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Last Words: The Influence of Religion on the Short Fiction of Grace Paley & Flannery O'Connor

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LAST WORDS:

THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON THE SHORT FICTION OF

GRACE PALEY & FLANNERY O'CONNOR

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…whether you think time will stop or that the world is eternal; there is still a need to speak humanly of a life's importance in relation to it—a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end.

Frank Kermode

Chapter I. Introduction: Beginning With Endings

I began reading Grace Paley's collection of short fiction from beginning to end, for the first time consecutively. The first story in the collection, and one of the most famous, "Goodbye and Good Luck" absolutely puzzled me. There was no exposition in the story. Paley dropped me right into Aunt Rose's world without any explanation. I felt lost. There were no quotations marks to indicate dialogue, time shifted without much warning, and the characters were easy to mix up. Rereading the story, I began to follow it more easily. I could chart the story and piece together what was happening. I taught myself how to read Paley and how to follow her. It isn't that her stories are so complex, instead her writing appears so simple that it is easy not see the many layers at work in her minimalistic use of language.

Reading Paley, one thing I kept fixating on was endings. I couldn't understand why the stories ended the way they did. None of the endings were expected. It isn't that I wanted the stories to be predictable, but usually there are only so many ways a story can go. None of the stories went in any direction I could have traced. Sometimes it felt like they didn't go anywhere—they just stopped and stood there, hanging, unmovable and unknowable. I would just stare at it, not sure what to think. I knew I liked these stories, but I wasn't sure why exactly. What is compelling about a story that doesn't end? At the same time, there was something satisfying about the mystery. Paley was constantly surprising me and challenging me. There's a wit and humor in her stories; she's a fierce and fearless storyteller.

That began my project, asking the question: Why are Paley's endings like *this*? Then I had to find out, what's *this*? What are her endings like? Not every story is the same or alike, but the endings felt similar. I could take each ending apart from the beginning and it would be hard

to guess where they came from and what they were related to. Here is an example from the story "Come On Ye Sons of Art," that demonstrates the appearance of randomness in her endings. Paley concludes, "Well, it was on account of the queen's birthday, the radio commentator said, that such a lot of joy had been transacted in England the busy country, one day when Purcell lived."[1] The story is about a man and woman in bed having a conversation. The last lines from the story are a description of what the woman hears on the radio. As an ending, nothing is resolved or answered. Still, the story was satisfying to me, challenging but satisfying. Paley doesn't take her readers by the hand, showing the tragic struggles of a character and then resolving all of them. That isn't where the satisfaction comes from. Instead, it's the offbeat quality of her work: the humor, the sarcasm, the confidence, and style that are compelling. Her endings can be characterized as trailing off without finality.

I was coming closer to understanding the issues at stake. I had found a pattern in the oddness of her endings, but now I wanted to know, why? There was something deeper at work in her fiction, I could feel it but I wasn't sure how to verbalize it or pinpoint where it came from. It bothered me, why didn't the stories just close and go somewhere? There had to be an explanation and some kind of lens in which to view the inexplicably strange quality of the endings.

From here I knew I needed to bring in another author to help ground the study. There was an author that was constantly in my thoughts as I was reading Paley: Flannery O'Connor. Time and again I kept thinking that there was something similar about them and their writing. The two of them mostly worked in the medium of the short story. Paley and O'Connor lived during the same time and had similarly strong voices. Similarly, Paley's and O'Connor's fiction is unique and specific to who they are. I knew it would help me to think about Paley's endings by looking at

[1] Paley, Grace, *The Collected Stories* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994) 174 (refer to in rest of footnotes as Paley)

O'Connor as well. O'Connor's fiction is saturated with her Catholicism and so it seemed a good balance to have a Secular Jewish author as well as a Catholic one. Joyce Carol Oates compared the two women, saying that Grace Paley, "like Flannery O'Connor, another American original who came of age in the 1950s… concentrated upon short fiction, and her major work is assembled in a single, not extraordinarily hefty volume." The two women were famous for their short stories and lived in the same period. Unfortunately, O'Connor only lived until the age of 39, unable to have an entire lifetime to write. Despite no evidence that the two ever met, it is conceivable that the two women's lives could have at one moment intersected. Grace Paley was born in 1922[2] and Flannery O'Connor was born in 1925.[3] In fact, the two had the same publisher: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux and were acquainted with each other's work.

I was thrilled to find a letter in which O'Connor, the more famous of the two, mentioned Paley's work. O'Connor, who had Lupus, was often in the hospital and was constantly reading. In a letter to her friend Cecil Dawkins from June 24, 1964, O'Connor talks about the books she had sent to her in the hospital:

> …I enjoyed reading *Catch-22* in the hospital though I haven't finished it. …I'm still on it. The Grace Paley I'm very glad to have too, though I think I will get this collection out of the way before I start reading it. Might make me dissatisfied with my offerings. I don't know if I'll include 'You Can't Be Poorer Than Dead' or not. It'll be up to Giroux in any case.[4]

O'Connor tells her friend Cecil, that she will wait to read Paley until after she has written her collection because she's worried it might "make [her] dissatisfied with [her] offerings. This is such a small snippet, but it is wonderful to know that O'Connor knew of Paley and in fact read

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[2] Arcana, Judith, *Grace Paley's Life Stories A Literary Biography* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993) 17

[3] O'Connor, Flannery, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1946) cover author biography (refer to as O'Connor)

[4] O'Connor, Flannery, *The Habit of Being*. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 586

her work. Further, she held her in high regard as a writer. Similarly, Paley commented on the work of O'Connor acknowledging her respect and different creative vision. Paley said in an interview, "Flannery O'Connor's a terrific writer, but somehow her conception of religion as specializing in death—and also her illness—forced her and her brilliant language in that direction."[5] I will discuss this later on, though it is interesting to see what Paley thought of O'Connor's fiction.

Paley and O'Connor were fascinating people with complex lives. For the sake of this analysis, I want to delve into their fiction and how religion affected them. Simply put, Paley identified as a Secular Jew, while O'Connor was a devout Catholic. On the one hand is Paley, she is non-religious but identifies strongly with her New York Jewish upbringing and culture. On the other hand is O'Connor, who never lost sight of her Catholicism, which is at the heart of her fiction and her experience living in the Protestant South. On the surface, they are nothing alike. They differ strongly on even the most basic issues. But, the two women were compelled to write, to respond to the world around them as artists and thinkers. Now I will dig deeper into their fiction and reflect on the many ways in which religion impacts their stories and endings. Endings—I started thinking more about what endings are and what they signify. In Frank Kermode's *The Sense Of An Ending*, he suggests a parallel between religion and fiction as seen in endings. There are three points from Kermode that I would like to focus on, that speak to the way endings work in fiction and why endings are important. Firstly, Kermode identified our need as human beings to belong. Kermode says, "there is still a need to speak humanly of a life's importance in relation to it—a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a

[5] Dee, Jonathan, Barbara Jones, and Larissa MacFarquhar, "Grace Paley, The Art of Fiction No. 131," *Paris Review* 124 (1992)

beginning and to an end."[6] As people living in an uncertain and unknowable world, we need to belong to something—a culture, an identity, a place, a family, a race, and so on. In this particular passage, Kermode highlights the importance of belonging to "a beginning and to an end."[7] In other words, we need to be able to envision our lives in terms of a start and an end, a timeline. We order time and view our lives as linear to help view our experiences and lifetimes. There are two points in our lives that are certain: life and death, or the beginning and the end. Placing ourselves between these two points creates meaning and helps us to engage in the world. It gives our lives a sense of order and purpose. This can be seen in fiction and storytelling. In order for stories to be meaningful or significant they must have a start and an end. Importantly, Kermode shows that endings create meaning in our lives by limiting and organizing time.

Secondly, Kermode realized that a fictional ending could be a way in which an author could represent and pre-experience their own death. Writing enables authors to see through their characters eyes and to experience life through this medium. Endings can act to prefigure an author's death. Kermode says:

> Men, like poets… need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations. They fear it, and as far as we can see have always done so; the End is a figure for their own deaths. (So, perhaps, are all ends in fiction…[8]

Ending a story or a character forces the author to think about what they believe will happen and what the experience of ending will be like. All characters and stories must end and this both creates as meaning and forces the author to confront their own mortality. Finally, relating to this, Kermode said, "we cannot of course be denied an end; it is one of the great charms of books that

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[6] Kermode, Frank, *The Sense Of An Ending, Studies In The Theory Of Fiction : With A New Epilogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 4
[7] ibid.
[8] Kermode 7

they have to end."[9] This wonderful quotation highlights something that can easily be overlooked: everything must end. No matter what, a story will always end, even if the ending just means reaching the last page. The fact of death and endings means that one has to make use of the space and time one is given. It is my own belief, that an author must draw upon their own beliefs and religious identity to formulate endings. How an ending is written and what it shows says quite a lot about an author's point of view. Simply, a story could end on a note of happiness or forgiveness, which might indicate optimism. Alternatively, ending in death or destruction could indicate an apocalyptic or pessimistic attitude. That's overly simplified, but endings contain meaning. They are the last thing we are left with and thus, they become emblematic of the story as a whole.

After realizing the great significance of endings, I wondered about the implications of Paley's religious identity: Secular Judaism. What did Secular Judaism say about the end and how might that inform her peculiar endings? I started then to look at eschatology, the study of a religion's belief system in religion about the end. What I found was that as fascinating as eschatology is, the actual minute details didn't answer my questions. Instead, it was the concept that launched further discovery. Eschatology shows that each culture and each religion has it's own specific view on what happens to we die and what happen collectively to all peoples at the end. I realized a parallel might exist between the way a person writes endings and what they believe to be a) the fate of the world—the end of days or the end of time and b) what will happen to them when they die.

[9] Kermode 23

Neil Gillman's exploration of eschatology in Judaism in the final chapter of *Sacred Fragments*[10], echoes Kermode's ideas and begins to show religion's part in endings. According to Gillman, Jewish ideas about the end should not be taken as scientifically proven roadmaps for the future. Instead he suggests that, "Since the events that we describe lie completely beyond our experience our formulations have to be taken as poetic, dramatic, impressionistic visions—never objective, scientific forecasts."[11] Here we see a philosophy that is not stringent and has flexibility to examine eschatology in all of its facets. To go further, he discusses belief about the end as a way to combat nihilism and feeling meaningless. He says that beliefs about the end:

> …do what great myths have always done: infuse meaning into our lives, generate emotion, mobilize us to action, inspire loyalty, and reveal unsuspected dimensions in our experience. The first of these functions—a response to our search for ultimate meaning—is indispensable. All of us live with the fear that in the cosmic order of things, our lives have little actual significance, that we really don't count, that what we do or don't do makes little difference beyond our immediate lives…[12]

Here Gillman reflects on humankind's fear of ending that can be comforted by a belief system. Endings are important because each person's time on Earth comes to a close and each story has to end. Endings create meaning in our lives by making the time we have indispensable. The great fear that is death or endings is answered and reassured for some, by some religious beliefs. Gillman says that eschatology is, "but a process with a beginning and an end, a process that strives for a realization of all of the potentialities inherent in creation from the outset."[13] As such, having a start and finish creates meaning in our lives. Gillman says that creations inherently contain endings, as death is destined to occur in all things. The search for understanding about these mysterious truths link people and make up the human experience. To begin is to be full of

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[10] Gillman, Neil, "The End of Days," *Sacred Fragments Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990)
[11] Gillman 249
[12] ibid.
[13] Gillman 272

potential in ways that only we can discover. Authors are creators, who pen beginnings, middles, and endings in which people struggle to make sense of their lives. In our own writing we become creators and experience the mystery that is the human condition and how we end.

I have been mentioning religion as a measure for understanding endings. But what is religion? How might one define it? In order to better understand the connection between endings and religion as well as religion and an author it is important to decide on a way in which to view religion. The word religion has a thousands of connotations and meanings unique to each person. Every person has a relationship with religion. On the one hand, some participate in religion as daily practice, a set of beliefs, an identity, and/or a culture. On the other hand, others have relationships to religion through a lack of belief, a religious background, exposure as an outsider, understanding through studying, and spirituality. One way to think about religion is as a culture, as presented by anthropologist Clifford Geertz. The benefit to regarding religion as a culture is that it incorporates many different attitudes towards religion. This becomes important in terms of this work.

Considering Grace Paley and Flannery O'Connor poses a challenge. Paley is a secular Jew, which is a simple way to say that she considers herself to be Jewish in identity but not in the way of following religious custom or religious practice. Judaism is a spectrum of belief and identity in which one can be both religiously and culturally Jewish, or just culturally Jewish. It tends to be that identity is at the base and in modern times, it is the belief that creates the spectrum. Admittedly, an Orthodox Jew would probably not agree with my portrayal. The discussion of what does and does not make someone Jewish is not relevant here. The important thing to recognize is that there are ways of being a part of a religion, but they may not actually include ascribing to religious practice. On the other hand, we have O'Connor who is a devout

Catholic in mind, body, and soul. There's no doubt that she is a believer through and through. No doubt, they both have strong and complex relationships to their religions. What is important when considering these two authors is having a definition that is includes both of their relationships to religion: one as secular and the other as devout. Geertz's definition incorporates both attitudes and lays the framework to help think about what religion means.

Geertz's definition is a combination of ethos and worldview, both of which stem from religion as a culture. Geertz defines religion in the following terms: "religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."[14] The key is that religion is a system that promotes a way of thinking about the world that feels accurate. Further, symbols act to create "moods and motivations"[15], which legitimize the worldview. Geertz defines symbols as "tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs."[16] Sometimes abstract beliefs are grounded in symbols, which are tangible in nature. As stated previously, religion is a combination of ethos and worldview. Geertz defines ethos as "the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood" and worldview as "the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order."[17] Simply put, ethos is colored by personality and way of life, while worldview is how we believe the world to function.

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[14] Geertz, Clifford, "Religion As A Cultural System," *The Interpretation Of Cultures, Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973) 90
[15] ibid.
[16] Geertz 91
[17] Geertz 89

To understand the whole schema, let us examine the cross as a symbol in Christianity. The symbol of the cross is one that evokes among many things: pain, suffering, humiliation, and death. According to Geertz's definitions, these qualities of the symbol become characteristics of ethos and worldview. Given the cross, a Christian's ethos might be built on a life of humility including periods of suffering as purposeful in a dedicated Christian life that exalts devotion. Similarly, the worldview of a Christian might be one in which they see suffering as the greatest form of redemption and as a passage to grace. Ultimately, Christianity as related to the cross sees the world as a difficult and humiliating place that leads to salvation and the afterlife through sacrifice. It is the symbol of the cross, for one, that characterizes Christian belief, worship, and character. These combined create a way of seeing the world that would, as Geertz says, appear "uniquely realistic."[18] To be sure, this is not a definitive study on the tenets of Christianity but instead educated assumptions based on a symbol. This shows how symbols are capable of representing qualities, which become central to identity. This shows that a religion frames the way in which its followers think, act, feel, live, and more. If religion defines us to our core, it is easy to imagine how religion would then affect fiction and the way in which a person writes.

Next, I will propose my own definition of religion as inspired by Geertz's insightful view of religion as a cultural system.[19] For my own purposes, I see religion as set of beliefs as codified by a group in which a person identifies that determines how they believe the world functions and how in which they should operate in it. This definition is perhaps more simplistic but the basic point is that religion affects the way we act and think. Being a part of a religion also implies being a part of a community or group. Simply put, religion is more than whether or not a person believes in a god. Also important, leaving a religion cannot erase the impact of the exposure to a

[18] Geertz 90
[19] Geertz 87

religion. On another level, one could replace religion with the word culture, and argue, that any structured social system also enacts the same principals. In this vein, secularism is also a legitimate system of religion or culture. Secularism has it's own code and belief system. While secularism may not be the first thing that comes to mind when using the word religion, it fits the formulation and creates a system to view the world that to secularists feels true to life. Understanding religion in this way allows us to view religion as an identity. Identity is what drives us to act in and to write the world. Similarly, to indentify with a certain religion or group does not necessarily mean a person cannot question or struggle with their beliefs. On the contrary, the act of questioning one's own religious group or another is central to writing. Writing is about asking questions and grappling with the parts of the human condition we cannot and do not understand, and perhaps may never know. Acknowledging religion as a cultural system then allows us to view the affects of religion on the way we write and structure our lives. Identity comes into stories, which are imitations of life in which language is manipulated to portray and understand our universe. In these creations, we are free to wonder and question the parts of our world that are perhaps harder to observe in real life. Stories can act to magnify or minimize aspects of the world in order to try to better understand them. This happens not only in writing but in every day life in which we constantly tell stories to one another. Relating a story is how we process things that happened, ask for advice, convey information, and re-experience something. How a story is told, is determined by one's identity, personality, religion, culture, and more. For example, two people can experience the same event but retell it completely differently. But what makes their stories so different? The answer is, a lot of things. One could do an entire psychological inquiry into what aspects of ourselves go into the way in which we see events. For the purposes of this analysis, it is religion that I want to focus on.

In this study of Grace Paley and Flannery O'Connor, it is helpful to review the important points and methods of observing their fiction. 1) Religion as seen as a cultural system helps shape identity. 2) The way in which an author writes fiction is determined by their identity, which is comprised of many things, most importantly in this work: religion. 3) Belief about the end of the world and an individual's death gives meaning to life, and determines how we live and how we view and write endings. In order to understand the endings in both authors one must understand their identity. Once identity and belief about the end are understood it is possible to begin to recognize what's in an ending.

How can we trace and see the influence of religion on the creation of a story and endings? The first step is to take a look at Paley's and O'Connor's beliefs and ideas about religion. Both have many essays and writings, which deal specifically with their thoughts on religion. Once their identity is understood it is possible to go through the fiction and view the way their identity has shaped it. Each sub-section to the author's chapter will be about a particular story. The section will start with a brief summary of the plot of the story so that the ending can be understood in the context of the story. Then, there will be a quotation from the end of the story so the end of the story will be visible. From there, it is important to examine the characters and their actions, which contribute to the end. I will especially focus on religious symbolism and moments in which religion, death, or endings are questioned or discussed. This provides commentary from the characters about religion. In addition, looking at the structure of the story will make sense of the ending. Once the story is analyzed and better understood, it will be possible to understand why the end is significant and how it reflects the author's identity. This process may not be simple or linear. The end may not always be a perfect representation of the author's identity. It isn't always as simple as religious identity equals how a story ends. It is true,

however, that religious identity and belief about the end will be evoked by what an author sees as important—as in what to emphasize—and what is meaningful. Endings help show what parts of a story are meaningful and the consequence of actions, or lack of consequences.

Chapter II. GRACE PALEY: "THE QUESTIONER"

The writer is not some kind of phony historian who runs around answering everyone's questions with made-up characters tying up loose ends. She is nothing but a questioner.[20]

Paley's fiction reflects her upbringing in a multi-lingual New York Jewish home. One of Paley's most valuable skills as a writer is her keen sense for voices and the rhythm of speech and sounds. She is highly perceptive and notices everything around her. In a piece of introductory prose included in her collected works, "Two Ears, Three Lucks,"[21] she says that writing made her able "to remember the street language and the home language with its Russian and Yiddish accents, a language my early characters knew well, the only language I spoke."[22] One of her poems is a fine example of Paley's voice and sense of timing. Paley also has a strong talent for comedy and knows how to captivate a reader. This posthumously published poem called, "Having Dinner,"[23] introduces Paley's style and is clearly influenced by religion:

My friend said why are you so up

> I mean reality is a terrible down
> look at the facts right there in the pasta
> you can see it the plausible future boiled
> once more in its own gas the end bad luck
> for our time bad luck for literature
> our dear language back to planet pudding
> Yes it is a terrible down they blame it
> on that tree that apple of all knowing
> I would eat it again he said[24]

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[20] Paley, Grace, "The Value of Not Understanding Everything," *Just As I Thought* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1998)
[21] Paley "Two Ears, Three Lucks," *The Collected Works*
[22] Paley x (in introduction)
[23] Paley, Grace, "Having Dinner," *Fidelity* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2008) 30
[24] ibid.

Religion plays a key part in this poem that asks the question: what is the future of language and our world? It is structured around a scene of a person having dinner with a friend. The speaker says, "My friend said"[25] which is followed by the friend's dialogue and eclipsed by the speaker's narration "again he said."[26] Colloquial language is elegantly paired with a more poetic voice to create a kind of list or catalogue of human existence and the terrible negative hardening of the soul that can come out of our world. It all begins with the man staring into his plate of pasta saying, "look at the facts right there in the pasta."[27] The pasta[28] is a launching pad that starts with the physical, leading to a more philosophical tone. He sees everything in the world as turning bad including language and words. A most evocative line is, "bad luck for literature/ our dear language back to planet pudding."[29] This line is saying that literature and language are doomed. The phrase "planet pudding"[30] elicits an image of the world as it was before it formed. It brings to mind a scientific image of the muddy cloud of stuff that was to become our planet. The word *pudding* also brings to mind children and the elderly who might eat pudding. A child's linguistic capacities are not yet fully formed and a very old person might be losing their control of language. Both perspectives yield a negative view of the world turning to mush. The tone of the man speaking is one that is quite negative and pessimistic.

