a rare event) and cries in front of the psychiatrist at a later session, the psychiatrist tells Clay he should not be “so mundane” in wanting to talk about himself (122-3). The psychiatrist is also an opportunist who tries to use Clay’s family connections in the movie business to get him into Hollywood. Clay’s experience with the psychiatrist fails to help him, and while good psychiatrists could conceivably do a lot to help many of Ellis’s characters, Ellis’s negative depiction here suggests that psychiatry will fail to help his characters with the kind of problems they have. Clay does need to be “more active,” but if he thinks he is on a road that “doesn’t go anywhere,” he will continue to passively live his life as a void. At the end of the novel, all that Clay can say he likes “is nothing,” as in nothingness (204). Clay

cannot begin to heal until he replaces the “nothing” at the center of his life, a feat the mental health sciences simply cannot accomplish on their own.

Ellis also criticizes society’s over-reliance on psychiatric drugs, particularly Xanax and other mood-altering prescriptions. In *American Psycho*, Patrick continually pops Xanax, as do several of other characters in Ellis's novels. In *Lunar Park*, Ellis notes how Bret’s young, adopted daughter takes her vitamins the same way his wife takes her psychiatric pills, frequently mentions Bret's own over-reliance on Xanax and Klonopin, which he uses to deaden his emotions whenever he feels anxiety, and notes how frequently even the children are medicated for anxiety, attention problems, and depression, turning them into almost emotion-less, blank robots. He calls his children “non-responsive,” “amnesiac,” unable to “read facial expressions,” and “unable to put thoughts” into “actions” (166). Ellis thus not only critiques psychiatry for failing to heal people, but he also makes it part of the contribution to the problem.

Criminal justice, on the other hand, is simply impotent. Patrick outright confesses, kills people in public places in the middle of the day, and turns his bloodied sheets into dry-cleaners on a regular basis, but he is never persecuted. When he is nearly caught and leaves the confession of all his deeds on his lawyer’s voice message, everything, again, comes to naught. Confessing both to psychiatrists and to the criminal justice system cannot bring the kind of

redemption or change Patrick wants because they are all about fulfilling the norms of his society, not providing an escape from his society.

Patrick already knows what the “normal” version of his identity, the one that obeys rules and standards, looks like. As Baelo-Allué says, having a “monster” who is not an “other” but the picture of success in his society is clearly a heavy social critique: “When a man who is perfectly integrated in society, who follows all the social rules and is *the* ultimate consumer in a capitalistic society, becomes a cruel serial killer, the blame cannot be put only on the individual, the blame reaches the whole of society, readers included” (115). Patrick's society, including the readers, cannot act as his confessor or grant him redemption because it is part of what has already shaped him into the homicidal killer he has become. The postmodern, consumerist culture has many competing, shallow claims on him, but there is no meaningful substance behind Patrick's identity, and he feels he is merely a “fabrication, an aberration” created out of the products he uses and the media he watches (337).²⁷ What remains “is an idea of

²⁷ In *American Psycho*, the episodes of Patrick's favorite television show, *The Patty Winters Show*, echo the shallowness, absurdity, and violence of his culture. Here is a selection of the topics of the show: multiple personalities, autism, big breasts, perfumes, lipsticks and makeup, UFO's that kill, the possibility of nuclear war (they conclude it will probably happen next month), toddler-murderers, Nazis, mastectomies, dwarf tossing, women who married homosexuals, aerobic exercise, deformed people, concentration camp survivors, salad bars, whether Patrick Swayze has become cynical or not, women who have been tortured, people who weigh over seven hundred pounds (the subheading: what can we do about them), tips on how your pet can become a movie star, Princess Di's beauty tips, a machine that lets people talk to the dead, human dairies, a man who set his daughter on fire while she was giving birth, beautiful

a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction,” but “no real me, only an entity, something illusory” (337).²⁸ Patrick thus already has sacrificed himself to the society around him, and it has subsequently stripped him of any real identity and defined him—along with everyone else—as a product and as a consumer.²⁹ Consequently, the people Patrick seeks to confess to ultimately cannot help him because they have helped form him, and, as discussed before, are hardly different from him. It is no wonder, then, that his confessions go unheeded, and that he can find no “exit” from his issues.

teenage lesbians, girls in fourth grade who trade sex for crack, and whether or not economic success equal happiness, and a two-part episode featuring Axl Rose admitting he uses razor blades on himself and Ted Bundy’s letters to his wife.

²⁸ Ellis continually calls attention to Patrick’s fractured identity. Patrick did not even recognize himself as a human being: “There wasn’t a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except greed and possibly total disgust. I had all the characteristics of a human being—flesh, blood, skin, hair, but my depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, that the normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure. I was simply imitating reality, a rough resemblance of a human being, with only a dim corner of my mind functioning” (282). He later concludes that though “there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction,” there is “no real me, only an entity, something illusory,” and he is “simply not there” (376-7). Patrick has become the signified without the referent: an empty shell only identifiable by a name, with no concrete existence or point of reference.