Paley uses the religious symbol of Eve eating the apple as a way to question knowledge as either salvation or corruption. The male speaker says, "they blame it/ on that tree that apple of all knowing/I would eat it again he said."[31] Here we have the friend referencing *they* or rather

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[25] ibid. line 1
[26] ibid. line 10
[27] Paley *Fidelity* line 3
[28] Godard, Jean-Luc, dir. *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her* (1967) There is a similar moment in this film in which the camera zooms into a cup of coffee. Goddard narrates and the coffee looks like the cosmos leading to a philosophical monologue. Here, a man stares into a plate of pasta only to delve into a discussion of religion and the fall of man.
[29] Paley "Having Dinner" *Fidelity* lines 6-7
[30] Paley *Fidelity* line 7
[31] ibid. lines 8-10

people who are religious and believe in the fall of man. The poem makes reference to the scene of Adam and Eve in which Eve, as well as Adam (she tells him to do so), eat the forbidden fruit gaining knowledge of good and evil. This causes God to force them out of the Garden of Eden. Eve is then named the original sinner causing the fall of man. The man says that he is glad to have the knowledge and turning himself into Eve says, "I would eat it again."[32] One reading is that the man sees the world as doomed. Despite the suggestion that knowledge leads to sin and downfall, he would rather have understanding about the world. Similarly, rather than be shrouded in innocence, he would rather not be shielded by ignorance.

"Having Dinner" is a piece that, like other Paley works, refuses a direct statement that might reveal what Paley sees to be the right way to read it. It's a piece that's ending returns to the Biblical beginning. Paley makes statements through what is not said. For instance, the breaks in the middle of lines might be read as places in which the speaker would be speaking or thinking to herself. Those moments reflect the option of another attitude, one in which the reader or narrator does not necessarily have to agree with the man. The silence conveys an alternative. The portrayal of the man is done in a way so that his voice is perfectly clear to the reader. This poem is reflective of all of Paley's work and shows her to be a minimalist and master craftsman of dialogue. She leaves enough information out of the poem to make the reader wonder more about it. Paley's deceptively simple style can make her work seem transparent. While the poem itself is short and in conversational language, there's much under the surface, as is evident. Religion and the dangling question of fate of the world come across in one stanza.

The poem "Having Dinner" represents Paley's fierce ability to ask difficult questions in her fiction. Paley suggests that a writer should write not about the things they already understand but

[32] ibid.

the things that are completely mysterious. She allows the male character to have a specific voice and opinion that is different from her own thoughts. Placing her questions in the mouth of a different character allows her to question his answers and see the mystery from a different view. In terms of writing, Paley suggests, "You might try your father and mother for a starter. You've seen them so closely that they ought to be absolutely mysterious. What's kept them together these thirty years? Or why is your father's second wife no better than his first?"[33] Even though it's clear that Paley draws from personal experience, she recognizes that writing about the unknown is far more compelling than the things we already know. I might in fact characterize her writing as taking grand and difficult questions and grounding them in realistic characters and settings. She takes what she knows, New York City, and puts in situations that aren't necessarily her own. People often assumed she was a single mother, like her character Faith, though this was never the case. Faith is a reoccurring character often seen to be Paley's alter ego. Paley has the ability to write in the voice and character of others but still in her world. Perhaps this it was creates a false sense of memoir.

In other poems, Paley often allows herself to be the subject. The following untitled poem introduces how Paley's thoughts come into her work. This will be useful when viewing Paley's view of religion as seen in her fiction. This poem in particular deals with the relationship between mothers and daughters. Further, it is a meditation on misunderstanding and criticism. Paley writes:

> She said
> every sentence is an accusation
> and I thought
> she speaks well
> that child has always known what to say about the world
> she has a beautiful face a clear head and cosmic notions

[33] Paley *Just As I Thought* 187

My god, I said
you're right that's the way it is
the world speaks to you nowadays
in accusations
it doesn't leave you alone for a minute
it thinks everything is your fault the world is like that
No she said
I wasn't talking about the world
I was talking about you
Yes I said that's it that's just what I meant[34]

I take Paley as the speaker, though it's clear that it doesn't have to be her. Paley is clearly drawing on her experience as a mother. The poem turns on itself and ends in an unexpected way, like most of Paley's work. The beauty of the poem is that the daughter is accusing the mother of speaking with accusations. Meanwhile, the mother takes this comment to be about the world. The daughter corrects the mother who instead of seeing the conversation as a miscommunication says, "that's just what I meant."[35] The private and personal converge and are collapsed into one moment of understanding, for the mother. Paley portrays humans as accusatory and critical. Paley is also brilliantly bringing out the way mother and daughters interact and disagree but often while meaning the same things. The poem is a peek into Paley's world as a mother and thinker. It will also help to begin to show Paley's style as a writer and how she deals with problems in life, such as understanding another person's experiences.

Paley responds to losing a close friend in an equally personal poem looks at the way we memorialize people we love. The poem feels like an intimate expedition into Paley's heart. In the poem "Even," Paley writes:

Even at pain's deafening intrusion
my friend could not forget the pleasant
blasphemous joking of our daily conver-
sations she said grace don't take me out
of the telephone book of your heart and I

[34] Paley Untitled Poem, *Fidelity* 25
[35] ibid. Line 16

> have not there she is under S for Syb and
> Claiborne still under C[36]

The poem sweetly memorializes Paley's friend Sybil Claiborne in "the telephone book of [her] heart." Sybil Claiborne was a writer and activist who was good friends with Grace Paley. She died in 1992 at the age of sixty-nine.[37] Here we have a clear instance of the personal coming into Paley's work. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that Paley's work is connected deeply to her life and she values that connection. *Fidelity*, as a collection is fascinating because it is a posthumously published work. Paley's poem about Sybil, which comes from this collection, is about how to memorialize a friend. Further, the collection itself came out after Paley died and is a vestige of Paley herself, in addition to containing Paley's memorial of Sybil. The book, more than the works of her lifetime, feels entwined with Paley's death. She didn't format or put together the collection. Instead, it is made up of her words, which is all that we have left of Paley. Additionally, Paley dedicated her short story collection to Sybil, saying:

> It seems right to dedicate this collection to my friend Sybil Claiborne, my colleague in the Writing and Mother Trade. I visited her fifth-floor apartment on Barrow Street one day in 1957. There before my very eyes were her two husbands disappointed by the eggs. After that we talked and talked for nearly forty years. Then she died. Three days before that, she said slowly, with the delicacy of an unsatisfied person with only a dozen words left, Grace, the real question is—how are we to live our lives?[38]

The scene of Paley seeing Sybil making eggs for her two husbands is the inspiration for the story "The Used-Boys Raisers" which will be discussed further on. Paley takes inspiration from Sybil for her character Faith showing Faith to be a composite image of Paley and others. Sybil's last

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[36] Paley "Even," *Fidelity* 77
[37] "Sybil Claiborne, 69, Writer and Foe of War," *New York Times* (New York, 1992) http://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/19/obituaries/sybil-claiborne-69-writer-and-foe-of-war.html
[38] Paley *The Collected Stories* dedication

words highlight the question that all writers and people must answer: "how are we to live our lives?"[39]

No doubt, Paley is a complex storyteller whose unique voice conveys many of her personal attitudes and struggles. Thinking more about Paley's identity, it is important to see her religious background and views to better understand religion in her work. Paley's secular Jewish identity and her Socialist political views helped to frame her stories. The world Paley was brought up in is the world Paley writes about. If she hadn't lived in Brooklyn in the twenties in an immigrant Jewish home, she wouldn't be capable of writing the same stories. A story might be fiction but it has to be based on something. The Jewish tradition places much importance on the present moment. Secular Jews care little about afterlife and the Messiah. Without either of these, our time on Earth is our only time, which makes perhaps, the present more precious. Paley's stories end in a way that doesn't directly confront ends as meaning makers. Instead, it is the trail leading to the end that is important and the end that creates a sense of mortality. From that temporality comes the importance of life.

Her view of time as precious is also seen in her view of writing. For Paley, one should only write about what is mysterious and presently interesting instead of what one already knows. She relates this to her Jewish identity, which she later in life characterized as something she finally understood. Paley talks about what happens when you exhaust a mystery. She writes that, "When you have invented all the facts to make a story and get somehow to the truth of the mystery and you can't dig up another question—change the subject."[40] This she sees as the case when it comes to writing on Jewish themes. Looking at her first volume of short stories, Paley says:

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[39] ibid.
[40] Paley *Just As I Thought* 188

> They are on several themes, at least half of them Jewish. One of the reasons for that is that I was an outsider in our particular neighborhood—at least I thought I was—I took long rides on Saturday, the Sabbath. My family spoke Russian, but the street spoke Yiddish. There were families of experience I was cut off from. You know, it seemed to me that an entire world was whispering in the other room. In order to get to the core of it all, I used all those sibilant clues. I made fiction.[41]

In this revealing essay, Paley cites feeling like an outsider as a reason for writing. She never felt completely as if she was a part of the Jewish community. This caused her to want to write about the Jewish New York experience that so enriched many of her early stories. However, Paley says that the more she started to understand her Jewish identity, the less she was interested in writing about it. She says:

> I have probably shot my Jewish bolt. …It's taken me a long time, but I have finally begun to understand that part of my life. I am inside it. I could write an article, I imagine, on life in the thirties and forties in Jewish New York, but the tension and mystery and the question are gone. …The writer is not some kind of phony historian who runs around answering everyone's questions with made-up characters tying up loose ends. She is nothing but a questioner.[42]

The mystery Paley speaks of is a mystery of origin or identity. She feels that before when she had some conflict with her identity and did not fully understand her relationship to Judaism, it was a more mysterious subject she wanted to breech. Now that she feels she has laid that internal question to rest, it is not longer as interesting to her. This is not say it isn't an important part of her identity, but it doesn't need to be her focus any longer. She says specifically that she is not interested in "tying up loose ends," and instead is an eternal "questioner."[43] The notion of "tying up loose ends"[44] does not appeal to Paley because she's too interested in things that are not easily answerable. She sets up stories as conversations and moments in which nothing has to be solved

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[41] ibid.
[42] ibid.
[43] ibid.
[44] ibid.

or answered. Plots unravel but the mysteries don't die—they morph, change, or are left hanging waiting to be tied back into a new story another day.

What makes something a mystery is that it can't necessarily be solved and Paley sees this as the foundation of literature. Paley asserts that:

> There are things about men and women and their relations to each other, also the way in which they relate to the almost immediate destruction of the world, that I can't figure out. And nothing in critical or historical literature will abate my ignorance a tittle or a jot. I will have to do it all by myself, marshal the evidence. In the end, probably all I'll have to show is more mystery—a certain juggled translation from life, that foreign tongue, into fiction, the jargon of man.[45]

Relationships between men and women are still mysterious to Paley. And she takes it farther than just love; it is also the way men and women "…relate to the almost immediate destruction of the world."[46] Paley could be talking about different things including the breakdown of the environment, destruction from war, natural disasters, the death of our planet, or mortality. No matter which she is thinking of, it's endlessly fascinating to examine the ways in which humans respond to the end. Even more interesting, she wants to see how men and women in relationships deal with the end and how it affects them as a couple. Paley says that though the point of writing is for her is sometimes to try to answer mysteries of life, sometimes admitting the mystery is all a writer can do. Calling fiction "the jargon of man"[47] evokes Paley's view on writing. Fiction as the dialect of man reveals fiction as a way in which we communicate and understand the world. Fiction serves as another language—another voice. Paley's fiction is about dialogue and speaking, much of the power of her writing is the way she represents speech and conversations. Paley fiction is stories, stories that could be read aloud, and she derives power and humanity from the mysteries she is responding to and the knowledge that ending a story is the not

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[45] Paley *Just As I Thought* 188-89
[46] ibid.
[47] ibid.

equivalent of solving life's mysteries. Instead, an end is a promise for a new story and more questions.

I. "THE USED-BOY RAISERS"

"The Used-Boy Raisers"48 is a breakfast scene with Faith, her two sons Richard and Tonto, and her two husbands Livid and Pallid. Pallid is her husband and Livid is the ex-husband who is the boys' biological father. Faith is the narrator of this story, which is mostly a conversation between the three adults who then say goodbye to one another and go about their days.

Faith, I'm going now, Livid called from the hall. I put my shopping list aside and went to collect the boys, who were wandering among the rooms looking for Robin Hood. Go say goodbye to your father, I whispered.
Which one? they asked.
The real father, I said.
Richard ran to Livid. They shook hands manfully. Pallid embraced Tonto and was kissed eleven times for his affection.
Goodbye now, Faith said Livid. Call me if you want anything at all. Anything at all, my dear. Warmly with sweet propriety he kissed my cheek. Ascendant, Pallid kissed me with considerable business behind the ear.
Goodbye, I said to them.
I must admit that they were at least clean and neat, rather attractive, shiny men in their thirties, with grand affairs of the day ahead of them. Dark night, the search for pleasure and oblivion were well ahead. Goodbye, I said, have a nice day. Goodbye, they said once more, and set off in pride on paths which are not my concern[49]

The above quotation, from the end of the story "The Used Boy Raisers," wanders somewhere unexpected, away from the center of the story. Ending on a wandering note with a poetic, foreboding tone, Paley forces the reader to contemplate the story further, rather then close

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[48] The character of Faith Asbury Darwin first appears in a pair of stories entitled "Two Short Sad Stories From a Long and Happy Life" the first of which is "The Used-Boy Raiser". The title of the story refers to Faith describing Pallid as "the used-boy raiser"(Paley 86) . By this she means that Pallid, being the husband and not the boys' biological father, is raising a second-hand child delivered from Livid. This image of boys as hand-me-downs is odd and I take to be mocking the power dynamics between the two men. Clearly there is a struggle between Livid and Pallid for family control.
[49] Paley 87

off the discussion with a definitive end stop. After having breakfast and conversing, the odd family transitions into saying goodbye. Paley describes the comedic scene in which the children have to ask which father to say goodbye to. Her main concern in this passage is characterizing the unusual relationship between herself and the two husbands as well as her children and the two men. Naming the men Livid and Pallid further emphasizes her approach to describing the men. They come in and out of the boys' lives like phantoms rather than fixtures. This is why they don't have proper names and are referred to by their attributes. After the goodbyes, Faith's narration shifts dramatically.

A poetic sentence initiates the shift in tone and trailing off quality in the story which emphasizes Paley's refusal to tie the lose ends. The change happens in the last lines that read, "Dark night, the search for pleasure and oblivion were well ahead. Goodbye, I said, have a nice day. Goodbye, they said once more, and set off in pride on paths which are not my concern."[50] The first sentence begins with two one-syllable words, "dark night"[51] and continues with all one syllable words except for "pleasure", "oblivion", and "ahead."[52] Upon the darkness of night, Faith presents two distinct parts of life: pleasure and oblivion. She then pushes them ahead into the future at once casting them away in avoidance, yet also observing their place in life. This begins the shift in the story that brings in Faith's worldview.

Faith's worldview is comprised of a binary made up of these two extremes, pleasure and oblivion, that formulate a path for existence which are made meaningful by death. Pleasure can be understood as a bodily experience, physical in nature, or as a part of our mental capacity for living in the world. What eclipses life and pleasure is oblivion, or mortality. Pairing pleasure and oblivion shows that endings create a pleasure-seeking motivation. Death enables us to desire

[50] ibid.
[51] ibid.
[52] ibid.

happiness in order to quell our fears of dying by making the most of the time we have. This sentiment is clearly one from a secularist perspective that rejects the notion of an afterlife. By putting life in terms of death, one is forced to grapple with existence as a temporal reality and not an infinite one. Paley as a secular Jew is concerned with present actions, which then implicate the future. In other words, the choices we make decide our future during life but not after death. Putting off understanding the future parallels Paley's own ambivalence to assign beliefs to what the future holds. At the same time, she does not believe in any kind of afterlife or God and so sees no meaningful end that is more than death itself. These are all traits of Paley's secular identity.

Perhaps oblivion also refers to falling asleep at night. After a long day, going to sleep is a transition into oblivion. For hours at night we remain in a state of repose in which we are not present to the world. Perhaps by sleeping, she also means that people are asleep to world—shutting themselves off from world affairs. O'Connor views fiction as a method of awakening the reader and filling them with questions. Here, Faith embraces this sleeping oblivion because at the end of the day, each person needs to tune out and be quite. Death is often explained to children as being asleep. The state of unconscious is one part of life contrasted with pleasure in which one's senses are awakened and active. In this way, sleep and being awake are similar to life and death as well as pleasure and oblivion. Paley's view of the world is one based on a secular mentality that says that life is comprised of living and dying. Without an afterlife, one must make the most of the present and accept death as oblivion.

Oblivion is not the same as apocalypse, which is an important distinction because Paley views death as emptiness and not a passageway. "Thank God there is no god/or we'd all be

lost,"[53] Paley says in a posthumous poem. She highlights the need for humankind to be "responsible"[54] for the betterment of the world and not look up to the heavens for change. Her secular attitude is evoked in "The Used-Boy Raisers" with the use of the word "oblivion."[55] The word "oblivion"[56] is anti-apocalyptic in meaning. The end of the story fizzles instead of ending in a momentous event, such as a destruction or calamity as in apocalyptic stories. Paley's text is not advocating a worldview in which apocalypse or a final judgment is seen as imminent. The word oblivion itself evokes a fade into obscurity, unconsciousness, nothingness, or inactivity. It isn't the same as apocalypse and it shows that the speaker sees death as eclipsed life not a catastrophe followed by resurrection and afterlife. In the story, Faith puts off pleasure and oblivion to follow other paths and not focus on the fact of death.

The characters say goodbye to one another several times, which shows how Paley's characters respond and act out endings. There is a repetition in the closure with the passage, "Goodbye, I said, have a nice day. Goodbye, they said once more."[57] This dialogue is mundane and ordinary but juxtaposed with the "dark night" line it makes the goodbyes more final. The first goodbye is said by the speaker and then seconded by Livid and Pallid. The unison here is one that is seen throughout the story. Additionally, the two sentences together, "dark night" and the goodbyes, show a lack of depth in speech and that there is an inescapable sense of mortality and nihilism entrenched in our thoughts. This juxtaposition is in part a closing off of the

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[53] Paley 19 In these two lines she emphasizes God in the first statement by making it uppercase but deemphasizes it in the second by making the second lowercase. The expression, "thank God" becomes heightened and exaggerated while the mention of a deity, usually God, is played down by using lowercase to signal her lack of worship and belief.

[54] Paley *Fidelity* 20; Paley says, "if we are responsible con-/ sider our frequent love for one another/ because this nowadays we may be able/ to look over great distances into/ each other's eyes these are the tele-/ phonic electronic digital nowadays/ famous for money and loneliness." Paley advocates human connection and "responsibility" as coming from people rather than God.

[55] Paley 87

[56] ibid.

[57] ibid.

relationship between Faith and the husbands who aren't reliable. By saying goodbye, we inevitably cut off certain people or associations only to embrace other ones. Goodbyes and endings are marks and points at which we are forced to decide where our lives are leading. These established bracketed segments make life appear to follow a predestined projection that has set points along a path. O'Connor views this path broken into periods as ordained by God. Paley sees life as a continuous with a beginning and an end. One moment flows into the next and for Paley we have meaning because of our choices and actions not because of our relationship to God.

Paley's vision of how to create a narrative is one in which she deemphasizes endings. This shows that she is more interested in life than death. In addition, we create a narrative of our lives: beginning (childhood), middle (preteens to middle age), end (old age and death.) We can envision our lives in the same way we tell a story. Paley illustrates the idea that there are many points in between the arc from beginning to middle to end are not necessarily straight or perfectly linear. Paley shows that part of being human is describing our experience and in order to do so we have to determine ways of organizing our realities. While stories are fictional accounts, they show how Paley and O'Connor break apart moments and the way they view life and destiny.

Paley's writes stories as moments not dramas and ends as oblivions not apocalypses or a path to afterlife. In her fiction, Paley drops us into a moment usually with minimal explanation. We hear the characters and see them act during a particular moment in time, not a whole lifetime. In "The Used-Boy Raisers," Paley drops the reader into the moment beginning the story with, "There were two husbands disappointed by eggs. I don't like them that way either, I said.

Make your own eggs. They sighed in unison."[58] The story could have started off with Paley saying, for instance: There once was a woman who had two husbands and two sons, who lived in an apartment in New York City. This beginning is more descriptive and introductory, but it isn't interesting. Paley drops us into the moment without much explanation. It's up to the reader to understand what is happening and take away something from the moment.

The endings are true to life— something happens and ultimately our attention turns to another aspect of our lives or to something utterly unrelated. Paley doesn't simply stick to one theme or one topic because that isn't how we think. She recognizes that saying goodbye to family members can lead a person to think about mortality and relationships. Faith distances herself from the two husbands cutting off her feelings and creating boundaries. She says that they "set off in pride on paths which are not my concern."[59] Faith calls Livid's and Pallid's paths prideful in a mocking slightly critical tone. But ultimately her tone is dismissive and not too serious as she says she does not really care about the paths these other characters are taking. Faith is content in the moment and happy to have them go on their way. Rather than create closure, this quotation is revealing more about the character of Faith as a person who is able to focus on her own path rather than be weighed down by relationships.

Paley's avoidance of endings is linked to her lack of faith. A conversation between Faith, Livid, and Pallid reveals some of Faith's own negative views of religion, which highlights her rejection of blind faith and predetermined endings. Livid strongly opposes the idea of the boys going to Church calling it a "grotto of deception."[60] Further he says, "I don't give a damn how au courant it is these days, how gracious to be seen under a dome on Sunday… Shit! Hypocrisy.

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[58] Paley 81
[59] ibid.
[60] ibid.

Corruption. Cave dwellers. Idiots. Morons."[61] Livid views ritual as a mechanism used to keep up appearances in society. Livid also describes religion as in fashion. In response Pallid, a Catholic, says that, "I myself, although I lost God a long time ago, have never lost faith."[62] Pallid views Catholicism as a strong part of his personal identity. Yet, he does not have strong beliefs about God. In a sense, he is a Secular Catholic—he holds dear the memory of his religious experiences in childhood but doesn't have strong Catholic beliefs. The word play in the line using the words Faith and faith is comic because Faith is lacking in faith. According to Pallid, "It is not to God, it is to that unifying memory out of childhood" to which he prays.[63] Pallid further talks about the traditions he learned as a child as being sacred in the sense of ritual and routine as opposed to being grounded in belief.

Contrastingly, Faith's rejection of religion ties into her rejection of endings. Faith expresses her view on religion as something ,which has no bearing on her life. Pallid angers Faith by suggesting that she might also wax nostalgic for her Jewish roots. He says, "can you ever forget your old grandfather intoning Kaddish? It will sound in your ears forever."[64] Faith reacts harshly to this statement, retorting:

> Are you kidding? I was furious to be drawn into their conflict. Kaddish? What do I know about Kaddish. Who's dead? You know my opinions perfectly well. I believe in the Diaspora, not only as a fact but a tenet. I'm against Israel on technical grounds. I'm very disappointed that they decided to become a nation in my lifetime. I believe in the Diaspora. After all, they are the chosen people. Don't laugh. They really are. But once they're huddled in one little corner of desert, they're like anyone else: Frenchies, Italians, temporal nationalities. Jews have one hope only—to remain a remnant in the basement of world affairs—no, I mean something else—a splinter in the toe of civilizations, a victim to aggravate the conscience.[65]

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[61] ibid. ellipses in text
[62] ibid.
[63] ibid.
[64] ibid.
[65] Pale 84-85

Pallid remarks that she might feel something when thinking about a Kaddish. She says comically "Who's dead?" because a Kaddish is said for a person who has died. There is nothing necessarily to be nostalgic about when it comes to hearing Kaddish because it does not mark a particularly joyous occasion. Nonetheless, Faith says she is "furious" although, that is sarcastic here.[66] Instead of addressing this particular claim of Pallid's, that she is nostalgic for Judaism, she dismisses it then turns to the Diaspora. Faith says she doesn't believe in the state of Israel "on technical grounds."[67] Maybe she means that she doesn't believe in the state of Israel because of the way in which it was obtained politically or because she thinks Jews should be relegated to the Diaspora. Considering that Faith, like Paley herself, later on becomes a political activist it is quite possible that she's judging the politics of the state of Israel and the way that Israel became a state. She then adds, "After all, they are the chosen people,"[68] emphasizing *they* as those who "decided to become a nation in my lifetime."[69] Faith sees that Jews as the chosen people have fought to become a sovereign nation instead of a scattered people. She says that by becoming a country, the Jews transform into a "temporal nationality." In other words, rather than be the eternal chosen ones, she suggests that by becoming a nation they have given up their immortal Similarly, Faith rejects Zionism and the idea that the Jews need a country.

Faith says that the Jewish people are lost if they leave the Diaspora and move to Israel to huddle "in one little corner of desert."[70] Faith's use of the word "huddling" projects an image of Jews as weak and cowering, hiding in the dessert together instead of standing strong in society. Zionism created an entirely new identity for the Jewish, Israeli people. The concept of the Sabra came out of the culture of Zionism. The idea was that the Sabra Jew would be strong,

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[66] Paley 85
[67] Paley 84
[68] Paley 84
[69] Paley 85
[70] ibid.

hardworking, and physically fit. The European image of the Jew as defenseless, weak, greedy, and more was one that Zionism tried to combat. As for Faith, she lives in New York and for her she doesn't belong in Israel—it isn't a part of her identity as a Jew. She advocates the Diaspora and in this way accepting Jews for who they are and not giving in to stereotypes. Further, she sees Israel as the Jews cowering in the desert, not being strong. The Diaspora has further implications for the world and Faith has particular ideas of how Jews can function in society. Faith sees the Jews in the Diaspora as able to critique the world as outsiders. As such, the Jewish people, according to Faith, should "remain a remnant in the basement of world affairs—no, I mean something else-- a splinter in the toe of civilizations, a victim to aggravate the conscience."[71] Paley allows Faith to give an opinion, take it back, and restate it. In Paley's minimalistic text, Faith's stumble is glaring which begs the question what is different about the two remarks and ultimately why does Faith choose one over the other? To be a "remnant in the basement of world affairs"[72] is to say that Jews should be remembered but not involved in global politics. Having a nation and land enters the Jewish people into the theater of "world affairs."[73] Faith may not specifically be referencing Israel, but it follows that she sees Jews as having no real stake or part in the world as a nation. Faith may also mean that Jews should not be at the crux of the world's problems. Rather, Jews should live amongst societies and not be a nation with more political problems to add to the world. For centuries, Jews have been seen as detriments to society and have been blamed for world problems.[74] In this way, perhaps Faith means that the Jewish people should live in the world peacefully and not be treated as the enemy, or an evil that for centuries has been a viewed as a stain on the Christian world.

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[71] ibid.
[72] ibid.
[73] ibid.
[74] See Jewish History on the blood libels, the Crusades, the Dreyfus Case, Pogroms, the Holocaust, the Protocols of the Elder's of Zion- a faked document detailing the supposed plot of the Jews to take over the world, etc.

Following this, Faith modifies her statement to say that the Jewish people should be "a victim to aggravate the conscience"[75] One possible reading is that Jews should be more than victims and stand as a living reminder that humans can be evil and civilizations corrupt. The Jewish people are a testament to the fact that there is bad in the world. This reminder can serve to "aggravate the conscience" of society. Instead of just being a "remnant in the basement of world affairs" their presence should engage modern societies to reform themselves and to be responsible. Another reading is that Jews are seen as outsiders and not part of society. Their status as observers and as a people who do not belong makes the Jews able to portray more objective opinions about modern societies. The outsider perspective allows for a more accurate critique of politics and policies. Throughout history, Jews were seen both as weak and dangerous. Much of the fear about the Jewish people was that they were secretly trying to take over the world all the while appearing incapable of doing so. Jews are stereotypically portrayed as in power or control of society, media, and politics. Here Faith is really tapping into this stereotype as well as the image of Jews as weaklings. Because of the stereotyping and constant suspicion, Jews have seen societies from the outer edge and are thought to be more able to critique and understand the world.

Where does Faith fit into her own definition of the role for Jews in society? If Faith thinks Jews should be critics to the world, how is she fulfilling this role? As writers and activists, Faith and Paley believe in a world made better by human actions. Further, the concept of Jews as outsiders, who can see the world more clearly, has an interesting relationship to Paley's Judaism. Paley often felt like an outsider in the Jewish community. In this way, she struggled to figure out her identity and it became a topic present in much of her early writing.

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[75] ibid.

In the text, Paley uses symbols as mechanisms for further displaying Faith's independence and rejection of religion and the housewife image. Firstly, there is the symbol of the embroidery reminiscent of embroidered pillows with sayings. Faith says she, "reached under the kitchen table for a brown paper bag full of embroidery which asked God to Bless Our Home."[76] She keeps her embroidery in a paper bag, which first of all says that she doesn't care too much about it. Without knowing much about the character of Faith, it first appears she is participating in a housewife craft and that she is part of this fifties conception of a woman who stays at home, sews, and bakes. The tone however alerts us to the fact that she's mocking the embroidery for purporting to have God bless their home. The piece is supposed to be symbolic of God's blessings but instead is an artificial and phony representation of a higher power Faith doesn't believe in. What is the purpose of having an object that signifies God's presence? Paley's light criticism begs the question of why we need objects and symbols of religion. Symbols, according to Geertz, act to give religion a sense of accuracy and correctness. In order to do so, symbols create a visual reminder of something, perhaps belief or fate that is invisible and intangible. That which we cannot see is put into embroidery. Embroidery becomes a way for God to be visualized and for religion to become a part of the home décor, which is ridiculous and comic.

Ignoring her husbands and rejecting the housewife persona, Faith demands independence. She takes care of her two boys mostly without the husbands. At the end of the story she says that the two men "set off in pride on paths which are not my concern."[77] Faith does not truly care about the two men because she has other more important concerns in her life. Faith says

[76] Paley 81
[77] Paley 87

sarcastically, "my destiny… is to be, until my expiration date, laughingly the servant of man."[78] Faith has bigger motivations than serving Livid and Pallid. The word "expiration"[79] evokes food products with sell-by dates. In this description, Paley is like a bottle of milk, nourishing man until it spoils. Even though she doesn't use milk specifically, serving milk and eggs have a feminine connotation. Faith fights the image that she should be the provider or caregiver to her husbands. Therefore, Faith is "laughingly"[80] caring for man.

Given Paley's vision of the world, as a place that needs to be continually critiqued, questioned, and pushed, Paley's ending makes sense. She leaves the reader with a question instead of an answer, allowing the reader to further complicate the story. Instead of ending this story with all the goodbyes and I love yous, Paley pushes it further with the "dark night"[81] line. Paley shows us that in a life made of pleasure and oblivion, one must be discerning about what is and is not worth our attention. In this case, it is her own husbands who she separates from herself—knowing her time is better spent on other more important things.

II. "LIVING"

The story "Living" is about two women, Faith and Ellen. Both say they are dying, one actually does.

'…Shall I adopt you?'
He stopped all his tears. 'Why thanks. Oh no. I have an uncle in Springfield. I'm going to him. I'll have it O.K. It's in the country. I have cousins there.'
'Well,' I said, relieved. 'I just love you Billy. You're the most wonderful boy. Ellen must be so proud of you.'
He stepped away and said, 'She's not anything of anything, Faith.' Then he went to Springfield. I don't know. I don't think I'll see him again.

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[78]Paley 85
[79] ibid.
[80] ibid.
[81] Paley 87

But I often long to talk to Ellen, with whom, after all, I have done a million things in these scary private years. We drove the kids up every damn rock in Central Park. On Easter Sunday, we pasted white doves on blue posters and prayed on Eighth Street for peace. Then we were tired and screamed at the kids. The boys were babies. For a joke we stapled their snowsuits to our skirts and in a rage of slavery every Saturday for weeks we marched across the bridges that connect Manhattan to the world. We shared apartments, jobs, and stuck-up studs. And then, two weeks before last Christmas, we were dying.[82]

The end of the story, shown in the passage above, introduces the death of Ellen and Faith's reaction at her funeral. She asks Ellen's son Billy, half-heartedly, if she should adopt him. Billy stops crying abruptly and reassures her in a strangely calm manner that he is taken care of. Faith tells Billy, "You're the most wonderful boy. Ellen must be so proud of you."[83] Billy reacts harshly to the use of the present tense in this statement stepping away from Faith then saying, "She's not anything of anything."[84] This powerful moment is suggestive of religion and the impact of death. Billy is saying that his mother is nothing—she is oblivion. For Billy, death isn't a passage to an afterlife it's the end. The moment is cut off by Faith saying she never saw Billy again. He also vanishes from her life in the same way as Ellen. The passage then shifts directions to a nostalgic look at the friendship between Faith and Ellen. There is an end, Ellen dies and Billy leaves, and then a continuation. Faith brings Ellen back into the story and ends the story on a circular note. The last line of the story, "And then, two weeks before last Christmas, we were dying"[85] reflects the first line, "Two weeks before Christmas, Ellen called me and said, 'Faith, I'm dying.' That week I was dying too."[86] The start and end of the story rests on the idea of both women dying, though the story is entitled "Living." Paley makes use of Christmas and Easter as ways to keep time in the story. Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus, the

[82] Paley 167
[83] ibid.
[84] ibid.
[85] ibid.
[86] Paley 165

Christian savior, and marks the end of the year and the start of a new year. Similarly, Easter is a time that recognizes resurrection and rebirth. Like Easter and Christmas, Ellen is born anew into the story. Juxtaposing death, Easter, and Christmas is similar to the way Ellen and Faith are juxtaposed. One lives and one dies, just as Christmas and death are both a part of our human experience. In this story, Paley takes stock of what it means to be living and dying as well as what it takes to live. The women mirror each other and yet their paths diverge as one lives, and the other dies.

This story in particular shows a different side to Faith, in which she is narcissistic and lacking generosity in the face of death. This is evident when Faith feels "relieved"[87] not to have to adopt Billy. While it is not unreasonable not to want to take on the responsibility of another child, Faith's inability to recognize problems other than her own surfaces in this story. In the beginning of the story, Ellen calls to tell Faith she's dying, Faith narrates, "That week I was dying too" and also says to Ellen, "Please! I'm dying too, Ellen."[88] The word "Please!" used before "I'm dying too, Ellen" makes Faith sound insensitive.[89] It is reminiscent of a schoolyard retort with one woman trying to one-up the other as to whose dying is more serious. While Ellen asks the difficult questions about what they will do with their children, Faith is distracted by her one desire to have a peaceful home. Faith's narcissism is darkly comedic, though at the same time somewhat troubling when compared to Ellen's earnest suffering. Ellen speaks to Faith who thinks about what she wants that moment. Ellen says:

> 'Faith, what'll we do? About the kids. Who'll take care of them? I'm too scared to think.' I was frightened too, but I only wanted the kids to stay out of the bathroom. I didn't worry about them. I worried about me. They were noisy. They came home from school too early. They made a racket.[90]

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[87] Paley 167
[88] Paley 165
[89] ibid.
[90] Paley166

Ellen is not concerned with her own life but instead how her death will affect her children. She fears for her son's life without a mother, and the impact it will have on him. Never does she worry about herself but only of her family. Meanwhile, Faith describes herself as "frightened too,"[91] yet the only thing on her mind is that her children are annoying her. She recounts all the things her children do that irritate her: they are "noisy", come "home from school too early", and make "a racket."[92] Faith just wants her kids to keep clear of the bathroom, while Ellen is in a state of distress and panic over her impending doom's impact on her family. Faith even says of her children that, "I didn't worry about them. I worried about me."[93] It is not that Faith is a horrible mother who does not care about her children. No, here she is depicted as dealing with her mortality in a way that is quite different from Ellen. In fact, the children are really just shadows in the story, mentioned to set the scene, but not shaped as characters. The only child mentioned by name who then becomes important is Billy, who only shows up on the last page at the funeral. Faith can't bother with the big questions and instead worries about herself. All she can think about is right this minute and the fact that she just wants some quiet time to herself. Faith is the one who lives, and the story points to this self-centered drive as what keeps her alive.

Faith's mortality is shown through the descriptions of her bleeding, likely caused by an ulcer. These moments often are morbid yet darkly comedic. Faith says:

> I really was dying. I was bleeding. The doctor said, 'You can't bleed forever. Either you run out of blood or you stop. No one bleeds forever.'
> It seemed *I* was going to bleed forever. When Ellen called to say she was dying, I said this clear sentence: 'Please! I'm dying too, Ellen.'[94]

[91] ibid.
[92] ibid.
[93] ibid.
[94] ibid.

The doctor's deadpan lines completely lack emotion or sympathy. The view of death here is that either you die or you go on living, something has to happen. 'No one bleeds forever'[95] also means no one can die forever and no one can live forever. Faith feels like she will bleed for the rest of her life, dying and being ill forever. On the other hand, no one can live forever so her pain has to end eventually. There's a strange nonchalance in the conversation about death and even the way Faith tells Ellen that she's also dying. Similarly, while Ellen is lamenting her family's impending suffering when she dies, Faith can:

> …hardly take my mind off this blood. Its hurry to leave me was draining the red out from under my eyelids and the sunburn off my cheeks. It was all rising from my cold toes to find the quickest way out.[96]

Faith's describes the physicality of her dying, while Ellen's suffering remains hidden beneath mental suffering. Ellen's fear for the future of her family is contrasted with Faith's nihilism and preoccupation with the present, which allows her to live. "I may have another couple months," Ellen says to Faith and in response to the doctor who says, "he never saw anyone with so little will to live."[97] Yet, Ellen pleads, "Faithy, I do, I do. It's just I'm scared."[98] The doctor sees Ellen as someone who doesn't have any will to live, yet perhaps what he is actually seeing is that she's accepted the fact of her mortality and does not want to part with her son. Ellen is never concerned with the fact that she, herself flesh and all, is dying.

Faith and Ellen have different responses to the end, which Paley uses to show the different ways people cope with mortality. Faith toys with the idea of death as something that might as well happen sooner than later. In a very dark passage Faith says, "I drank a little California Mountain Red at home and thought—why not—wherever you turn someone is

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[95] ibid.
[96] Paley 166
[97] ibid.
[98] ibid.

shouting give me liberty or I give you death. Perfectly sensible, thing-owning, Church-fearing neighbors flop their hands over their ears at the sound of a siren to keep fallout from taking hold of their internal organs."[99] Enjoying wine, Faith exclaims, "why not"[100] saying between the dashes, why not die? It also punctuates the moment— like a breath of air, a pause from life, and a break from the sentence. Faith is freeing herself of the fear of death by bringing it out into the open and seeing it as a break from the monotony of living. Faith is calling into question the idea that anyone could be above death or not frightened by it. Additionally "Church-fearing"[101] is a twist on the phrase 'God-fearing.' This is a commentary on religion as an institution. To fear the church is to fear the social structure of being a Christian. Perhaps it also means that the people restrain themselves from doing anything the Church would reject. Catholics especially hold their church in high regard as it sets standards and places bans on certain things deemed unchristian. Fearing God would be much more powerful as God is not visible and has the ultimate power and judgment. Faith is judging the Christians and mocking them by calling them "Church-fearing."[102] Further the siren is a symbol that represents death. The average Christian neighbors, Faith says, instinctually shield themselves from sirens. Sirens represent impending death in this sentence, as a reawakening to the fact that life ends and tragedy strikes every day. Protecting their ears from the sound, the neighbors are trying, as Faith says, to keep themselves safe and unaffected. The siren also is represented as a bomb with the Christians protecting themselves from the "fallout."[103] The explosion is a reminder of one's mortality but also life force. The siren causes an almost primal instinct to clutch oneself in safe fear, while others are swallowed by death. Living is a self-centered enterprise, which Paley represents in the story. Faith is saying that if

[99] Paley 165
[100] ibid.
[101] ibid.
[102] ibid.
[103] ibid.

even Christians, people who believe in an afterlife, fear death, there's really almost no point in not fearing it. If you don't fear it, perhaps accepting death leads to freedom. In acknowledging an end, Faith is allowing herself to live and to continue on until the end.

The siren could also refer to the Sirens of mythology. In *The Odyssey*, Circe tells Odysseus about, "'the Sirens, who are enchanters/ of all mankind and whoever comes their way; and that man/ who unsuspecting approaches them, and listens to the Sirens/ singing, has no prospect of coming home…"[104] Odysseus plugs his ears with beeswax to keep from being killed by the song of the Sirens. Men in ships must cover their ears in the same way Paley depicts the Christians as, "flop[ping] their hands over their ears at the sound of a siren…"[105] The Siren lures the seamen with her beautiful song that eventually kills. Some say "the Sirens' victims waste away over a long period of time from lack of nourishment due to the enchantment of the Sirens' song…"[106] Additionally, Sirens were later thought to be corrupting creatures.[107] The idea of the Siren's song corrupting seamen relates to the Christians that clasp their ears, perhaps in fear of being lead down a path of evil. Further, perhaps the enchantment leads to wickedness and hell. Faith isn't the one covering her ears, so perhaps she sees herself outside of the corrupting and evil force. Faith also sees herself as a part of death because throughout she thinks she is dying. Maybe this makes her immune to the call of the Sirens.

Additionally, Paley magnifies Faith's physical pain in the depth and closeness of her description. Blood, a signifier of life, is here the thing that is causing her demise. The very thing which makes up our bodies is actually draining her of life. The fear of mortality and of losing

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[104] Homer, "Book XII," The Odyssey, Trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Perennial Classics, 1967.) lines 39-42
[105] Paley 165
[106] Gresseth, Gerald K, "The Homeric Sirens," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 101, (1970) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2936048>.
[107] Prochnik, George, "The Orchestra," *Cabinet*. http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/41/prochnik.php

control of one's body takes precedence over Ellen's pain and anyone else. In the same way, Faith cuts off her conversation with Ellen when a clot of blood takes her focus. Ellen laments the end while Faith tries to embrace it. After a physical description of Faith's blood "…rising from my cold toes to find the quickest way out,"[108] Faith tries to see death as a relief from the troubles of living. She says:

> 'Life isn't that great Ellen,' I said. 'We've had nothing but crummy days and crummy guys and no money and broke all the time and cockroaches and nothing to do on Sunday but take the kids to Central Park and row on that lousy lake. What's so great Ellen? What's the big loss? Live a couple more years. See the kids and the whole cruddy thing, every cheese hole in the world go up in heat blast firewaves…'
> 'I want to see it all,' Ellen said.[109]

Distracted by the blood, Faith can only see the bad things in life. She looks on the memories as not worth living and does her best to face mortality. Yet, the narration quickly cuts to a Faith saying casually that she stopped bleeding and fully recovered. Paley writes:

> 'I want to see it all,' Ellen said.
> I felt a great gob making its dizzy exit.
> 'Can't talk,' I said. 'I think I'm fainting.'
> Around the holy season, I began to dry up. My sister took the kids for a while so I could stay home quietly making hemoglobin, red corpuscles, etc., with no interruption. I was in such first-class shape by New Year's, I nearly got knocked up again. My little boys came home. They were tall and handsome.
> Three weeks after Christmas, Ellen died. At her funeral at that very neat church on the Bowery, her son took a minute out of crying to tell me, 'Don't worry Faith, my mother made sure of everything. She took care of me from her job. The man came and said so.'
> 'Oh. Shall I adopt you anyway?' I asked, wondering if he said yes, where the money, the room, another ten minutes of good nights, where they would all come from. He was a little older than my kids. He would soon need a good encyclopedia, a chemistry set.
> 'Listen Billy, tell me the truth. Shall I adopt you?'[110]

[108] Paley 166 ellipses Paley's own
[109] ibid.
[110] Paley 166-167

Faith starts to recover "Around the holy season."[111] This detail makes it seem like God was responsible for making her well. Though, Paley doesn't believe in God. It's a strange way to denote time and perhaps shoes that holidays enter into secular culture as a timekeeper and not necessarily out of a religious spirit. Paley continues to relate moments of living or dying, in Ellen and Faith, to Christianity. The two never bring up religion or God, and Faith and possibly Ellen too, see death as a secular enterprise not related to a higher power. The mention of Christmas suggests that religion pervades our conscience though it cannot quell the fear of death. Here, just as Faith recovers, Ellen's death is given one sentence: "Three weeks after Christmas, Ellen died."[112] Paley writes this without drama or a build up. Instead, deemphasizing her death suggests that Faith's self-centeredness is what allowed her to live. Additionally, while considering whether or not to take in Ellen's son, Faith is worried about time and whether she can manage to love another person. She adds up the extra things in her mind that it would take to adopt Billy. Faith asks herself where she'll find, "another ten minutes of good nights."[113] It isn't wrong of Faith not to take Billy but it shows that Faith protects her time and her own resources in a way that is in some way less giving. Whether this is a limitation or a strength is left up to the reader.