²⁹ Critics have frequently argued this point. Martyn Lee argues that Patrick’s identity is formed from, and that he understands his life through, commodities. Baelo-Allué argues that Patrick “internalizes everything offered by mass culture and consumerism,” and thus is “constructing his personality with them” (106). Mark Storey argues that Patrick’s “central identity” has been “created by external forces,” which causes Patrick, who Storey argues is an extreme type of a dying masculinity, to lash out and attempt to reassert control and central status through his violence (58). Elizabeth Young goes so far as to say that Patrick is so void that he is nothing but a “cipher: a sign” that “sets in motion the process that must destroy him” (119). While these critics take his vacuity in different directions, they all agree that Patrick is ultimately a cultural construction and void of any meaningful sense of identity.

I thus find in *American Psycho* a surprising affirmation: we need God to rescue us from the hell we have created. Near the end of the novel, Patrick goes into a long digression that pinpoints our Godless world as a cause for his compassionless, murderous state of living:

It did not occur to me, ever, that people were good or that man was capable of change or that the world could be a better place through one's taking pleasure in a feeling or a look or a gesture, of receiving another person's love or kindness. Nothing was affirmative, the term "generosity of spirit" applied to nothing, was a cliché, was some kind of bad joke. Sex is mathematics. Individuality no longer an issue. What does intelligence signify? Define reason. Desire—meaningless. Intellect is not a cure. Justice is dead. Fear, recrimination, innocence, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief, were things, emotions, that no one really felt anymore. Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. (375)

Patrick's conclusions affirm what several of Ellis's other novels suggest: without a transcendent source to help dictate purpose and values to life, everything is meaningless ("surface, surface, surface") at best, extremely evil at worst. If God is dead, Patrick argues, all that is left are the things that he already represents—materiality and evil. If God is dead, his confession rightly means "nothing."

Christian Confession

Though Patrick seeks to confess his problems to several different people, everyone—even we as readers—fail to receive and fulfill his confession. He searches for a confessor that can and will finally hear the truth of his terrible

deeds. He instinctively follows the form of a confession, yet he only finds “nothing” instead of redemption. In Ellis’s postmodern, death-of-God society, no confessor exists because no God exists. Here, confession cannot be anything more than a self-sacrifice to a society which has shaped the person and caused so many of his or her problems. There is no escape, nothing beyond this world: God is dead, Christianity is a cog in the mass media machine, and everyone seems the same. However, if Christianity still confesses that God is alive and upholds its role as a counter-cultural faith, the practice of Christian confession itself can possibly be a counter-cultural alternative to the problems so many of these characters experience.

While confession is one of the most appropriated of the Christian rituals, separated from its purpose as a turning to God and used as a tool for cultural normalization, it loses its power. Carl Jung considers the confessional the “prototype” of analytical treatment and thinks there is a close relationship between psychoanalysis and Christian confession (31). However, as noted above, psychology in Ellis is perhaps part of—not the solution to—the problem. Both Annemarie Kidder and Adrienne Von Speyr note the connection between confession and psychology and claim that psychology should not and cannot replace confession. For example, Von Speyr argues that psychological confession is “diametrically opposed to Christian confession,” since in psychological

treatment, one is “reflecting upon himself” while in Christian confession, “the object of contemplation is always God, never oneself” (158). Christian confession does not seek to normalize or socialize a confessor; instead, it seeks to reconcile the sinner into the communion of believers.

Christian confession reconciles a sinner to God. An understanding of sin, as Monica Helwig points out, is instrumental toward a proper understanding of confession. Sin is primarily defined as creating a chasm, a “deliberate or unrecognized detachment from God” (21), caused by trying to find meaning in life “without ultimate reference to God” (14).³⁰ Patrick and his friends continually try to carve out meaning in other ways, particularly through the products their culture tells them they need to use. His entire world is understood through the lens of consumerism, through the use-and-throw-away attitude that is so problematic in all of Ellis’s work. Patrick feels a disconnect between his outside appearance and his internal feelings, admitting, “I feel like shit but look great...all it comes down to is this” (Ellis 106). In contrast to a life defined by its culture, admitting sin, as David Coffey notes, is distinctly counter-cultural. In the kind of competitive society that Patrick lives in, people are constantly pushed to “project the most positive possible image of themselves, an image which allows no room for admission of weakness, let alone failure”

³⁰ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Sin is before all else an offense against God, a rupture of communion with him” (1440).

(Coffey 109). An admission of sins frees a person from fraudulence and allows for transparency—that sense of “the real” Ellis’s characters continually quest after.