Faith's final reflection on Ellen and the time they spent together is contrasted with the previous reflection on life as not worth it. When dying Faith recalls:

> 'We've had nothing but crummy days and crummy guys and no money and broke all the time and cockroaches and nothing to do on Sunday but take the kids to Central Park and row on that lousy lake. What's so great Ellen? What's the big loss? Live a couple more years. See the kids and the whole cruddy thing, every cheese hole in the world go up in heat blast firewaves…'[114]

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[111] Paley 166
[112] ibid.
[113] ibid.
[114] ibid.

And while living, Faith meditates:

> But I often long to talk to Ellen, with whom, after all, I have done a million things in these scary private years. We drove the kids up every damn rock in Central Park. On Easter Sunday, we pasted white doves on blue posters and prayed on Eighth Street for peace. Then we were tired and screamed at the kids. The boys were babies. For a joke we stapled their snowsuits to our skirts and in a rage of slavery every Saturday for weeks we marched across the bridges that connect Manhattan to the world. We shared apartments, jobs, and stuck-up studs. And then, two weeks before last Christmas, we were dying.[115]

When consumed with the fear of death, Faith looks at life as "crummy"[116] and a waste. In this world Central Park has a "lousy lake" and the world is going to hell.[117] But when Ellen dies and Faith is the one who gets to live, she sees things with rose-colored glasses. In a warm tone full of longing, Faith says, "I often long to talk to Ellen, with whom, after all, I have done a million things in these scary private years"[118] Faith shared many experiences with Ellen, who made her feel less alone. Without Ellen, Faith is more alone in the world and in the face of death and life sees that human experience is "scary" and "private."[119] Manhattan is depicted as an enchanted playground in which "the bridges… connect Manhattan to the world."[120] Paley's two separate reflections show that death frames human experience and creates meaning. In the face of death, Faith was wont to dismiss death as a deliverance from the pains of living. Yet, in the face of loneliness, Faith sees death as closure and emptiness for those who must remain in the world of the living. Life and death, for Paley, color our experience and create our reality. Circling back to the time at which both women "were dying"[121] prevents us from seeing life as the better of the two. According to W. H. Auden, we are lonely in the face of knowing our own tragedy.[122] Here,

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[115] Paley 167
[116] ibid.
[117] ibid.
[118] Paley 177
[119] ibid.
[120] ibid.
[121] ibid.
[122] Auden, W. H. *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage International, 1976) 583
Auden was Paley's writing professor and had a huge impact on her own writing.

Paley sees that we are lonely when trapped in our own reality, a life full of death. And yet, she challenges us because Ellen, is portrayed as the more moral of the two, is the one to parish. The right path cannot be easily determined, but death is obviously a force that for Paley, is what constantly challenges us and our identities. While for Paley death has no divine truth and holds no further promise, it shapes our lives.

III. "LISTENING"

"Listening" seamlessly flows in and out of Faith's memories. The story follows an older than "Living" Faith who is in her second major relationship, with Jack.

I took a deep breath and turned the car to the curb. I couldn't drive. We sat there for about twenty minutes. Every now and then I'd say, My God! or Christ Almighty! neither of whom I usually call on, but she was stern and wouldn't speak. Cassie, I finally said, I don't understand it either; it's true though, I know what you mean. It must feel for you like a great absence of yourself. How could I allow it. But it's not me alone, it's them too. I waited for her to say something. Oh, but it is my fault. Oh, but why did you wait so long? How can you forgive me? Forgive you? She laughed. But she reached across the clutch. With her hand she turned my face to her so my eyes would look into her eyes. You are my friend, I know that Faith, but I promise you, I won't forgive you, she said. From now on, I'll watch you like a hawk. I do not forgive you.[123]

"Listening" is the last story in the collected works. The story ends with Cassie accusing Faith of leaving her out of the volume of stories because this is the first mention of her. The irony is that when Cassie says, "Where is Cassie? Where is my life?"[124] there she is, in the story saying those lines. This final story in the collection is an examination of storytelling. Cassie not being admitted into Faith's world, until the very end, allows Cassie to become significant and memorable. Cassie is absent in the stories until "Listening" and yet she has the final word. She says the final sentence of the volume, "I do not forgive you."[125]

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[123] Paley 385- 386
[124] ibid.
[125] ibid.

Cassie feels as if having her story untold illegitimates her experience. Faith says to Cassie, "I know what you mean. It must feel for you like a great absence of yourself."[126] This is to say that without a written documentation of her life, Cassie doesn't exist. As though, the fictional characters become more real than when a person is but a person and not made immortal through written words. The end of the passage, and the collection, is a refusal—to forgive, to live happily ever after, and to finish. Cassie's anger in that moment is cut off but not finished. Paley refuses to give Faith an easy out and makes even her exit complex. Paley gives Cassie her moment to defend herself and accuse Faith of being a cruel narrator. It makes the reader question ever story and wonder, who else was left out? In this way, Paley lets the characters take over and critique their own stories—breaking down the fourth wall in her fiction. This shows that Paley views endings as having the ability to launch further discussion and discovery. Her fiction ends in a manner that allows readers to pursue deeper understanding of the stories and question them. Fiction should be questioned—it is for Paley an educating force not the word of God. Ending on unsteady notes or drifting melodies reveals Paley's desire to create a discussion piece rather than a definitive moral.

Similarly, the charged words, "I do not forgive you,"[127] signify a refusal to see death as salvation. For O'Connor, life is leading to judgment day in which God will hopefully forgive man of his sins. Paley rejects this notion entirely by having Cassie withhold mercy. The end of the story and the collection as a whole is cut off by anger. Death isn't, as Paley writes later to describe young consumers with money in their pockets, "a song of beginnings."[128] Death can be angry and full of pain, just because it is the end doesn't mean it has to be graceful or accepting. Those words push away any attempt or desire to find comfort in the story. When forgiveness is

[126] ibid.
[127] ibid.
[128] Paley 380

impossible, Faith must live with the consequences of her actions. In this way, Faith is left off in a state of immortal guilt and remorse that will never be righted. Here, death is charged with meaning. Like in O'Connor, revelation doesn't always lead to forgiveness.

Paley's rejection of death as salvation is emphasized in her discussion of suicide as a relieving choice and not a godly experience. Faith sees two men who have a conversation about suicide. Faith narrates:

> The first man said: I already have one child. I cannot commit suicide until he is at least twenty or twenty-two. That's why when Rosemarie says, Oh, Dave, a child? I have to say, Rosemarie, you deserve one. You do, you're a young woman, but no. My son (by Lucy) is not twelve years old. Therefore if things do not work out, if life does not show some meaning, MEANING by God, if I cannot give up drinking, if I become a terrible drunk and know I have to give it up but cannot and then need to commit suicide, I think I'd be able to hold out eight or nine years, but if I had another child I would then have to last twenty years. I cannot. I will not put myself in that position.
> The other man said; I too want the opportunity, the freedom to commit suicide when I want to. However, I have responsibilities to the store, the men that work there. I also have my real work to finish. The one serious thing that would make me commit suicide would be my heath, which I assume will deteriorate—cancer, heart disease, whatever. I refuse to be bedridden and dependent and therefore I am sustained in the right to leave this earth when I want to do so and on time.[129]

Similar to Faith's opinion of death in "Living" when she is bleeding, the men want death to be a deliverance from the pain of being alive. Yet, deliverance often has a religious implication of forgiveness and here death isn't about salvation. Death, or rather suicide, is a relief and the only thing that comforts them from the pains of living. According to the men, the only thing keeping them alive is "the freedom to commit suicide when I want to."[130] Suicide and ending life is treated like it should be a right and not a sin. For these men, having the choice to end suffering can sustain them in their unhappiness. Planning for an end keeps them sane which is ironic because people planning suicide are seen as mentally ill. Suicide is shown as perfectly natural and further, the thing that keeps them going. The second man says, "I am sustained in the right to

[129] ibid.
[130] ibid.

leave this earth when I want to do so and on time."[131] The use of the phrase "on time"[132] characterizes death as something that naturally comes at the wrong time. The men not only want to control their ends but indeed time as well. This is to say, that death could happen too late or not at the right point. The men think that they know when they should no longer be and at which point they should be allowed to decide to stop living. God isn't factored into the equation because for believers of God, death is seen as happening at the right time. God's vision allows people to die when it is their destiny. The two men want to take life in their own hands and play god, determining when they should die on their own.

Similarly, the two men see death not as meaning making but as a solution "if life does not show some meaning, MEANING by God…"[133] If life does not improve quickly and meaning does not become apparent, the men can commit suicide to cut their losses. Further, suicide is a means for independence. The second man sees that when he is no longer able to function on his own, death is what he can take hold of and make the choice about. God is invoked as a word to emphasize meaning, as an exclamation and not as the one creating meaning.

Paley the writer, however, refuses to play God in her stories, which is evidenced by Faith's distaste for the men's suicide plans. Faith subtly passes judgment on the two men emphasizing their confidence in their judgment. She says:

> The men congratulated each other on their unsentimentality, their levelheadedness. They said almost at the same time, You're right, you're right. I turned to look at them. A little smile just tickled the corners of their lips.[134]

Faith points out their self-congratulatory attitudes as they applaud "unsentimentality" and "levelheadedness"[135] toward ending life. Faith is more judgmental of the fact that the two men

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[131] ibid.
[132] ibid.
[133] ibid.
[134] ibid.

treat life as something that can easily be forsaken. Their treatment of life as disposable and their arrogant attitude irks her as well as their smiles that "tickled the corners of their lips."[136]While Paley places no supernatural or godly stock in death, she values life. As a political activist advocating human rights, a life is precious.

Faith's optimism and appreciation of life is brought out through the discussion of having another child. It is revealed that Jack, Faith's spouse, was one of the two men sitting in the restaurant plotting his suicide. He sees life as more of a liability than death and would rather not be held responsible for making life appear hopeful, when it isn't for him. He can't imagine, as Faith says that being able to "continue pointing out simple and worthwhile sights"[137] that make life worth suffering through. She goes into a poetic and colorful description of all the things one might describe to a child to make the world appear worth it. Things like, "the sky which is always astonishing either in its customary blueness or in the configuration of clouds—the way they're pushed in their softest parts by the air's breath and change shape and direction and density."[138] The question here is: what keeps us living? Further, what drives us to want to propagate? Faith says you have to bring out the good things in order to not, "have a gloomy face when you meet some youngster who has begun to guess."[139] Jack and Faith present the world as split into two kinds of people. Firstly there are young people with fresh faces, naïve, and excited for the future. Secondly, older persons who have the "gloomy" look on their faces indicating they have left the Garden of Eden. Their only hope is to live in contentment and get through the years ahead. Interestingly, Faith portrays this experience or sense of the truth of life's difficulty as visible on the face. Further, Paley characterizes worldly knowledge as beginning to peak

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[135] ibid.
[136] ibid.
[137] ibid.
[138] ibid.
[139] ibid.

through on the young faces who have "begun to guess"[140] that the world isn't what they had imagined. Paley rejects religion and God but never loses her sense of optimism that the world is worth living in. Forgiveness doesn't give meaning to death. Instead, an ending provides a framework to experience life. Death is an end in the same way that "I do not forgive you" is a conclusion that Cassie reaches.

[140] ibid.

Chapter III. FLANNERY O'CONNOR: MYSTERY & BELIEF

A belief in fixed dogma cannot fix what goes on in life or blind the believer to it.[141]

Flannery O'Connor has been called many things. After all, "…there is always some critic who has just invented one [category] and who is always ready to put you into it."[142] Critics dub her writing southern, gothic, local color, Catholic, grotesque, and regional, among other labels. All of these categories tap into O'Connor's Southern Irish Catholic identity that impacts her work in many ways. There's a mythology about Southern writers. They have become something else—a legacy or collective history. O'Connor doesn't deny her Southern roots, for:

> It is not a matter of so-called local color, it is not a matter of losing our peculiar quaintness. Southern identity is not really connected with mocking-birds and beaten biscuits and white columns any more than it is with hookworm and bare feet and muddy clay roads.[143]

Yet she challenges the myth of the South that our culture has embraced. The popular image of the South as quaint and country isn't at the core of Southern identity, according to O'Connor. Instead, hardship, recovery, and salvation are really at work in the Southern consciousness. O'Connor continues, examining closer what she means by identity:

> …An identity is not to be found on the surface, it is not accessible to the poll-taker; it is not something that *can* become a cliché. It is not made from the mean average or the typical, but from the hidden and often the most extreme. It is not made from what passes, but from those qualities that endure, regardless of what passes, because they are related to truth. It lies very deep. In its entirety, it is known only to God, but of those who look for it, none gets so close as the artist.[144]

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[141] O'Connor, Flannery, Fitzgerald, Sally, and Robert Fitzgerald, ed. and comp., "The Church and the Fiction Writer", *Mystery And Manners* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1957) 150
[142]O'Connor "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mystery And Manners* 37
[143] O'Connor "The Regional Writer," *Mystery And Manners* (On receiving the Georgia Writer's Association Scroll for her novel, The Violent Bear It Away.) 57
[144] O'Connor *Mystery And Manners* 58

Identity, O'Connor remarks, cannot "become a cliché."[145] O'Connor's definition asserts identity as being a nugget of truth that is found deep within each person. Unlike stereotypes, which are crude exaggerations of identifiers, identity is under the surface. Rather than being "average" or "typical", it's born of mystery, that which is "hidden and often the most extreme."[146] Identity, like mystery, is 'known only to God," though the artist is closest to understanding and interpreting identity and mystery.[147] Region is at the crux of a writer's identity and in this way, their art. "The writer," O'Connor says, "operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location."[148] Fiction allows writers to collapse "time", "place", and "eternity" into a fabrication through words. Writers must grapple with location as every story has to have a setting of some kind to ground the story. O'Connor's Southern identity is located in her fiction: in her ethos, mentality, and vision.

O'Connor calls her fiction more real than realism and violence is a color O'Connor paints with often. In an interview, Paley was once asked about why the use of violence in her fiction is relegated to the background. In response Paley said, "I hate the American expectation of violence. I'm not going to play into any of that. When I must write about violence, I will, but I'll do it straight, not add and add because the level is higher every year."[149] Yet, in a fiction that strives to show evil and distort humanity, like O'Connor's, "it is almost of necessity going to be violent and comic, because of the discrepancies that it seeks to combine."[150] O'Connor says that violence, as well as comedy, are necessary byproducts of her Catholic outlook. Her intention in fiction isn't to provide a mirror to society, she makes this quite clear, though her reader is forced

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[145] ibid.
[146] ibid.
[147] ibid.
[148] O'Connor *Mystery And Manners* 59
[149] *The Paris Review* http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2028/the-art-of-fiction-no-131-grace-paley
[150] O'Connor "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mystery And Manners* 43

to confront her fiction because of the way in which she writes with distortion. O'Connor presents things in a manner that stretches the imagination. She feels that a slice of life depiction is less artful and less affectively shows the problems in society. Mystery is that of extremes, therefore O'Connor uses extremes to distort and disturb her reader into understanding her interests in writing. While Paley sees violence as at best a necessary evil and at worst gratuitous. She sees writing violence, or extreme violence will ultimately contribute to the violence in society. O'Connor's aim is to use violence to show horror, and the need for salvation.

Paley viewed O'Connor as hyper-focused on death, which speaks to her religious identity. Paley said, "Flannery O'Connor's a terrific writer, but somehow her conception of religion as specializing in death—and also her illness—forced her and her brilliant language in that direction."[151] Paley's words strike me as ironic because time and again Paley provides commentary on death and the role of religion. In fact, I see that her fiction does characterize "religion as specializing in death."[152] Yet, in truth Paley's fiction does not place violence at the forefront and instead favors conversation and dialogue between nuanced characters to explore her questions about the world. It would be fair to call Paley a realist writer, as her stories hardly tiptoe into O'Connor's realm of the grotesque. Paley suggests that living with Lupus pushed O'Connor toward a life forced to consider death. Here I must argue with Paley because I wonder if instead O'Connor's fiction is not focused on salvation rather than death itself. Death is but one part of the Christian cycle, in which one hopes ultimately to be granted salvation and passage to heaven. Revelation and salvation seem instead to be preoccupations of O'Connor who seeks to reach life after death, not death itself.

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[151] ibid.
[152] ibid.

In the essay, "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction" O'Connor builds a compelling argument for why violence is necessary to her fiction and why realism isn't adequate or real at all. O'Connor notes that "Georgia is not at all the way I picture it, that escaped criminals do not roam the roads exterminating families, not Bible salesmen prowl about looking for girls with wooden legs."[153] O'Connor's vision of the South may not be based on common occurrences, though it gives an impression that would never be evoked in realist fiction. It doesn't matter that O'Connor's Georgia is not the authentic actual Georgia, she is giving a very specific impression of Georgia. O'Connor seeks to represent the grotesque and disturbing parts of Southern life that make for good fiction and questioning. The quaintness and kindness of the South need not continue to be portrayed in fiction. In this way, her fiction seeks to show something true about the nature of people in unrealistic ways, using distortion for example. She tries to get to the heart of the matter through art and not through photographic impressions of the place. In other words, she isn't trying to convey a perfect image of the South but instead the feeling of it and the hidden parts she seeks to enlarge and reveal. O'Connor defines the writing the grotesque as bringing:

> …alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life. We find that connections which we would expect in the customary kind of realism have been ignored, that there are strange skips and gaps which anyone trying to describe manners and customs would certainly not have left. Yet the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns toward mystery and the unexpected. It is this kind of realism that I want to consider.[154]

O'Connor is not interested in slice of life portrayals of the American South. Her fiction which is characterized by "strange skips and gaps", characters that have "an inner coherence" or "coherence to their social framework", and whose "qualities lean away from typical social

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[153] O'Connor "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mystery And Manners* 38
[154] ibid.

patterns toward mystery and the unexpected."[155] O'Connor brings mystery into the equation because like peafowl[156], mystery is her constant companion. She calls her work the "kind of realism… [she] want[s] to consider."[157]

What is O'Connor's mystery? In the essay "The Fiction Writer And His Country", O'Connor is responding to a claim made in *Life* magazine that there is no author who represents America in his or her work. Flannery O'Connor writes:

> The Christian writer will feel… what we are asked to do is to separate mystery from manners and judgment from vision, in order to produce something a little more palatable to the modern temper.[158]

O'Connor means that often Christian writers feel they are asked to do something contrary to writing good fiction. She feels they are asked to pull apart mystery (what is hidden and truthful, supernatural, shrouded in darkness) from manners (everyday life, the way people act, slice of life, politeness, civilized society) and judgment (personal critique, individual opinion) from vision (art, ability to see, creativity, portrayal.) O'Connor passes judgment on all of her characters and sees her religious opinions and beliefs to be central to her art. She doesn't want to separate out her beliefs from her stories and her art from her religion. For O'Connor it is all interrelated and should be in order to make meaningful fiction. Additionally, mystery is the point at which there aren't observable answers. Things like faith, feelings, identity, humanity, psychology, motivation, life, and death are parts of mystery. Mystery is at the foundation of religion and not in competition with it. There are pieces of our experience that are intangible and can't be explained by science but are a part of human experience. Religion creates ways in which to live despite the inevitable gaps in our understanding as produced by mystery. Still, as evident

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[155] ibid.
[156] O'Connor famously raised Peafowl see her essay "The King of the Birds," *Mystery And Manners*
[157] O'Connor "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mystery And Manners* 38
[158] O'Connor "The Church Writer And His Country," *Mystery & Manners* 30-31

in her description of her own fiction. O'Connor welcomes these gaps and embraces the unknowable. O'Connor sees the world as divided with one "part of it trying to eliminate mystery while another part tries to discover it in disciplines less personally demanding than religion."[159]And perhaps there is even a third category of people who embrace mystery the way O'Connor feels Catholics should. Mystery becomes a code for faith in a way as the pieces of the world that are indefinable and unknowable yet accepted to be a part of God's plan. In this way, mystery becomes as important to religion as belief.

O'Connor then uses mystery to explain why it appears Southern writers are so successful. Fiction that embraces mystery with manners and judgment with vision will, for O'Connor, be good writing. In response to a journalist's question about why so many good writers come from the South, Walker Percy replied, "Because we lost the War."[160] O'Connor interprets Percy's statement observing:

> He didn't mean by that simply that a lost war makes a good subject matter. What he was saying was that we have had our Fall. We have gone into the modern world with an inburnt knowledge of human limitations and with a sense of mystery which could not have developed in our first state of innocence—as it has not sufficiently developed in the rest of our country.[161]

O'Connor compares the Civil War to the Garden of Eden as the "Fall."[162] Southern folks, according to O'Connor are born with the "knowledge of human limitations" and "a sense of mystery" unique to the region in the modern, post-Civil War era. Knowledge imparts understanding that is irreversible. Mystery is enmeshed in the Southern consciousness and is tied to knowledge and limitations. This creates a force of writers who, embracing mystery, are able to push the boundaries of our understanding. Similarly, O'Connor identifies that, "There is another

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[159] O'Connor "The Church & the Fiction Writer," *Mystery And Manners* 145
[160] O'Connor "The Regional Writer," 59 *Mystery And Manners*
[161] ibid.
[162] ibid.

reason in the Southern situation that makes for a tendency toward the grotesque and this is the prevalence of good Southern writers. …The presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do."[163] Southern writers don't just want to copy the works of others before them. The tradition of Southern writing, according to O'Connor, is good writing and good writing for O'Connor is grotesque fiction.

Nevertheless, grotesque is a loaded word that O'Connor both embraces and takes issue with. On the one hand she says that, "The prophet is a realist of distances, and it this kind of realism that you find in the best modern instances of the grotesque."[164] By distances, she is probably referring to the gaps she mentioned which characterize grotesque fiction. There is a gap between the expected and the grotesque, which creates distortion. On the other hand, O'Connor has "found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic."[165] Well crafted grotesque writing, for O'Connor, actually provides a more realistic view than realistic fiction itself.

Additionally, O'Connor expresses her belief that watering down one's mystery and judgment to be "more palatable to the modern temper" produces "soggy, formless, and sentimental literature."[166] The last thing O'Connor believes in is literature that appeals to the masses want of uplifting vacant pieces that are weak.[167] This is why she refuses to indulge readers and instead prefers to challenge them with her fiction. O'Connor recounts a letter from California, an elderly woman explained that:

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[163] O'Connor "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mystery And Manners* 45
[164] O'Connor "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mystery And Manners* 44
[165] O'Connor "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mystery And Manners* 40
[166] O'Connor "The Church Writer And His Country," *Mystery & Manners* 30-31
[167] See O'Connor's essay "The Regional Writer," *Mystery And Manners* for more on the writer as awakening the readers and not simply producing fiction to satisfy them.

> …when the tired reader comes home at night, he wishes to read something that will lift up his heart. And it seems her heart had not been lifted by anything of mine she had read. I think that if her heart had been in the right place, it would have been lifted up. …You may think that the serious writer doesn't have to bother about the tired reader, but he does, because they are all tired.[168]

O'Connor's fiction isn't about appealing to the masses, though she obviously wants an audience. She continues:

> …There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored. His [the reader's] sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether and so he has forgotten the price of restoration. When he reads a novel, he wants either his senses tormented or his spirits raised. He wants to be transported, instantly, either to mock damnation or a mock innocence.[169]

O'Connor looks for redemption in fiction, the "redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored."[170] As a Catholic author, restoration redemption, and salvation are all a crucial aspect of the human experience and fiction. O'Connor reminds readers of evil which is essential to understanding the importance of "restoration."[171] She sees readers as wanting instant gratification through being "transported" by fiction.[172] Yet, she says they only want to experience "mock damnation" or "mock innocence."[173] Perhaps she means that the fabricated journey to neither full damnation nor innocence is the temporary relief from the monotony of life that a reader seeks. Certainly, O'Connor provides neither respite from long days nor mock-anything.

There arises a problem in fiction based on exploring the grotesque, which is how to present a story in which salvation is possible. For writers who become more poetic, O'Connor sees that:

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[168] O'Connor "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mystery And Manners* 47- 48
[169] O'Connor "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mystery And Manners* 48- 49
[170] ibid.
[171] ibid.
[172] ibid.
[173] ibid.

> The problem for such a novelist will be to know how far he can distort without destroying, and in order not to destroy, he will have to descend far enough into himself to reach those underground springs that give life to his work. This descent into himself will, at the same time, be a descent through the darkness of the familiar world where, like the blind man cured in the gospels, he sees men as if they were trees, but walking. This is the beginning of vision, and I feel it is a vision which we in the South must at least try to understand if we want to participate in the continuance of a vital Southern literature. I hate to think that in twenty years Southern writers too may be writing about men in gray-flannel suits and may have lost their ability to see that these gentlemen are even greater freaks than what we are writing about now. I hate to think of the day when the Southern writer will satisfy the tired reader.[174]

To "distort without destroying"[175] is key for O'Connor, in order that her characters are still characters and are readable. Consider that distortion is only affective when there is still humanity recognizable. In "The Lame Shall Enter First", the character of the adopted boy is incredibly monstrous and cruel. Rufus, as a child, he is still seen as innocent and salvageable. As a character he is compelling in his inhumanity that is nuanced by his youth. Similarly, the "beginning of vision" as O'Connor sees it, is the point at which a writer "will have to descend far enough into himself to reach those underground springs that give life to his work… a descent through the darkness of the familiar world."[176] Here O'Connor is describing mystery, which lies deep within us. To write is to take the journey of venturing into the darkest parts of ourselves, to unveil truths about humanity or limitations in understanding. Darkness doesn't necessarily mean our dark sides, or evil within us, it also means the point at which we cannot know. She also sees "men in gray-flannel suits" or perhaps boring milk toast WASP-types as "greater freaks than what we are writing about now." Finally, Paley says, "I hate to think of the day when the Southern writer will satisfy the tired reader."[177] The woman who wrote to her intended to mean readers tired from their long days. Flannery O'Connor means both the physically tired reader but

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[174] O'Connor "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mystery And Manners* 50
[175] ibid.
[176] ibid.
[177] ibid.

also the reader who is asleep. Her fiction isn't satisfying to a reader who comes home from work wanting to read fluff. O'Connor is interested investing time into fiction that awakens her readership instead of soothes them.

Catholic writers have been charged as incapable of creativity. In response to this, O'Connor argues back that, "The Catholic sacramental view of life is one that sustains and supports at every turn the vision that the storyteller must have if he is going to write fiction of any depth."[178] Similarly, O'Connor states:

> It makes a great difference to the look of a novel whether its author believes that the world came late into being and continues to come by a creative act of God, or whether he believes that the world and ourselves are the product of a cosmic accident. It makes a great difference to his novel whether he believes that we are created in God's image, or whether he believes we create God in our own. It makes a great different whether he believes that we are free, or bound like those of the other animals.[179]

Religion has a direct impact on the work O'Connor is creating. For O'Connor it fulfills part of her role as a Catholic. The idea that Catholics cannot be creative because of their strict ideologies, is proven by O'Connor through her immensely creative works and her prose to be false. "…because I am a Catholic," asserts O'Connor, "I cannot afford to be less than an artist."[180] For those who claim that a Catholic's only desire is to proselytize their readers, O'Connor says back to them that one "cannot move or mold reality in the interests of the abstract truth."[181] O'Connor seeks to work through the limitations and the mysteries of life, not simply to turn her audiences into Catholics. As an artist, this defies her sensibilities and reduces her to a peddler of religion.

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[178] ibid. 152
[179] ibid. 156-157
[180] O'Connor "The Church & the Fiction Writer" *Mystery And Manners* 146
[181] ibid.

The ultimate mystery in life, according to O'Connor, is "the general mystery of incompleteness and the particular tragedy of our own times…"[182] That we are not perfect and that life must inevitably end, is the tragic consequence of our humanity. The universal "mystery of incompleteness" awakens our need for answers and dogmas. The difference between writers and people is what they choose to believe. O'Connor sees that the central role of salvation and Catholicism provides depth and meaning to her fiction. For, "Where this is no belief in the soul, there is very little drama."[183]

I. "THE LAME SHALL ENTER FIRST"

"The Lame Shall Enter First" is a story about Sheppard, a widow and father, who works at a reformatory. He tries to reach out to a disabled boy, Rufus Johnson, who he thinks deserves more attention and love than his own son, Norton. Sheppard must live with the consequences of his own misjudgment.

He saw Norton at the telescope, all back and ears, saw his arm shoot up and wave frantically. A rush of agonizing love for the child rushed over him like a transfusion of life. The little boy's face appeared to him transformed; the image of his salvation; all light. He groaned with joy. He would make everything up to him. He would never let him suffer again. He would be mother and father. He jumped up and ran to his room, to kiss him, to tell him that he loved him, that he would never fail him again.
The light was on in Norton's room but the bed was empty. He turned and dashed up the attic stairs and at the top reeled back like a man on the edge of a pit. The tripod had fallen and the telescope lay on the floor. A few feet over it, the child hung in the jungle of shadows, just below the beam from which he had launched his flight into space. [184]

The end of the story marks Sheppard's revelation about his own actions. In the wake of Rufus's arrest and his final realization that Rufus is destroying his family, Sheppard views

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[182] O'Connor "Novelist & Believer" *Mystery And Manners* 167
[183] ibid.
[184] O'Connor 482

Norton as his "salvation."[185] Previously, Sheppard looked upon his son as "selfish,"[186] having never had to share with siblings. Similarly, Sheppard feels that his son is past the point of "normal grief" and that his unacceptable grief was "all part of his selfishness. She had been dead for over a year…"[187] Sheppard is disgusted by what he perceives to be his son's ugly flaws. Additionally, he describes Norton as:

> …a stocky blond boy of ten. …The boy's future was written in his face. He would be a banker. No, worse. He would operate a small loan company. All he wanted for the child was that he be good and unselfish and neither seemed likely.[188]

Sheppard views Norton as a simple weak boy who has no great future ahead of him. As a parent, Sheppard is wholly rejecting of his own son. Sheppard notes that the boy's selfishness did not appear "When his wife was living" though it became obvious when she died. Here death acts as a force that uncovers truth, for Sheppard, though it appears as a false understanding. Perhaps Sheppard's actions toward his son can only be explained by his own grief.

Sheppard himself is described as having white hair that, "…stood up like a narrow brush halo over his pink sensitive face."[189] Sheppard is described as angelic, having a halo. Though in actuality he is figured to be a false savior who is blinded by his own strange desire to save the boy Rufus. In the end of the story, Norton is found dead in the attic. Sheppard's own false understanding and his attempt to be a savior winds up killing his son. Many forces are at work which lead to this heightened moment in the story when Norton is found dead.

Rufus is a complex character shown to possess an evil, which Sheppard seeks to explain and ignore. Sheppard is overly sympathetic toward the character Rufus, who he thinks to have high potential. While at the reformatory, Sheppard sees that Rufus has a high IQ and thinks that he

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[185] ibid.
[186] O'Connor 446
[187] O'Connor 447
[188] O'Connor 445
[189] ibid.

can draw out his potential. Sheppard compares Norton to Rufus. Sheppard sees Norton as greedy, eating cake with peanut butter on top, while Rufus must rummage through garbage cans for food. Sheppard tries to appeal to Norton, trying "to pierce the child's conscience with his gaze."[190] In the same way, Sheppard makes Norton feel guilty saying:

> 'Think of everything you have that he doesn't!' Sheppard said. 'Suppose you had to root in garbage cans for food? Suppose you had a huge swollen foot and one side of you dropped lower than the other when you walked?'[191]

The story is set up with Sheppard's rejection of his son and his approval of Rufus. When Rufus takes the key that Sheppard gave him to use, he enters the family and Sheppard tries to adopt him as a second son. Sheppard believes that "What was wasted on Norton would cause Johnson to flourish," choosing Rufus over his flesh and blood.

Rufus' club foot symbolizes both his humanity and his evil nature. On the one hand, the foot is described several times as inhuman and beastly. On the other hand, the foot is Rufus' physical disability that in some ways makes him more human. Rufus is described as having: …lifted a monstrous club foot to his knee. The foot was in a heavy black battered shoe with a sole four or five inches thick. The leather parted from it in one place and the end of an empty sock protruded like a gray tongue from a severed head. The case as clear to Sheppard instantly. His mischief was a compensation for the foot.[192]

The foot and shoe are described as "monstrous" and "a gray tongue from a severed head."[193] Additionally, the foot and shoe are also described as a "black deformed mass that swelled before his eyes,"[194] "a black slick shapeless object, shining hideously,"[195] and "a blunt

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[190] O'Connor 446
[191] O'Connor 447
[192] O'Connor 450
[193] ibid.
[194] ibid.
[195] O'Connor 470

weapon, highly polished."[196] The use of his foot as a weapon comes into play when Rufus suggests that "If I kick somebody once with this… it learns them not to mess with me."[197] For Rufus, the foot is seen as a gift that allows him to defend himself. Further, he acted as "if it were a sacred object."[198]

Johnson constantly proclaims that he is going to hell and is inspired by Satan himself saying, "…when I die I'm going to hell."[199] Rufus' foot also acts as a way to distinguish him from others. It has the feeling of a satanic mark that shows him to be evil. When the shoe doesn't fit, Rufus "…insisted the foot had grown. He left the shop with a pleased expression, as if, in expanding, the foot had acted on some inspiration of its own."[200] As a source of his sin, Rufus is happy that the foot has grown. The tie between the foot and his immorality suggests that the foot contains the devil's power. Despite the fact that Sheppard wholeheartedly believes in Rufus, or wants to believe in him, the foot still disgusts him. This is the only part of him that elicits any kind of gut reaction that Sheppard ignores. Rufus' reaction to death suggests that Rufus is untouched by mortality. The conversation between Rufus and Sheppard shows how Rufus treats death:

> 'How's your grandfather treating you?'…
> 'He dropped dead,' the boy said indifferently.
> 'You don't' mean it!' Sheppard cried. he got up and sat down on the coffee table nearer the boy.
> 'Naw,' Johnson said, 'he ain't dropped dead. I wisht he had.'[201]

[196] ibid.
[197] O'Connor 453
[198] O'Connor 459
[199] O'Connor 461
[200] O'Connor 466
[201] O'Connor 456

Rufus' doesn't care about his grandfather and in fact wishes that he was dead. His lack of emotion or caring is brought out by Sheppard's surprise and concern. Similarly, Norton is upset when Rufus starts to touch his mother's things. Norton pleads:

> 'Leave her comb alone!'… He stood… as if he were watching sacrilege in a holy place. Johnson put the comb down and picked up the brush and gave his hair a swipe with it.
> 'She's dead,' the child said.
> 'I ain't afraid of dead people's things,' Johnson said.[202]

Following this, Rufus continues to use Norton's mother's things. He takes out her corset and dances around with it defying Norton. The objects are for Norton holy relics that should not be touched. In this way, Rufus defiles them by using her things and further when he plays with her bra in a sexual way. Death is meaningless to Rufus who sees himself outside of the laws of nature, because he believes he is going to hell.

A peculiar moment in which Norton appears supernaturally afflicted, O'Connor's grotesque quality emerges, proving that there is a greater force at work in the story and in the lives of the characters. Sheppard tries to guilt Norton and make him feel bad for being more privileged than Rufus. At the mention of his dead mother, Norton becomes monstrous and his pain is felt. Sheppard states emphatically:

> '…And your mother is not in the state penitentiary.'
> The child pushed his plate away. Sheppard groaned aloud.
> A knot of flesh appeared below the boy's suddenly distorted mouth. His face became a mass of lumps with slits for eyes. 'If she was in the penitentiary,' he began in a kind of racking bellow, 'I could go to seeeeee her.'[203]

Sheppard thinks that Norton shouldn't be grieving anymore and that his grief is fueled by his so-called selfishness. Sheppard mentions Rufus' mother in an effort to make Norton feel bad. Rufus' mother is still in existence and it is possible to see her. While she may not have been a good mother, or the circumstances around her imprisonment may make her unfit as a parent,

[202] O'Connor 455
[203] O'Connor 447

Norton holds on to the fact that at least she is alive. Suddenly, Norton's face becomes disfigured and "His face became a mass of lumps with slits for eyes."[204] This sudden shift in a story that until now appears quite ordinary, in fact realistic, is prompted by the discussion of Norton's dead mother. Norton's grief is characterized by the transformation of his suddenly beastly face and eyes that are "slits."[205] This is the skip or gap that is characteristic of the grotesque. It jars the reader but also makes the moment more noticeable and evocative of Norton's suffering. To have eyes that are "slits"[206] is to have nothingness where eyes once were. His eyes mirror his mother who is nothingness herself, or at least is not present for Norton or Sheppard. Norton's pain comes from the fact that he can no longer access her, as he sorrowfully moans that if she was in the penitentiary, at least he "'…could go to seeeeee her."'[207] The effects of death take on a physical form in Norton and his eyes not only transform but become empty themselves.

Thus, Rufus's own devilish character is also shown through his eyes as his eyes are often full of fire or rage, as if they were endowed with Satan's own powers. Rufus' own evangelical beliefs emerge in a scene in which he describes his religion. When Sheppard tries to deflect Rufus' opinions about hell, he says:

> '…Nobody has given any reliable evidence there's a hell.'
> 'The Bible has give the evidence,' Johnson said darkly, 'and if you die and go there you burn forever.'…
> 'Whoever says it ain't a hell,' Johnson said, 'is contradicting Jesus. The dead are judged and the wicked are damned. They weep and gnash their teeth while they burn,' he continued, 'and it's everlasting darkness.'
> The child's mouth opened. His eyes appeared to grow hollow.
> 'Satan runs it,' Johnson said.[208]

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[204] ibid.
[205] ibid.
[206] ibid.
[207] ibid.
[208] O'Connor 461

The word dark, as in "darkly" and "darkness", shows up throughout the story as descriptive of hell and Rufus' evil.[209] Rufus is describes the Bible's image of hell "darkly."[210] He explains that after death, a person would go to hell and "burn forever."[211] Here, death is a portal to eternal death. The act of burning would ordinarily lead to death, but in this case is a punishment that lasts forever. He further clarifies this statement, saying that in being an atheist, Sheppard is "contradicting Jesus"[212] himself. The word "contradicting"[213] is strange because rather than say outright that Sheppard is wrong or defying Jesus, instead to contradict is to say that Sheppard's proposal of nothingness after death just doesn't match up. For Johnson, the facts are in the Bible and the Bible acts as a proof text, showing that hell is real. The image of the wicked who, "weep and gnash their teeth while they burn" is powerful. Some of these phrases are straight out of the Bible. As such, Rufus he appears controlled by the devil or an evil within him. Those who weep are on the path that leads to death, they cry for themselves. In contrast, Rufus is described as having eyes, which "appeared to be hollow."[214] This is similar to the description of Norton's eyes that were slits, though different because Norton actually sheds tears. Rufus never sheds tears, his eyes are empty places. Although, hollow sees to mean more, hollowness brings to mind hell itself as represented by Dante as a tiered hollow space. Further, Rufus looks to be infatuated by hell. He seems excited by the idea that "'Satan runs it…'"[215] Rufus, like his hollow eyes, is empty of emotion and even self-pity.

Following this moment, Norton applies Rufus' beliefs to his mother and is again described as disfigured at the sign of grief. Norton begins to ask Sheppard and Rufus questions

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[209] ibid.
[210] ibid.
[211] ibid.
[212] ibid.
[213] ibid.
[214] ibid.
[215] ibid.

about where his mother is. Norton begins by asking Sheppard, "'Is she there?... Is she there burning up?'"[216] Norton is worried immediately that his mother could be burning in hell. Sheppard reacts to this immediately, reassuring Norton that his mother isn't in hell. He says to Norton, "Your mother isn't anywhere. She's not unhappy. She just isn't."[217] Sheppard's response is to refute the notion that his mother could be "anywhere"[218] because she's nothing. In fact, saying that she "isn't anywhere"[219] is striking because he could so easily have said she's nowhere. Nowhere and anywhere denote different things. This is to say that Norton's mother is something, but just not anything that can be explained or said. Her state cannot be defined or stated so saying that they are not anywhere or not anything is to let in mystery. There's more possibility in any- versus no-. It suggests that death is not simple and is not easily explained or defined. O'Connor leaves room for mystery and Paley leaves room for the "anywhere." Further, it is fascinating that Sheppard brings happiness into Norton's question. He equates burning in hell to unhappiness and therefore explains that because his "mother isn't anywhere," then "she's not unhappy."[220] If his mother is "not unhappy,"[221] is this to say that she is happy? He meditates on the idea that he should have told Norton that his mother went to heaven because it would have alleviated some of the anxiety Norton is experiencing in this moment. Similarly, "not unhappy"[222] is a double negative and more simply put is just happy. Sheppard doesn't mean that his wife is happy, but instead that she is neutral. He further characterizes her by saying "She just

[216] ibid.
[217] ibid.
[218] ibid.
[219] ibid.
[220] O'Connor 461
[221] ibid.
[222] ibid.

isn't."[223] Sheppard is trying to portray his dead wife as not existing, though this disturbs Norton more to think of her as gone rather than in heaven or hell.