Mere confession of sin alone does not reflect the entire purpose of confession. Confession of sin admits responsibility in creating a distance and detachment from God, but more importantly, it also means that one seeks to bridge this chasm. Thus, confession “turns us to God, to restore us to God’s grace” and to invite us to “an intimate friendship” with God (*Catechism* 1468). As von Speyr succinctly states, absolution, the intended result of confession, is much less a turning away from sin than a turning to God” (60). Patrick’s confession never aims to turn to God, and thus, there is “not an exit” from his life. While Patrick feels fragmented and alone, the Christian confessional intends to “glue our fragments back together,” to reconcile a person into the “creature that God created in order to redeem it in himself” (von Speyr 157). Sin causes a person to feel “sin-schizophrenia,” to become “broken into a thousand pieces, incurably fragmented,” but “confession is there so that a person may collect himself” (157). Christian confession thus responds to Patrick’s quest by offering antidotes to moral depravity, consumerism, and identity fragmentation through confession’s emphasis on sin, truth, and reconciliation.

Augustine's own *Confessions* provides a first-hand testimony that demonstrates that confession is primarily about reconciling ourselves with God, because when we are separated from God, we are not wholly ourselves and become self-destructive. Augustine admits that when he sins and is separated from God, the "fountain of life" (87), he also separates from himself. He says he became "at odds with [him]self" and was "fragmenting [him]self," a "disintegration" he found "occurring without [his] consent" (202). The more he separated himself from God, the more he discovered he was separated from himself, so that he no longer even had control over himself or recognized his actions and thoughts as his own. Augustine thus turns to confession in order to "give a coherent account of [his] disintegrated self," because he knows that when he "turned away from" God, he "went to pieces" (62). His confession is thus his means of turning toward God again. By confessing sin, that which has split him from God and from himself, he is able to reconcile with God and reconcile the pieces of himself. Confession is Augustine's medicine, as Aquinas's analogy suggests: "In the life of the body a man is sometimes sick, and unless he takes medicine, he will die. Even so in the spiritual life a man is sick on account of sin. For that reason he needs medicine so that he might be restored to health": confession (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4.73). Thus, to help Patrick, who admits he is

a “pretty sick guy,” or Victor, who says he is “soul sick,” confession is needed: a confession that reconciles a sinner with God.

These confessions can only work, however, if the Church itself keeps confessing. Confession is a reminder of where one stands and what one needs to stand for. Without it, the Church, like the individual sinner, can become more and more fragmented and split away from its true identity. The televangelist Clay encounters confesses his faith, but he confesses a faith that is easy and purchasable; it can be consumed and is consuming. However, when Christianity does not become the cultural narrative, but stands at the periphery, offering an alternative story, it confesses that faith is something different—that it can be the “exit” Patrick searches for.

Patrick comments late in the book that he “feels as if he’s moving toward as well as away from something” (380). Because he’s exercising the form of confession, he’s moving toward Christianity; yet, because he cannot find a confessor and because confession has become disconnected from its religious roots, he is also moving away from Christianity. The reader, I would argue, goes through something similar. As we read the novel and read about horrific murder after horrific murder, we are constantly moving away from any semblance of a religious, sacred world. However, our desire to escape from Patrick’s world and to find some kind of alternative to both shallow materialism

and pervasive evil also moves us toward a desire for the transcendent, for something to redeem us and restore values and good, for a Being that can actually accept our confessions. Fittingly then, the last words of the novel, "This is not an exit," only serve to make the reader even more desperate to find one.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

The writers I have considered all depict the failure of substitutes to fill in for Christianity but they still never became Christians themselves; they did not find what they sought outside or within the Church. By being outside of the Christian faith (but still interested in it), their works thus not just critique appropriated forms, but help the Church figure out what it needs to do better. Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald's work portrays the power of love in reorienting one's entire life and shows how the Church must be able to capture people's hearts and spark their desire to engage in a dogged pursuit of love. Hemingway's texts remind the Church to profess its entire narrative and to confront suffering. It must be willing to share its stories and effectively demonstrate how those stories help us to understand our own. McCullers's critique on idols is a necessary indictment of false gods, both outside and inside the Church, and her work, especially combined with Ellis's, powerfully condemns the consumeristic idols Christianity has produced. The mass market production of Christian "goods" has manufactured and skewed the image of Christ, so that Jesus has become a product on the shelf, an anesthetized and impotent picture of friendliness and cheer, rather than a suffering Savior and the true image of God. As Ellis's works

stress, Christianity cannot become merely part of the culture if it is to survive.

Plath's work also emphasizes the need for Christianity to be careful in what it becomes. Her work attests to the seemingly quick descent Christianity can have into becoming either an abusive, aggressive, "piranha religion" or a mere social club.

In other words, all these authors' works leave a powerful charge to the Church to be what it was created to be. If it is not, Christianity is—like the Christian forms I have examined—emptied of its potency. It must stand as a witness to the grace of God and a testimony to the redemption offered by a life in Christ. It must also instruct, so that believers and non-believers alike know—to adapt Charles Taylor—where the Church stands (and what they practice) and therefore know who the Church is. Only if the Church is what it was created to be can it, too, be more than an empty sign that points nowhere. It will instead be the sign that points to a new city, a way out, a fulfillment of all being. It can then provide a dynamic, alternative narrative to the one these writers' characters are living.

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