In response to this idea that Norton's mother "isn't"[224] his face is again disfigured. It follows that, "Norton's face began to twist. A knot formed in his chin."[225] The word "knot"[226] is used in both this moment and the earlier instance when Norton's face morphs after the first mention of his mother. Norton appears physically tortured by the idea that his mother is unreachable. Sheppard says to Norton to ease his mind that his, "mother's spirit lives on in other people and it'll live on in you," though Norton's "pale eyes hardened in disbelief."[227] Norton is already picturing his mother burning in hell. Now his eyes are described as "hardened in disbelief."[228] Ironically, his disbelief is directed toward Sheppard's own disbelief in religion. Then, Sheppard loses pity for his son as he gets angry that, "The boy would rather she be in hell than nowhere," and irritated, he says to Norton that, "'She doesn't exist.'"[229] In more heated discussion, Sheppard uses the word "nowhere"[230] instead of "anywhere"[231] as before. In anger, Sheppard turns to more extreme language. The fact that Norton's mother remains nameless further echoes the concept of her being a mystery. Not having a name suggests she is nothing, though 'mother' substitutes and gives her an identity. Additionally, Sheppard is disgusted by what he sees to be Norton preferring the idea of his mother in hell than not existing at all. Knowing she exists in some way, even burning hell, provides an ounce of comfort to Norton who wants to believe she is reachable.

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[223] ibid.
[224] ibid.
[225] ibid.
[226] O'Connor 461 and 447
[227] O'Connor 461
[228] ibid.
[229] O'Connor 462
[230] ibid.
[231] O'Connor 461

Norton then turns to Rufus to ask him where he thinks Norton's mother and he alternatively provides him with a shred of comfort. Norton asks Rufus, "'Is she there… Is she there, burning up?'"[232] In response, "Johnson's eyes glittered. 'Well,' he said, 'she is if she was evil. Was she a whore?'"[233] The description of his eyes as glittering[234] contrasts to Norton's eyes which, "hardened in disbelief."[235] Rufus' excitement is felt in his eyes, which reveal his twisted joy at the conversation. Rufus' comment that Norton's mother would only be in hell "if she was evil", for example a "whore", reveals Rufus' strict sense of good and evil.[236] Rufus sees the world as black and white without any gray areas. In this way, his equation is that if you're evil you go to hell and if you're devout and good you go to heaven. Rufus' apparent devil worshiping leads him to be content and confident in his evil. Rufus in fact declares that, "'Satan… has me in his power.'"[237] Rufus displays a certain glee at explaining the way he thinks death and judgment work. Despite Rufus' cruelty, the conversation comforts Norton to a degree. Rufus and Norton continue to evaluate whether or not his mother is in heaven or hell. It is also striking to see two young children grasping religion and Norton struggling with heavy existential questions. Meanwhile Sheppard is portrayed as ignoring these important questions and being blind for it.

Rufus and Norton continue ultimately deciding that Norton's mother is in heaven. Rufus asks Norton if his mother "believe[d] in Jesus?"[238] In response Norton says that she did "All the time," but Sheppard says, "She did not."[239] Norton then persists saying:

> 'She did all the time,' Norton said. 'I heard her say she did all the time.'
> 'She's saved,' Johnson said
> ...'Where?' he said. 'Where is she at?'

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[232] O'Connor 462
[233] ibid.
[234] ibid.
[235] O'Connor 461
[236] O'Connor 462
[237] O'Connor 450
[238] O'Connor 462
[239] ibid.

> 'On high,' Johnson said.
> 'Where's that?' Norton gasped.
> 'It's in the sky somewhere… but you got to be dead to get there. You can't go in no space ship.' here was a narrow gleam in his eyes now like a beam holding steady on the target.
> …'When I'm dead will I go to hell or where she is?' Norton asked.
> 'Right now you'd go where she is,' Johnson said,' but if you live long enough, you'll go to hell.'[240]

Rufus, as if playing God himself, passes judgment saying nonchalantly, "She's saved."[241] To be "saved"[242] of course has the implication that Norton's mother has been favorably judged by God and sent to heaven. It means that Norton's mother exists in some form and she still is. Wanting to know where she is, Norton asks Rufus who says, "On high" and in "the sky somewhere."[243] Yet, he clarifies that in order to reach her one has to be dead, which ultimately leads Norton to fatally try to reach her in the end. In response to Norton's question about where he will go when he dies, Rufus says to where his mother is, "but if you live long enough, you'll go to hell."[244] Rufus contends that life is corrupting and that the longer one lives the more likely they will be lured into darkness. During this scene, Rufus' eyes are described as having "a narrow gleam in his eyes now like a beam holding steady on its target."[245] The description of his eyes as gleaming is similar to before when they were "glittering."[246] Rufus is enraptured by his role of educating Norton on the ways of death. Further, his eyes are described as aiming at Norton as though he were a "target."[247] Clearly, Rufus gets pleasure out of Norton's questions and naiveté.

The darkness in Rufus is similar to death itself. Perhaps Rufus feel untouched by death because he operates as though he is already dead and in hell. Rufus is shown by O'Connor to be

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[240] ibid.
[241] ibid.
[242] ibid.
[243] ibid.
[244] ibid.
[245] ibid.
[246] O'Connor 462
[247] ibid.

deeply grasped by darkness. Perhaps he is also afflicted by death itself. While he is a child and had a difficult background, there's no real sympathy for the boy. He treats Norton horribly and in his first visit with him constantly calls him waiter and in fact makes Norton serve on him in Norton's house. Rufus treats Norton like his servant and throughout the story tries to control him. Less obviously, Rufus has control over Sheppard, though he did almost nothing to make that happen. Rufus' darkness feeds right into Sheppard's wish to save him. What appears to be a good thing—trying to help Rufus—actually leads Sheppard to destruction and pain.

The last pages of the story, heightened with intense and Biblical language, represents Sheppard's revelation and the death of his son. Before Sheppard finally realizes that Rufus is destroying his life, Sheppard for once last time tries to reach out to him. At first he says how much he hates Rufus but it is evident he still is not done with him. Sheppard repeats the words "save you"[248] several times in this passage and hasn't yet given up hope. At first, "A chill of hatred shook him. He hated the shoe, hated the foot, hated the boy. His face paled. Hatred choked him. He was aghast at himself…" but then he says, "'… That was all you wanted—to shake my resolve to help you, but my resolve isn't shaken. I'm stronger than you are. I'm stronger than you are and I'm going to save you. The good will triumph.'"[249] He finally lets go of his desire to love Rufus, though not completely. His hatred is interrupted by his desperate need to save Rufus.

Sheppard's search for Rufus' salvation causes his own destruction in return. Sheppard continues to say, "'I'm going to save you'"[250] twice. Rufus retorts, "'Save yourself… Nobody can save me but Jesus.'"[251] Rufus' words imply Sheppard's own search for salvation and

[248] O'Connor 474
[249] ibid.
[250] ibid.
[251] ibid.

alleviation from the grief of losing his wife. Then, Rufus' eyes are described as being, "like distorting mirrors in which he saw himself made hideous and grotesque."[252] His anger toward Rufus manifests in this description, which captures a moment in which Rufus examines himself. Interestingly, the mirrors are described as "distorting" therefore, the image projected is warped. This is to say, the projected image Rufus sees, of "himself made hideous and grotesque"[253] is not actually his reflection. Perhaps what Rufus is seeing is an image of his dark side or of the way he imagines himself to be. Contrastingly, "The intensity had gone out of Sheppard's eyes. They looked flat and lifeless as if the shock of the boy's revelation were only now reaching the center of his consciousness."[254] Somehow, Rufus' revelation in which he views himself as gruesome, causes Sheppard's eyes to dull. As Rufus realizes his true form, so does Sheppard. However, Rufus appeared to always know he was controlled by an evil force. Now that Sheppard sees it, the light goes out of his eyes as if he has died. Sheppard previously put all of his energy into reforming and helping Rufus to succeed. Now that he views Rufus as impossible to help, it is like a death. Sheppard loses faith in Rufus and the goodwill that he thinks each person possesses. Further, Sheppard had said that those who believe in religion are weak. Rufus replies that Satan has control over both Rufus and Sheppard and that in regard to religion, "Even if I didn't believe it, it would still be true."[255] He then proceeds to ingest pages of the Bible. As he does this he has a religious experience:

> His eyes widened as if a vision of splendor were opening up before him. 'I've eaten it!' he breathed. 'I've eaten it like Ezekiel and it was honey to my mouth!'
> …'I've eaten it!' the boy cried. Wonder transformed his face. 'I've eaten it like Ezekiel and I don't want none of your food after it nor no more ever.'[256]

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[252] ibid.
[253] ibid.
[254] ibid.
[255] ibid.
[256] ibid.

Rufus is quoting the Bible which says, "...'Son of man, eat this scroll I am/ giving you and fill your stomach with it.' So I ate it, and it/ tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth."[257] In eating the pages of the Bible, they become a part of Rufus and he experiences a revelation. He says he doesn't want any of Sheppard's food because the food of his revelation and spiritual experience are enough. He tries to mimic the experience of Ezekiel. Following this, Rufus "rose and picked up the Bible and started toward the hall with it. At the door he paused, a small black figure on the threshold of some dark apocalypse. 'The devil had you in his power,' he said in a jubilant voice and disappeared."[258] Rufus is depicted as a "black figure on the threshold of some dark apocalypse."[259] The darkness of Rufus is evident in the passage. He is also described as being on the forefront of an apocalypse. Thus, he has precipitated an apocalypse and that he is entering into it. He happily rejoices to Sheppard that he is being controlled by the devil. Sheppard further worries that Rufus "might come back a week later and set fire to the place."[260] Fire and burning evoke apocalypse and hell. The idea of Rufus starting a fire feeds right into this idea of him as an enactor of evil and a soul controlled by Satan.

After realizing he can't save Rufus, Sheppard views the sky as nothingness. He hates that Norton now thinks his mother is in the stars. As a unbeliever, he prefers to see the sky as just space and emptiness. His lack of beliefs and ability to comprehend the truths of the universe that would have enabled him to understand Rufus' true nature, eventually lead to Norton's death. The consequence of his disbelief is losing his son. Contrastingly, Rufus as well as Norton, who Rufus has influenced, see the sky as containing heaven or an afterlife. The sky further represents the workings of God and Satan that they think control the universe. Norton proclaims, "'I've found

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[257] "Ezekiel 3 New International Version," *The Bible*, <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ezekiel 3&version=NIV>.
[258] O'Connor 478
[259] ibid.
[260] ibid.

her!'"[261] excitedly because it gives him hope and relief knowing his mother exists in the universe. The sky can also represent mystery and a sense of supernatural. It gives Norton hope, which leads him to ultimately die, though O'Connor doesn't suggest that the hope he feels is the culprit.

Suddenly, a siren passes by possibly as a warning about the tragic events to come. After Sheppard writes of Rufus as incapable of reaching for the stars:

> Somewhere in the small wood behind the house, a bull frog sounded a low hollow note. …He... leaned forward and heard, like the first shrill note of a disaster warning, a siren of a police car, moving slowly into the neighborhood and nearer until it subsided with a moan outside the house. He felt a cold weight on his shoulders as if an icy cloak had been thrown about him.[262]

First there is the description of the bull frog's natural siren. The frog "sounded a low hollow note" which is a warning. If nature starts off the warning, it is likely mean to be understood as supernatural or charged by God. Following this is the siren that is a "shrill note of a disaster warning" which "subsided with a moan."[263]The siren is also acting as a kind of warning. It means that Rufus is coming back because he's been arrested. We find out that he chose to see Sheppard and wanted to be caught. He wants Sheppard to behold him as evil and not worth saving. The warnings predict something about to happen in the story.

Rufus and Sheppard get into a confrontation in which Rufus accuses Sheppard of trying to corrupt him. This forces Sheppard to finally, once and for all, see that Rufus is not a force of good. Rufus finally leaves as "the siren wailed into the darkness."[264] This is also Rufus' exit from the story. Rufus, like the siren, is sinking back into the darkness from whence he came. It is also interesting to consider the term siren as in mythology, as explored in the Paley chapter. Rufus is captivated by the devil and his dark side. Like a siren, evil has lured him into its trap and he can't

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[261] ibid.
[262] O'Connor 479
[263] ibid.
[264] O'Connor 481

find a way out. Similarly, Norton has been lured by Rufus into believing that he can access is mother.

The siren going into the dark is the end of the warning. Sheppard is then plunged into a difficult revelation. He is described twice as closing his eyes, as he at first does not want to have a revelation. When he finally is pulled into the revelation, Sheppard realizes he:

> '…did more for Johnson that he had done for his own child. Foulness hung about him like an odor in the air, so close that it seemed to come from his won breath. 'I have nothing to reproach myself with,' he repeated. His voice sounded dry and harsh. 'I did more for him than I did for my own child.' He was swept with a sudden panic. He heard the boy's jubilant voice. Satan has you in his power.
> 'I have nothing to reproach myself with,' he began again. 'I did more for him than I did for my own child.' He heard his voice as if it were the voice of his accuser. He repeated the sentence silently.[265]

In a sudden panic, Sheppard tries to comfort himself, repeating the self-affirmation "'I did more for him than I did for my own child.'"[266] This phrase that he tries to comfort himself with leads him to the realization that he has harmed Norton. The heart of his goodness, trying to save Rufus, is actually destroying Norton. Hearing Rufus' "jubilant voice" in his head, he hears the phrase, "Satan has you in his power."[267] This is to say that because Rufus is in Satan's power, so is Sheppard. He has been lured into Rufus' power because of Sheppard's ceaseless desire to help him. Rufus is acting like a siren, transfixing him until he dies. Except here, it is until his life is ruined. Norton is also captivated by Rufus and he dies because of it. The passage continues:

> Slowly his face drained of color. It became almost gray beneath the white halo of his hair. The sentence echoed in his mind, each syllable like a dull blow. His mouth twisted and he closed his eyes against the revelation. Norton's face rose before him, empty, forlorn, his left eye listing almost imperceptibly toward the outer rim as if it could not bear a full view of grief. His heart constricted with a repulsion for himself so clear and intense that he gasped for breath. He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton. He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself. He saw the clear-eyed Devil,

[265] O'Connor 481
[266] ibid.
[267] ibid.

> the sounder of hearts, leering at him from the eyes of Johnson. His image of himself shriveled until everything was black before him. He sat there paralyzed, aghast.[268]

This episode appears as a last judgment with Sheppard hearing his own voice as "the voice of his accuser."[269] Sheppard puts himself on trial for his crimes against his own son. Again we have the same image of Sheppard as an angle with a "white halo"[270] from the first page of the story. This image acts as bookends, starting off and ending the story. At first, Sheppard's angelic quality is unquestioned. Now, with all of the context and revelations about Sheppard as a character, it is clear he is a false angle. His desire to do good comes from a place of pain and arrogance. His rejection of his own son and his taking in Rufus, the devil character, shows his misjudgment and false sense of righteousness. At the start of the true revelation, Sheppard's mouth "twisted and he closed his eyes against the revelation."[271] This moment is reminiscent of when Norton has a realization about his mother's nonexistence. Just before, "a knot of flesh appeared below the boy's suddenly distorted mouth."[272] Physical distortion marks the start of a revelation in O'Connor. Further, Sheppard sees Norton's face which "rose before him, empty, forlorn, his left eye listing almost imperceptibly toward the outer rim as if it could not bear a full view of grief."[273] Written in Norton's face and eyes is his grief from losing his mother. Sheppard finally recognizes his son's pain as more than selfish. Sheppard reacts to this with strong "repulsion for himself" that has him "gasp[ing] for breath."[274] The sudden realization that he has been lead down a path of wickedness causes his body to react with anxiety as though he is being choked. He finally admits to himself that in trying to be a savior, he had really just "stuffed his own

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[268] ibid.
[269] O'Connor 481
[270] ibid.
[271] ibid.
[272] O'Connor 447
[273] O'Connor 481
[274] ibid.

emptiness with good works like a glutton."[275] In this moment of judgment, he "saw the clear-eyed Devil, the sounder of hearts, leering at him from the eyes of Johnson."[276] Sheppard sees the devil in Rufus' eyes. Perhaps by "the sounder of hearts" he means the power of the devil to lure someone in to its trap. Sheppard felt pity for Rufus, which fueled his so-called glutton. His judgment is left with everything turning black and he was "paralyzed, aghast."[277] Sheppard has this religious experience in which he feels judgment. Sheppard's judgment comes from different sources all originating within himself. He sees Rufus as the devil and feels the power of God's wrath against him.

From this point, the story ends on the last two paragraphs as transcribed in the beginning of this section. Sheppard realizes his love for his son at the point when it is too late. His love for his son acts as a "transfusion of life"[278], endowing Sheppard with life instead of deathliness the way Rufus did. Norton's face comes to him "transformed; the image of salvation."[279] The hate and rejection he felt for Norton is replaced by love and kindness. Although, Sheppard's mistakes cannot be taken back. He makes promises to himself and lists the ways he can be a better father to Norton. Sheppard runs up the stairs but "reeled back like a man on the edge of a pit."[280] This marks the punishment after Sheppard's last judgment. As if he is upon the gates of Hell, Sheppard is taken aback. He notices his son who "hung in the jungle of shadows, just below the beam from which he had launched his flight into space."[281] The image of Norton hanging is treated as a punishment for Sheppard's sins. It is vague, though it can be interpreted from the text that Norton, in an effort to reach his dead mother, tried to jump into space. While Norton

[275] ibid.
[276] ibid.
[277] O'Connor 482
[278] ibid.
[279] ibid.
[280] ibid.
[281] ibid.

probably did not intentionally kill himself, he has been convinced by Rufus that the only way to reach his mother was by dying and going to heaven. Perhaps, Norton innocently jumped, not knowing what would happen, imagining he would be able to see his mother. Or possibly, he knew that death was the only means to see his mother. Either way, Norton has been lead to death by his negligent father and Rufus' teachings.

The ending is written in a way that is so simplistic yet shocking. The line, "he had launched his flight into space"[282] is a beautiful symbolic image that tells the reader that Norton has died. In this story, death concludes the action but is not the end. The idea of going into space shows that Norton's path is upward to the sky. He was trying to reach heaven and the ending leads me to believe that perhaps he does. The story doesn't say he died, the end. Instead, he dies trying to reach his mother and his trajectory is upwards indicating a life after death. This shows that for O'Connor, death is not the end. It ends the story, but there is the hint of more.

The character of Sheppard is one who is guided by a desire to be a savior. Sheppard's name is significant in itself. Jesus was known as "The Good Shepherd" in the New Testament. Sheppard is a figure who thinks of himself as being like Jesus, as a savior. In fact, Rufus echoes this truth throughout the story saying to Sheppard's son, "'God, kid… how do you stand it?... He thinks he's Jesus Christ!'"[283] Even Rufus understands that what is undercutting Sheppard's charity is his self-centered and self-seeking attitude. Sheppard also makes it clear that he does not believe in Christianity or the Bible. Sheppard is a character who has lost his way and is following a wicked path disguised as the right path.

Throughout the story, O'Connor asserts that if Sheppard was religious he would have recognized the signs that Rufus was not a good influence. O'Connor suggests that being religious

[282] ibid.
[283] O'Connor 459

heightens one's awareness of good and evil. This heightened awareness would have allowed Sheppard to see Rufus not as a needy boy, but as a great evil wishing to betray Sheppard and push him to a wicked path. Sheppard talks about "the failure of his compassion."[284] While this may be true, O'Connor suggests it is not about compassion but instead understanding the nature of people. She sees Sheppard's compassion as the thing that causes him to lose everything. Additionally, the last time Rufus gets arrested, he asks the police to take him to Sheppard. Sheppard asks why he wanted to be found and brought there. With the media present, in a surreal moment, Rufus accuses Sheppard of many things. Rufus says he wanted:

> 'To show up that big tin Jesus!'… 'He thinks he's God. I'd rather be in the reformatory than in his house, I'd rather be in the pen! The Devil has him in his power. He don't know his left hand from his right, he dont have as much sense as his crazy kid!' …'He made suggestions to me!'
> 'Suggestions?' the reporter said eagerly, 'what kind of suggestion?'
> 'Immor'l suggestions… But I ain't having none of it, I'm a Christian…'
> 'He's a dirty atheist… He said there wasn't no hell.'[285]

Rufus calling Sheppard "that big tin Jesus,"[286] is evocative of Sheppard's role in the story. Calling him a "tin Jesus"[287] is to say that he is like a tin statue—an artificial version of the real thing. Tin is a hard and man-made substance that shows Sheppard to be false. His image of himself as a savior is the same as the tin in that he imagines himself, creates himself, as a savior. But it is a fake and not close to the real thing. Rufus further accuses Sheppard, saying, "'He thinks he's God.'"[288] In this moment, Rufus represents himself as a Christian following the right path and Sheppard as the "dirty atheist" who is in the Devil's power.[289] Rufus continues by

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[284] O'Connor 475
[285] O'Connor 480
[286] ibid.
[287] ibid.
[288] ibid.
[289] ibid.

saying that Sheppard made "immor'l suggestions"[290] to him. There's a question as to what these immoral suggestions really are. The text points to the suggestion being related to religious belief. As an Atheist, perhaps Rufus is saying that Sheppard tried to get him not to believe in Christianity or God. Yet, there appears to be something else at work, more sinister. I can't help but think that there's a sexual tone to this accusation. To garner attention and make Sheppard look bad, maybe Rufus intends to claim sexual harassment—more than just being an atheist, perhaps he wants everyone to think Sheppard is a pedophile. And maybe there's a sense that not believing in god is equal to being inappropriately sexual. There's a moment in the text that leaves this question in my mind. Deciding not to speak to Norton, Sheppard, "…hesitated, but remained where he was a moment as if he saw nothing. Tomorrow was the day they were to go back for the shoe. It would be a climax to the good feeling between them."[291] There's something odd and suggestive about the line, "It would be a climax to the good feeling between them."[292] I get the sense that O'Connor wants the reader to be a bit put off by this line, jarred slightly. The word climax inevitably sounds sexual, though it need not necessarily be sexual here. It's easy to read this as Sheppard's happiness in providing for Johnson. In order to do so, he must turn a blind eye to Norton and pretend not to see him. The relationship between Sheppard and Rufus is based on Sheppard rejecting his son. One possible reading is that Sheppard gets a pleasure out of helping Rufus in a sexual manner. Whether it is sexual or not, this section makes it clear that Sheppard's satisfaction should not sit well with the reader.

Much of Rufus' lines from the story are from the Bible. Sheppard's desire to help Rufus often feels contrived. After giving Johnson a telescope, Sheppard's, "face was flushed with pleasure. This much of his dream was reality. Within a week he had made it possible for this

[290] ibid.
[291] O'Connor 468
[292] ibid.

boy's vision to pass through a slender channel to the stars."[293] Similarly, Sheppard's enthusiasm toward Rufus' new shoe is shown in the line, "It was as if he had given the boy a new spine."[294] Both phrases have a slightly judgmental and mocking tone, which call out Sheppard's goodwill as potential egotistical. The idea of Sheppard giving Rufus a new spine is to say that Sheppard acts like God—as though he created Rufus himself. Related to this is the Gospel of Matthew, in which it is said, "Take care not to perform your good deed before other people/ So as to be seen by them,/ For you will have no reward from your father of the skies./ When you give alms, don't sound a trumpet before you…"[295] O'Connor as a Catholic believed wholeheartedly in the teachings of the Bible. This particular passage illustrates the emptiness of good deeds done for show. According to these verses, God will not reward one who performs a good deed to garner favor and attention. One should do charitable acts in private and expect nothing in return. The story charges Sheppard of assisting Rufus not out of the goodness of his heart, but to lift himself up and feel important. Further, it is written, "…when you give alms, do not let the left hand know/ What the right hand is doing/ So the alms may be given in secret…"[296] The left hand traditionally is symbolic of evil while the right hand is symbolic of goodness. With this in mind, the verse proposes that we should do good and not allow our bad side taint our good deeds. In other words, if the left hand were to know what was happening, perhaps our sinful side would want credit for the deeds being done and our egos would get in the way. Rufus actually describes Sheppard in this way more than once, saying, "'He don't know his left hand from his right,'"[297] and perhaps quoting the Bible says, "'He said… you didn't know your left hand from your

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[293] O'Connor 459
[294] O'Connor 479
[295] Barnstone, Willis, ed. and trans., *The Restored New Testament* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002) Matthew 6:1-2
[296] Barnstone Matthew 6:3-4
[297] O'Connor 454

right.'"[298] Rufus sees that not only can Sheppard not keep his left hand hidden from his right hand, he doesn't know the difference. If he doesn't know the difference between his right hand and his left then he doesn't know the difference between good and evil. Thus, Sheppard thinks his deeds are good when they are actually leading him on a path to suffering and punishment. The lame are invoked into the story from verses of the Bible. Rufus says, "'The lame'll carry off the prey!'"[299] which relates to the verse, "…the lame take the prey."[300] Similarly, Rufus says, "The lame shall enter first"[301] which is reminiscent of the phrase found in the New Testament, "So the last will be first and first will be last."[302] The image of the lame is present throughout the Scriptures. In many instances, Jesus is said to have healed the lame, which demonstrates Jesus' capacity to save people. In this way, Sheppard tries to heal Rufus by taking him to get an orthopedic shoe. Sheppard thinks that by helping Rufus to walk better he is saving him. Nonetheless, Rufus refuses the shoe and rejects Sheppard's attempts to save him. As is evidenced by Rufus' description of Sheppard as a "tin Jesus,"[303] it is clear Rufus doesn't want Sheppard's aid. Similarly, Rufus being disabled, or lame, is a mark of otherness and as seen from the story, possibly God's smite. However, Rufus takes some pride in his disability and in the phrase, "the lame shall enter first" he implies that in the end he will be favored. In like manner, perhaps he sees that heaven, and death is the great equalizer and that though he is physically marred, in heaven it won't matter.

Rufus' foot harbors his evil and is also is a physical mark of his wickedness. Rufus is like the serpent in Genesis to whom God says, "You will crawl on your belly/ and you will eat

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[298] O'Connor 458
[299] O'Connor 481
[300] "Isaiah 33 The 21st Century King James Version," *The Bible*, <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah 33&version=KJ21>.
[301] O'Connor 480
[302] Barnstone Matthew 20:16
[303] O'Connor 480

dust…"[304] Because the serpent convinces Eve to eat the apple, he is not given feet and is forced to crawl for eternity. This becomes a mark of the serpent's evil. Similarly, Rufus is disabled and is cannot walk properly. Perhaps this too is a mark of his evil and only in salvation, from Jesus, will he be healed, according to the Bible.

II. "Why Do the Heathen Rage?"

"Why Do the Heathen Rage?" is a remembrance from a nameless mother. She focuses on her irritation with her apathetic son, all the while recalling the time when her husband, Tilman has a stroke and is being taken away by an ambulance.

She turned back in the book to see what she was reading. It was a letter from St. Jerome to Heliodorus, scolding him for having abandoned the desert. A footnote said that Heliodorus was one of the famous group that had centered around Jerome at Aquileia in 371. He had accompanied Jerome to the Near East with the intention of cultivating a hermitic life. They had separated when Heliodorus continued on to Jerusalem. Eventually he returned to Italy, and in later years he became a distinguished churchman as the bishop of Altinum.
This was the kind of thing he read—something that made no sense for now. Then it came to her, with an unpleasant little jolt, that the General with the sword in his mouth, marching to violence, was Jesus.[305]

The mother has a strange realization about her son and his interests. The mother is describing a passage she once saw in a book that her son had underlined. At first she is disgusted and mystified at why he liked this section. She says, "This was the kind of thing he read—something that made no sense for now."[306] The phrase "no sense for now"[307] suggests that sense will be made later. A thread running through this ending is that understanding isn't always instantaneous. Sometimes revelations come much later as there has to be a period of time to

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[304] "Genesis 3 New International Version," *The Bible*, <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis 3&version=NIV>. Genesis 3:14
[305] O'Connor 486-87
[306] O'Connor 487
[307] ibid.

digest the things that don't yet connect. This suggests that understanding, or salvation, can be achieved later after true revelation.

What is the significance of her eventual revelation that the General, referenced earlier in a letter from St. Jerome to Heliodorus, is Jesus? She gets this from a part of the letter that says,

> …our General marches fully armed, coming amid the clouds to conquer the whole world. Out of the mouth of our King emerges a double-edged sword that cuts down everything in the way. Arising finally from your nap, do you come to the battlefield! Abandon the shade and seek the sun.[308]

The representation of Jesus is not a peaceful one. He is seen as going toward a battle and having a sword in his mouth. Also, the end suggests there is some salvation because the story ends by invoking "Jesus."[309] There is also another moment described as an "instant's revelation" in which the mother's, "heart constricted. She had an instant's revelation that [Walter] was homeless."[310] This is a revelation in which Walter is seen as being without a home. By home, I think she means a place in life or a path to follow. He has a physical home—he can stay with the family, but that's not a future or an existence she wants for him. This ties into Walter's mother's descriptions of him as being idle and immobile. What's the significance of an "instant's revelation"[311] versus a full revelation? Revelations can come at any time. Is one greater than the other? One revelation views Walter as aimless and the other as saved. Perhaps it is that one leads to another and that revelations collapse into one another and build on each other.

The title refers to the father, who is dying and is full of rage. The mother fears that Walter could be next to parish in the same way as his father. During the stroke:

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[308] O'Connor 486
[309] O'Connor 487
[310] O'Connor 485
[311] ibid.

> Only [Tilman's] left eye, twisted inward, seemed to harbor his former personality. It burned with rage. The rest of his face was prepared for death. Justice was grim and she took satisfaction in it when she found it. It might take just this ruin to wake Walter up.[312]

Tilman's face shows vestiges of his "former personality."[313] Because of the stroke, Tilman's is probably in a remote state of mind in which he isn't himself. Though his face has the look of getting ready for death, his eye reveals his inner rage. The mother calls the stroke, and the father's dying "justice," further taking "satisfaction in it…"[314] The mother has a bad relationship with Tilman and wants him to die. She sees this as the "ruin to wake Walter up."[315] It has an apocalyptic tone—a terrible event occurring to make a change. She sees her husband's death a solution to the problem of how to motivate Walter.

Walter's mother characterizes him as being apathetic and stuck. Sitting on the porch while Tilman is being taken out on a stretcher, the mother:

> …had been watching him all along, searching for some sign in his big bland face that some sense of urgency had touched him, some sense that now he had to take hold, that now he had to do something, anything—she would have been glad to see him make a mistake, even make a mess of things if it meant that he was doing something—but she saw that nothing happened.[316]

Walter's oblivious nature irritates his mother to her core. She acts as though she is bored of him, she wants him to act even if that means doing something wrong. In being wrong at least he would be making a decision and acting upon a desire. His content being and lack of urgency bother her. The mother also describes him as "an absorbent lump"[317] as he sits and watches people. Walter takes everything in, not passing judgment right away. It's possible that the mother takes this to be apathy when really Walter is quietly engaged and softly waiting for realizations

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[312] O'Connor 483
[313] ibid.
[314] ibid.
[315] ibid.
[316] O'Connor 484
[317] ibid.

to come to him later on. The mother twice describes him as being like a stranger but with a familiar face. First she says it is as though she was "looking at a stranger using the family face,"[318] and a second time, she sees that "his eyes and his skull and his smile belonged to the family face but underneath them was a different kind of man from any she had ever known."[319] Her words are haunting and eerie. She describes Walter as a phantom or devil taking the form of a family member. She's frightened by how different her own child is than her—not just different but actually different from anyone else she "had ever known."[320] At first it's his lack of motivation or action that bothered her the most. These description, however, describe a mother horrified by a child she can't recognize as her own. At this point, Walter is described as in a state of oblivion—nothing, oblivious, and empty. He isn't right or wrong, good or bad, he's both nothing and in between. But the quality of Walter, as feeling for his mother like a person disguised with the family look, feels wicked. Walter's mother also describes Walter saying:

> There was no innocence in him, no rectitude, no conviction either of sin or election. The man she saw courted good and evil impartially and saw so many sides of every question that he could not move, he could not work, he could not even make niggers work. Any evil could enter that vacuum. God knows, she though and caught her breath, God knows what he might do![321]

Walter's ambivalence and lack of action is here seen as a way for evil to enter in. He is described as a "vacuum,"[322] a hollowness and emptiness in which evil could reach. Walter's mother is afraid from him and what could happen. She suggests that making wrong choices, having convictions, is better than being nothing.

What does the ending mean? The ending is Paleyesque. This story hangs, unfinished and trailing off from the main part of the story. We never find out what happens to the father,

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[318] ibid.
[319] O'Connor 485
[320] ibid.
[321] ibid.
[322] ibid.

whether he lives or dies. The entire scene of his stroke is relegated to the background. Walter and his mother are unconcerned about him. The story approaches the father's death as a punishment for his anger—what it is specifically is not told to the reader. The title of the story, the question "Why Do the Heathen Rage?" appears to treat the story as an answer, but we are left with none. The only thing that can be taken from the father's rage is that could cause his death. Ergo, those that are heathens are full of rage and are punished because of it with death. The mother and son's lack of compassion is striking. Even if they hated the man, they feel not concern or worry for their family member feels strange.

Ultimately, the mother, finding Jesus in the passage can be read as seeing her son as saved. She discovers Jesus in her son's underlining, which is to say that he has discovered Jesus. The ending hints at Walter's salvation. Nothing really happens in the story—nothing is resolved or final. This is one of O'Connor's shortest stories, as she typically writes long sometimes novella length stories. Paley writes on average shorter stories and thus it is interesting to see O'Connor working in a smaller space. It makes the characters brief and eclipsed by the ending. The story feels more spontaneous and of the moment, rather than drawn out. What becomes of Walter and the rest of them, we will never know. Perhaps, the ending reveals that salvation is possible for everyone, but it doesn't come at expected times or in expected ways.

Chapter IV. CONCLUSION

Kermode said, "it is one of the great charms of books that they have to end"[323] and so does every work. In this analysis, which is so concerned with endings, it is interesting to conceive of my own ending and conclusions. What might my discoveries say about my own thoughts about the end? This question is perhaps for another time and of another matter. Yet, I am left feeling the immensity of their stories, which show an incredible depth and uniqueness in the quality of their endings.

O'Connor is an author who is concerned with scruples, salvation, evil, apocalypse, the Southern identity, God, the Church, and being Catholic. Meanwhile, Paley is interested in miscommunication, loneliness, oblivion, pleasure, narcissism, New York Jewish culture, community, and relationships. At the heart of it all is mystery, which has two completely different meanings for both authors and yet I think it is their driving force. The search for mystery is in both of their works. Ends as shrouded in mystery branches off of a desire to reveal pieces of our experience, divine or human. Throughout the course of this analysis, I have been coming closer and closer to understanding mystery. The fact is that endings are mysterious. We are incapable of understanding them while we are living. Paley and O'Connor have taught me what it means to grasp mystery as an artist. Mystery is at the foundation of O'Connor's Catholicism and Paley's humanism as well as both of their writing.

Both O'Connor and Paley embrace mystery one as a divine force and one as creative inspiration. O'Connor said that in order to write grotesque fiction, one "will have to descend far enough into himself to reach those underground springs that give life to his work…a descent

[323] Kermode 23

through the darkness of the familiar world."[324] O'Connor sees the process of writing good fiction as entering into the darkest realms in order to grasp the darkness of our world. When I first read O'Connor's essay "The Fiction Writer And His Country," I assumed that when she said, "what we are asked to do is separate mystery from manners and judgment from vision," that she meant one should try to illuminate difficult mysteries. Mystery has the connotation of mystery novels and detectives who attempt to solve mysteries. Instead, what O'Connor means is that as a Catholic, she accepts that mystery is a part of life. The pieces of our experience that we can't know should be examined and beheld but not for the purpose of shedding light on them. Mystery is a part of the human condition that makes our lives inspired by the divine, for O'Connor. Mystery acts a mark of God and propels her to write. It is the job of the Catholic writer to find the shape and outline of the mystery, to define what the questions are, but not to reveal the mystery or know it. For the mystery that is life and all that we cannot see is unknowable. The best that can be done is to approach it and see it within ourselves. Acceptance of mystery leads to salvation and ultimately creates an ending in which judgment occurs.

Paley similarly embraces mystery but not for the same means. Paley's fiction seeks to understand mystery, but not O'Connor's mystery. Paley's mystery is defined by humanity and not by the divine. Paley writes:

> There are things about men and women and their relations to each other, also the way in which they relate to the almost immediate destruction of the world, that I can't figure out. And nothing in critical or historical literature will abate my ignorance a tittle or a jot. I will have to do it all by myself, marshal the evidence. In the end, probably all I'll have to show is more mystery—a certain juggled translation from life, that foreign tongue, into fiction, the jargon of man.[325]

She is interested in the mystery of human connections and relationships. Indirectly, I believe that Paley is trying to shed light on mystery in her fiction. Compared to O'Connor's work, the

[324] O'Connor "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mystery And Manners* 50
[325] Paley *Just As I Thought* 189

character of Paley's fiction feels much less driven and steered to a certain direction, as it can feel aimless or wandering. O'Connor thought a great deal about the significance of her work and what it meant to be a Southern writer. I feel that as an artist, Paley wrote much more about the craft of writing when she was older than we she was writing many of the stories I have analyzed here. Her reflections and thoughtfulness came after success. For O'Connor, her short life was prolific and full of constant reflection and letter writing. She was constantly reading, and writing reviews of books. Her constant engagement with reading and thinking about the act of writing, gives O'Connor's fiction the sense of being mindfully crafted. Paley's fiction as a result feels more free and spontaneous. She wants to shed light on the mystery of human connections, though in the end she realizes that mystery remains. Secular culture tends to value scientific inquiry and imagine that all mysteries in life are answerable by human achievement. Paley may not fully agree with this, though she doesn't think mystery is a product of the divine. While Paley is perhaps less accepting of mystery, her sentiment suggests that in wrestling with it sometimes all there is to do is let it be. It kept her writing and thinking throughout the years of her life.

To see their work in action, let us examine Paley's "Living" and O'Connor's "The Enduring Chill," which are about characters who must confront the possibility of dying and alternatively, of living. Comparing these two stories will help to illuminate their different concerns in dealing with the end and death. Paley's story, as analyzed in the second chapter of this project, is about Faith and Ellen, both of whom think they are dying. When Faith ends up surviving, she must confront the life ahead and what it means to outlive someone. Similarly, "The Enduring Chill" is about Asbury[326], a twenty-five year old, who comes home from New

[326] Asbury is a character in O'Connor's story and as it happens, Asbury is also Faith's last name. I will refer to her as always as Faith, to allow no confusion between the two.

York City proclaiming that he is dying. Throughout the story, his mother tries to help him get well but all he wants to do is die. She brings in the doctor, Dr. Block, who takes his blood to try to find out what is wrong, angering Asbury. Asbury then begs to have a Jesuit priest come, so that he can discuss his death and have someone to converse with. When the Priest comes, he is extremely dissatisfied because the Priest sees him as not taking care to save himself to insure a good afterlife. The story ends with Dr. Block saying that he will live and that all he has is an "Undulant fever."[327] The twist is that the doctor says that Asbury's fever is caused by him drinking unpasteurized milk. Earlier, Asbury says he drank milk to try to build a rapport with his mother's black dairy workers. He's the one who caused his illness and in the end, he's unhappy to live on. The similarity in "Living" and "The Enduring Chill" is that both Faith and Asbury think they are dying and end up living.

> *'…Shall I adopt you?'*
> *He stopped all his tears. 'Why thanks. Oh no. I have an uncle in Springfield. I'm going to him. I'll have it O.K. It's in the country. I have cousins there.'*
> *'Well,' I said, relieved. 'I just love you Billy. You're the most wonderful boy. Ellen must be so proud of you.'*
> *He stepped away and said, 'She's not anything of anything, Faith.' Then he went to Springfield. I don't know. I don't think I'll see him again.*
> *But I often long to talk to Ellen, with whom, after all, I have done a million things in these scary private years. We drove the kids up every damn rock in Central Park. On Easter Sunday, we pasted white doves on blue posters and prayed on Eighth Street for peace. Then we were tired and screamed at the kids. The boys were babies. For a joke we stapled their snowsuits to our skirts and in a rage of slavery every Saturday for weeks we marched across the bridges that connect Manhattan to the world. We shared apartments, jobs, and stuck-up studs. And then, two weeks before last Christmas, we were dying.*[328]

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> *His limbs that had been racked for so many weeks by fever and chill were numb now. The old life in him was exhausted. He awaited the coming of new. It was then that he felt the beginning of a chill, a chill so peculiar, so light that it was like a warm ripple across a deeper sea of cold. His breath came short. The fierce birth which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness had been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously,*

[327] O'Connor 381
[328] Paley 167

> *appeared all at once to be in motion, Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes, He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked but enduring, he would live in the fate of a purifying terror. A feeble cry, a last impossible protest escaped him. But the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend.*[329]

Above are the endings from "Living" and "The Enduring Chill." In "Living," Faith is at Ellen's funeral and realizes the finality of her death. Recalling their life, Paley ends the story with reminiscences from Faith's and Ellen's time together as mothers living in Manhattan. The story goes back to all the good times they shared and how Faith "…long[s] to talk to Ellen…"[330] But the story ends by circling back to the beginning. Faith says, "And then, two weeks before last Christmas, we were dying."[331] Even though Faith lives, she cannot see herself as the lucky one. Without Ellen, she is alone and all she has is the memory of Ellen. She circles back to the memory of her friend because even when she was dying, at least she was alive. Paley cannot leave it on a note of death because despite Ellen's death, Faith lives on. It is Faith who keeps Ellen alive in her memories and in circling back to the beginning.

O'Connor's piece ends on Asbury's revelation that he will not die, after all. After being in bed for so long, Asbury had grown used to his dying life. Now he's forced to reconsider his future. Paley says, "He awaited the coming of new."[332] What does Paley mean by new? Perhaps "new"[333] means a new life and identity. Asbury has to revitalize himself now that he is living instead of dying. But the next lines indicate that there's a new evil at work, a new chill comes over Asbury, "a chill so peculiar, so light, that it was like a warm ripple across a deeper sea of cold." Before, Asbury thought his suffering would finally end. As Faith's doctor says, "'You

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[329] O'Connor 382
[330] Paley 167
[331] ibid.
[332] O'Connor 382
[333] ibid.

can't bleed forever. Either you run out of blood or you stop. No one bleeds forever."[334] But the new imperceptible chill is maybe in reference to the fact that he has a reoccurring fever that won't go away but won't kill him. His mother says, "'you have an undulant fever. It'll keep coming back but it won't kill you!"[335]The story suggests that Asbury's condition is a punishment for trying to corrupt his mother's black workers into smoking and drinking the milk. Maybe the new chill is the realization that death is a kinder end and that now, he will have to suffer throughout his life. Additionally, the story indicates that Asbury's strange fixation with his own death and pleasure from his dying, cause his fate, which is to continue living in pain. The story ends saying that he will live his days in "a purifying terror."[336] Perhaps his punishment will cause him to take death seriously and not as a narcissistic achievement. In the end, the Holy Ghost "descend[s]"[337] upon him as a punishment. It is suggested that perhaps salvation can be reached through living his days in pain, but, Asbury's story ends in the revelation that he will not be granted an artful death to take away his suffering.

O'Connor's stories end in revelation and either punishment or salvation. Here, Asbury realizes that he must continue to live and sees that as his punishment. In "The Lame Shall Enter First," Sheppard's revelation comes but it is too late to save his son and he is forced to deal with the consequences of his actions. O'Connor's stories aim to show how being religious allows people to understand the world better and be more aware of their actions. Asbury's punished by the Holy Ghost in the end, for treating death as performance, enjoying his agony. O'Connor's endings act as last judgments, judging her characters for their actions and forcing them to get what they deserve.

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[334] Paley 165
[335] O'Connor 381
[336] ibid.
[337] ibid.

O'Connor's and Paley's stories end in the unexpected. O'Connor ends her stories normally with an unexpected twist that reveals the truth about a character. Meanwhile, Paley's endings are unexpected in that they normally trail off into a digression or end on a surprising note. The twist in "Living" is that she goes back to the time at which the two women proclaim that they are dying. In "The Enduring Chill," O'Connor sets the seeds for Asbury's fate early on when she describes him drinking the milk straight from the cow. She embeds this in the story in a way that makes it seem insignificant but it turns out to be the moment at which Asbury sealed his fate. O'Connor writes her stories with a strong voice that makes the endings feel destined. There's a sense that the stories couldn't have ended any other way. Still, it's always a surprise and never obvious. Paley works the same way, her stories are so offbeat and specific to her that there's not a expectation for how they should end, they just do.

O'Connor and Paley use anywhere and anything to speak to the strangeness of non-existence and endings. "Not anything"[338] occurs in the story "Living" by Paley, while "isn't anywhere" comes up in O'Connor's "The Lame Shall Enter First."[339] Both occur in reference to a child's dead mother. Here are the instances in both Paley and O'Connor.

> '…Ellen must be so proud of you.'
> He stepped away and said, 'She's not anything of anything, Faith.' Then he went to Springfield. I don't think I'll see him again.[340]

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> 'Is she on fire?'
> 'Oh my God,' Sheppard muttered. 'No no,' he said, 'of course she isn't. Rufus is mistaken. Your mother isn't anywhere. She's not unhappy. She just isn't.'[341]

[338] Paley 167
[339] O'Connor 461
[340] Paley 167
[341] O'Connor 461

In the case of Paley, Ellen's son reacts harshly to Faith's use of the present tense in saying that Ellen is proud of him. The boy pulls away and says that Ellen's, "not anything of anything."[342] Similarly, Norton worries that his mother is in hell. In an effort to quell his fears, Sheppard says that Norton's mother, "isn't anywhere,"[343] which actually ends up causing him more distress. For Ellen's son, saying that she doesn't exist is a way of moving on. He has to say that she isn't her anymore and live his life. But it haunts Faith, who recalls all the good times she had with Ellen, even the times when the two of them were dying. For Norton, thinking of his mother as burning in hell at least means that she still exists in some form. Sheppard goes on to say he wished he had just told Norton that his mother was in heaven to make things easier for him. In terms of grammar, the two phrases are quite similar. There is a negative grouped with a positive: "not" and "isn't" are paired with "anything of anything" and "anywhere."[344]The phrases could easily have been written as: nothing and nowhere. The prefix *any* leaves room for possibility, but is then negated with the negative *not*. Perhaps the grammar emphasizes distinctly that both speakers are rejecting the premise of religion. Sheppard and Ellen's son reject the idea that their loved ones could be in heaven or hell. Using *any* refers to anyplace in the world, but also those places which we cannot see or know. The consequence of death on the living is confusion and loneliness. Norton dies in the process of trying to reach his mother, and Faith is left alone in the world to fend for herself without her best friend. Both characters are rattled by the sharpness of the words, which reject a happy life for those who have died. The endings reveal a need for us as humans to come to conclusions about the end because it is all around us and is the fate of all people.

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[342] Paley 167
[343] O'Connor 461
[344] Paley 167 & O'Connor 461

What's in an ending? For O'Connor and Paley it is the promise for more stories. In order for new beginnings, there must be endings. O'Connor teaches that all lives are leading to judgment and revelation which lead to salvation or punishment. O'Connor uses grotesque imagery and characters to reveal something deep about the disparity she sees between those who are religious and those who are not. If only Sheppard had been religious, perhaps then, suggests the story, he might have seen Rufus' true nature. Religion is a lens out of which O'Connor sees a world full of evil, but also salvation. She writes disgusting character but allows their actions to be judged, by herself playing God. Endings for O'Connor are full of revelation and judgment, though sometimes revelations come too late for salvation. Paley's stories allow the reader to make judgments, she doesn't provide a strong moral decision in her endings. Her stories are moments and recollections that explore the same questions through an everyday ordinary lens. What heightens her prose is that she brings a nonchalance and minimalism to her work. The endings are promises for new moments, and are just snapshots in a lifetime of stories and days. She gives the sense that the characters live on, that they are real.

When I read an O'Connor story, I feel as though I have just come out of a terrible dream. It always leaves me in a daze—a place of contemplation and surprise. The stories are so engrossing that unless I pay close attention, it's easy to get lost in the middle points. Her stories are long and measured. She takes time to craft sagas that give each character nuance and sophistication. Upon reaching the end, I always feel I have uncovered a new dimension of her work and understood something about human beings. There is nothing like an O'Connor story, engrossing and haunting. She makes me question my views on religion and makes me want to let in mystery. There's salvation and redemption in reading her stories and ultimately finding something to take from it.

Reading Paley is an incredibly different experience. I often feel immediately in love with her metaphors and dialogue that is so rich and New York. Her characters are full and round, I know them as well as if I had met them myself. Paley's identity is similar to mine and in it I find reassurance in her questioning stories and concerns about connecting. Her endings teach me that there's no right way to end a story. They trail off and are strange, I never know they're coming and I am never sure exactly how to read them. She's a true artist and the endings reflect her completely.

My purpose in writing this work was to find out, why Paley writes her endings the way she does. The best answer I have is that she writes her endings, or non-endings, to show that her characters are real. She gives them a life off the page. Maybe today Faith is dying, but tomorrow she's going to the movies or writing a novel. And even if Cassie doesn't forgive her today, there's always a chance for redemption. There's no finality because she believes that life isn't set in stone, there's always something new tomorrow. Admittedly, I see flaws in my work as there will always be when putting a hypothesis to the test. Not every story fits perfectly with the theory. But on average I believe that the endings of O'Connor and Paley show their own personal identities. From their endings, I have learned more about fiction, writing, and religion than I had ever expected.

I. Creative Appendix

Limitations:
I have a drawer
of journals
none full
none empty
of a heart broken
without knowing
how to break

Flannery O'Connor and Grace Paley are more than the subject of my senior project. These two women inspire me as a writer and a thinker. Their words touched me more than can be described in my critical analysis of their works. The two women were creative geniuses who made no apologies for their attitudes or outlooks. A fuller account of my year long study of O'Connor and Paley must in fact include the writing I have done along the way. Though I must say, this piece is not necessarily directly influenced by the two women. Still, having them constantly in my mind certainly affected my writing. There are words and references scattered throughout my story, though not always purposefully. Flannery and Grace sank into my soul, it sounds ridiculous, cliché even. But it's absolutely true that I never stopped loving my project and the works that will continue to challenge and influence me throughout my life.

Some of my own creative work is imitative of their styles. I am the first to admit that my relationship to writing has not always been a smooth journey. I am still searching for my voice and my own style. Flannery and Grace have been incredible mentors and tutors, teaching me what it means to be an author and to have a point of view. Instead of looking at this appendix as a polished set, let it hang as an everlasting question. This piece here is the second half of my discovery. Writing about my own questions and struggles allowed me to reexamine the creative process and view Grace and Flannery as artists instead of just words. I hope this creative

exploration helps to deepen the analysis and document my year with Flannery and Grace, who were always by my side.

Jessica Kathryn Wiseman

ORANGES

I cut the orange into wedges, the juice puddles on the red plastic cutting board. Jim comes through the front door.

Unshaven, Jim's face is dotted with stubble. They must not have razors in Detroit, just cars and an airport with an indoor trolley.

I'm home. I'm going right to bed, he says, while moving through the house.

I can't see straight. I can't think. I've been driving for fourteen hours straight. Don't get me a thing. I'll just go right upstairs.

Don't I get a kiss? A hug even? Nothing on my birthday. Jim you forgot to wish me a happy birthday! For godsakes Jim.

And if today isn't my birthday, all the same, today is the day he could have forgotten my day.

Seriously honey, I'm not joking. I'm half asleep, says Jim.

Oh Jim. I'm tired every day. I don't even have time to brush my matted red hair. Baby, we have two bundles of joy who don't respond to my not responding methods that clearly do not work though you insist I persist with the Ferber method of raising detached progeny.

Night honey, Jim murmurs.

Like a blur he's in and out of the kitchen. Going upstairs, he leaves a trail of discarded items: his coat, shoes, scrunched up wool socks, pants, and wrinkly button down. All are strewn along the floor waiting to be picked up.

I have a thing against socks; sweaty or not. Jim wouldn't know.

I cut the orange into wedges, the juice puddles on the red plastic cutting board. Jim comes through the front door.

Honey I'm finally home. Kiss kiss. He sits in his leather chair.

I missed you so! Dear I'm bringing your drink. Scotch on the rocks?

No something special!

I bring out a martini glass with silvery liquid, two submerged ice cubes, and a twist of an orange peel.

Grand news, I've just got a promotion. He takes off his penny loafers and puts up his feet.

Fab-u-lous! Fab-u-lous!

Let's watch a movie and fall asleep in each other's arms. I love feeling our little girl kick inside of you.

Someday our little boy will be there taking pennies from Jim's penny loafers that he will one day put there for them to find.

I cut the orange into wedges, the juice puddles on the red plastic cutting board. Jim comes through the front door.

Hi honey, I'm back from my trip.

I look down at the cutting board. Serrated marks crisscross each other in a pattern all over the plastic.

No hello?

What do you expect, Jim?

Sticky orange coats juicy hands like an extra layer of skin. Water and lemon verbena soap wash away the candy coated, caramel apple stick. I squeeze my shmata dress to dry my wet hands.

Now on my baby bump are two large water stains that look like a child's finger painting: the child slabs thick paint on one side of a thin sheet of paper, folds it in half, and sees the mirror image and swirls of color on the other side. If asked I'd swear it was a butterfly, but really it's a moth.

You're still mad? Heavy, his head is forward, hanging like a loose hinge, clasped by his palm, as if the skull could detach any second. If a screw were loose, and his head did fall off, would it be murder? What would the world even do with a million heads fallen from the bodies of cheating bastards?

I cut the orange into wedges, the juice puddles on the red plastic cutting board. Jim comes through the front door.

I'm back from Seattle. Pretty and rainy, but overall not too cold.

It's a boy.

Jim squeezes me and kisses my stomach before kissing my lips.

And a girl. We're having twins!

He smiles, a smile he might have when no one is watching. A smile, like a climax, involuntary and supremely physical.

But you missed the ultrasound. I brought you a souvenir. They've got such advanced technology nowadays.

They look like—

—like us.

No, like me. I think it's the eyes.

Oh.

Jim eyes my orange wedges and pops one in his mouth.

Reminds me of halftime in soccer when you stick one of these puppies in your mouth for energy. You think they'll play soccer, out in the backyard then in a league?

Embracing Jim, one of the fetuses kicks and the unborn are transferred to his body because together touching, we are one.

I cut the orange into wedges, the juice puddles on the red plastic cutting board. Jim comes through the front door.

How was your mom's? Made any decisions?

About?

About what? The baby for christsakes!

Jim we're eighteen. If we keep it now, well there goes our lives.

Don't say it like that.

What am I supposed to say Jim? That I want to have a baby and let go of all my other plans?

I stick a piece of orange in my mouth and chew until there's just a chunk of pulp in my mouth. I spit it out in the sink and turn to him.

Jim, what if there's something I'm really good at. Something I'm going to love and be happy with for the rest of my life. And what if having this kid means I won't discover that thing?

What if it's being a mom?

I take another wedge and chew, the juice puddling in my mouth. I spit the seed into my cupped hand and think on it. I should plant it, in wet soil and watch it grow into a new orange bush, if that's how these things work anyway. I've never been one for gardening and growing. But maybe we could have orange trees all from the seeds stuck between my teeth. If only it could grow right in the palm of my hand up to the sky.

Jim I've been taking French for how many years, and I've never even seen the Eiffel Tower. Isn't that why you say, with a nudge and a wink, we'll always have Culver City. We've never been anywhere except this suburban sprawl. The best we have from here is the view of the freeway entrance and the palm trees growing in the planters in the roundabout.

But honey, that's just a joke. We'll see Paris, we will.

No, Jim, I've never been to Rome or Egypt or Australia. I haven't seen even a tiny piece of this planet. Jimmy, I'm afraid that this will be the end of possibility. And Culver City might be the best view we've got. We can't even afford to live here.

Don't be so dramatic, Jim starts to get flushed in his ears and annoyed so easy. He softens his voice and says, We can go on family vacations. Imagine that. Us and our little girl on top of the Eiffel Tower.

I'm embarrassed for him, I am. For both of us. All the things in the world we have available now. But then there will be nothing except parenthood and cameras strapped around our necks with little kids hanging on us in the most romantic city in the world. He's just the type, he'll be wearing sandals with socks and Hawaiian shirts. It's not so far off. I'll gain thirty pounds and wear moo-moos and big necklaces to take away attention from my enormous breasts, that will be so large, they won't be attractive anymore.

It won't be the same. Jim think about it. I've never even sat at a bar and ordered a drink.

How am I supposed to do this? I can't be a mom. And you can't be a dad. Not now.

He looks at me and I see him trying to think of what to say. It looks like he's about to say something a few times, his lips move with his thoughts. But this is what I love about Jim: he doesn't pretend to know.

And even though Jim hugs me and pats my back like he's never held a crying girl in his life, he isn't saying something he doesn't believe. I'm pregnant so I bare the brunt while he suffers without this ticking time bomb that's growing in my stomach, counting down until my last day as a free woman. His tears are reserved for the shower, where in his nakedness he allows tap water and salty tears to comingle into one stream. He thinks that I don't hear him, when his parents are asleep and I'm in bed reading. But the sobs aren't drowned out by the hard rock coming from the radio on the john.

I cut the orange into wedges, the juice puddles on the red plastic cutting board. Jim comes through the front door.

I'm back from the market. Did you want carrots or celery? I got both.

Celery. Didn't I say that? I say.

No I would have remembered.

Jim, I remember everything. I remember your life better than you do.

Not that again. You do not. That's just your way of making me feel bad.

Feel bad about it, it's true.

Well I got both. Deal with it and stop shouting.

I'm not. Take off your hearing aids and you'll hear it isn't loud, I say.

Jim sits at the table. I quickly shove all the magazines and brochures over to the other side.

You know what next Thursday is, right?

What?

Our wedding anniversary!

Oh that again. I laugh.

What the hell is that supposed to be? Fifty-nine years is a big deal, Jim says. His constantly furrowed brow looks purposeful now, deeper even.

And it goes by so fast! Alright, Jim. Reminisce if you want but I will have no part it in.

It's all crap.

What crap? I'm only trying to love you.

Well stop it.

Why are you like this? You're so hard. We'd be better off in a home, safe and secure.

I'm not hard and I'm not moving. Stop it, I scream. I don't want to talk about this. Another time, we can talk about it another time. I try to stop him, stop everything.

When? We're running out of time, he pleads.

He grabs my wrinkled hand. I pull away. Violet bruises with blotches of brown and green appear on my arm like a sleeve of tattoos. High blood pressure medication makes my skin thin like crepe paper. How old I am.

I pick up a stray brochure from the floor. My back stings with pain. There's a picture of The Sunshine Retirement Village our daughter's husband has been pushing us into for the last two years.

I cut the carrots into shreds on the red plastic cutting board. Jim comes through the front door. He storms in and turns off the stovetop.

What's the matter with you?

You're making dinner and you know I hate cooked carrots. I just hate them.

Don't just turn off the stove. How in the world do you know I'm cooking them?

Well aren't you? There's a pot of boiling water and you're chopping carrots. What ever happened to the orange you were cutting?

What orange? God, you know, you go away for five minutes and you think I forget everything about you. Typical. And it's for the salad. The kids hate cooked carrots. They take after you… dummy.

That's not what you were going to say! Just say the word.

Oh hush, the kids are in the living room watching TV.

Jim storms out and goes upstairs.

He disarms and gives the signal to his men to retreat. The cavalry exit first then the foot soldiers. Swords are put away and guns are discharged. Bullets are saved for another day. The men look disappointed. No battle scars will be made today. No purple hearts will be won.

I cut the orange into wedges, the juice puddles on the red plastic cutting board. Jim comes through the front door.

Jim walks in silent.

Hi. How are you? Jim finally says.

Fine. Nothing to report.

You haven't been watering the plants. They look dry.

Well you were always the one bringing home plants from who knows where.

I hear footsteps, the kids running up the stairs.

I'll get them back to you Thursday.

Who, the kids? or the plants?

Janie has a science project. Robby has spelling. You would know that if you ever helped with their homework.

Okay fine. KIDS, I shout, dinner in five minutes. I look at Jim who is looking at the photos on the fridge. He took most of those. Look Jim, just so you know, I've hired a lawyer. Maybe you should do the same.

A lawyer?

Maybe it's best we don't discuss this now. You better go.

He waves goodbye and goes right back out the door.

When dinner is ready and the kids and I start eating I see a shadowy figure by the windows peering in. Don't look up. Jim, just walk away. Looking from the outside, is he a stranger? The kids don't notice and go on complaining about the broccoli and dry chicken.

I cut the orange into wedges, the juice puddles on the red plastic cutting board. Jim comes through the front door.

I accidentally slice my finger and blood gushes all over the orange. Jim sees the blood but steps back—he can't stand the sight of it. Of me.

I wrap a towel around my finger and squeeze it. The sharp pain dulls and the flowing blood lightens. Jim, from the corner of the room, talks to me saying everything will be fine.

The tears pour, out of somewhere deep. I thought they were finished. The blood and all the pain reignites the crying.

Don't cry, says Jim, like it will do anything.

When the bleeding stops I move to the couch and wrap myself up in a blanket. Jim sits near me.

I put my hand on my empty stomach. I look up at Jim.

There's nothing in here.

Jim says steadily, that's what you wanted. What we wanted.

I can't stop crying. Dammit just stop, stop it, I tell myself. I wanted this? I ask. No. No one wants this. Need. I needed this. My life is back on track. I can go to school. I can be a therapist. I can do everything. I can go to Paris. I can… cry. Can I cry forever?

I feel like it needs a funeral. But that's ridiculous, right? A funeral for… for… for what?

I cut the orange into wedges, the juice puddles on the red plastic cutting board. Jim comes through the front door.

Through the lace curtains in the kitchen, I peer out to the porch. Our black cat, who looks like a dust rag, sits in the window basking in the sun. A tiny basket that she once fit into sits next to her, about the size of her head. Hearing a car pull up the drive, I feel a strange bout of anxiety. I want to hide in the closet under my mother's hanging skirts and dresses next to her fancy shoes like I used to. I see Jim coming down the walk in his silk pajamas. How embarrassing for him. What will the neighbors think?

I hear a key in the lock and the door peels open with a nose peeking through the crack and two little eyes that emerge to see if the coast is clear.

I sneak over to the front and appear.

What are you doing here?

I don't have any clothes. I thought I would just grab some things.

I run upstairs and come back down. I throw a pile of laundry at him.

Here's what you get for screwing the neighbor. I'm sure Bonnie is angry too.

He looks up like one of the kids, caught feeding the cat their asparagus under the dinner table, again.

Do you know how embarrassing this is? Are you aware what all the other moms on the block are talking about these days? Seriously, you and Andrew!

He motions for me to lower my voice, invoking the kids. I wave my hand right back and him and keep screaming.

He has an answer for everything but the truth is I'm not exciting enough. He can have a vagina any day. The fleeting excitement of a penis is now.

I cut the orange into wedges, the juice puddles on the red plastic cutting board. Jim comes through the front door and finds me on the kitchen floor, juice dripping from the cutting board onto my face and hair.

I cut the orange into wedges, the juice puddles on the red plastic cutting board. Jim comes through the front door.

Shhhh… they're sleeping. I have to bring them upstairs, I whisper, holding the two babies one on each arm.

Parallel sleeping, he rubs one of their soft heads.

I stand up.

Nobody move. Two babies coming through, he whispers.

Once I get them upstairs I come down and lie on my husband's lap.

Time for more nail polish. It's chipping hon.

We should be able to tell them apart, but the two girls just look so much alike.

Honey, they're one month old twins. Don't beat yourself up about it.

His hand strokes my head.

It's weird to think I was like them. We all were.

They make me feel so old. Every time I look at them it's like I forgot babies existed. I've been an adult for too long.

Jimmy strokes my hair. He's the one who didn't get away. And in the moments when I wonder whether I should have made him go, I know I love him. Him and all the things wrong with us together. The improbability of our china-like love that while chipped and worn, is always beautiful in its fragile strength.

And Jim, Babies are like aliens. New weird parts of ourselves to examine. I thought all of them were alike, but the fact that they have our DNA makes them an even stranger sensation. Our lives lead up to procreation and our bodies are vessels preparing at a young age to become incubators. Without children we are nothing. With children we are everything. For those two infants Jimmy, we are everything—even my palpitating heart that keeps me awake at night. Even the racing thoughts. Even all we lost. All the ones who let go. We are their world. They are our world. We created them. They created us.

I see them. I see myself. Sometimes I think I'm holding myself, because I looked just like them. Red golden hair, enormous newborn blue eyes that will be brown, milky skin, baby hands,

and huge heads. I rock myself to sleep at night. I sing lullabies to myself. I rub my own back. I kiss my own soft cheek. I bathe myself. I cradle my future as I cradle me.

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