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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“I Was Speaking of Visions”:
Gilead Through the Lens of Flannery O’Connor**

written by

Liz Richardson

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for completion of the
Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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April 15, 2011

“I Was Speaking of Visions”:
Gilead Through the Lens of Flannery O’Connor

Liz Richardson

Honors Thesis

Dr. Doug Sonheim, Director

15 April 2011

1. Introduction: When Marilynne Met Flannery

While much has been written about Flannery O'Connor and her approach to Christianity in fiction, fewer critics have examined Marilynne Robinson or compared the two authors.¹ Yet, as American, Christian women who write compelling fiction, rooted in place, about their faith in twentieth century (though Robinson has written well into the twenty-first), these two authors have every reason to become better acquainted. And though Robinson will never have the chance to sit down to tea with Flannery O'Connor, she undoubtedly writes in the shadow of this mysterious young woman's fiery southern voice. To write fiction about Christianity—at least the kind more often found in anthologies than a Lifeway Christian Bookstore—is to write in the tradition of Flannery O'Connor, whether one likes it or not.² What's more, where Robinson has only in the last decade received the wide recognition she deserves, winning the Pulitzer Prize in 2004, O'Connor's work has been thoroughly explored for the last half of a century. Flannery's been around the block, you might say, and her work concerns the same ideas that concern Marilynne Robinson. For these reasons, the two merit comparison, warrant a good conversation over an equally good cup of tea. In fact, it only makes sense that the ice breaker at tea time with Marilynne and Flannery might go something like this:

FOC: So, I guess you know I'm a pretty big deal.

And continue a little like this:

MR: Yea? Did *you* ever win a Pulitzer?

¹ See Susan Petit's "Finding Flannery O'Connor's 'Good Man' in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*." See also the introduction of Michael Vander Weele's "Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and the Difficult Gift of Human Exchange."

² According to Susan Petit, "Robinson even claims that, 'the influence of Flannery O'Connor has been particularly destructive' by leading readers not to expect 'serious fiction to treat religious thought respectfully'" (qtd. in 301).

FOC: Alright, how many books have been written about you? Listen, let me tell you a little bit about how critics talk about my fiction and faith. Maybe if you're lucky, they might just talk about you like that someday too.

MR: Okay, okay, I feel that.

In all seriousness, it only makes sense that from the well-developed critical conversation about O'Connor, readers might discover a relevant way to analyze Robinson, furthering scholarship for both authors. Reading Marilynne Robinson through the lens of Flannery O'Connor would not only add to the growing conversation that surrounds Robinson's work, but would further enrich scholarship on O'Connor as it examined her work as a basis for interpreting other authors.

Though much has been said about Flannery O'Connor, with the goal of reading Robinson through the lens of O'Connor, I will focus on one of many critical threads concerning O'Connor, that which addresses a central contradiction in her writing. Though I will outline this thread fully in the first half of my paper, in brief, the main idea is that readers have attempted to resolve the contradiction they feel in O'Connor's work; in contrast, I will argue that readers should recognize this contradiction as a key part of O'Connor's stories, leading readers to read O'Connor according to a certain strategy. Therefore, to support my argument, I will demonstrate how readers should approach the contradiction in her short story "The River" using this strategy.³ Once I have explained and demonstrated this strategy of reading generated by the presence of contradiction, I will then apply it as a critical approach to Robinson's work.

While "The River" is one of O'Connor's lesser acclaimed works, I choose this story for my discussion because it is permeated by unmistakably strong religious symbolism, a key element of my analysis. In O'Connor's "The River," a small boy, Harry, is baptized in a river by a traveling preacher. The next day he returns to the river to find the kingdom of God—which he

³ As a short story, "The River" represents the form for which O'Connor is most well known.

thinks is a physical place waiting somewhere within its waters—and drowns. The contradiction between baptism, which should be a saving act, and a young boy's unintentional death, is obvious even in this short description. "The River" will therefore provide a simple and clear example of how the contradiction in O'Connor's work invites readers to read her work in a certain way.

Accordingly, in section one of this paper, which focuses on O'Connor, I will first explore how critics choose to read the contradiction in her stories. Second, I will present the strategy that I argue is invited by this contradiction and demonstrate how this reading strategy works in "The River."⁴

For section two of this paper, I apply the reading strategy demonstrated in "The River" to Robinson's novel *Gilead*. Though the bulk of this paper is devoted to exhibiting the value in this method of comparison, in brief, this strategy for analysis is supported by critic Robert Donahoo. According to Donahoo, two criteria should guide O'Connor scholarship in the future: "(1) the ability to open up and deepen awareness of mystery in her work; and (2) the ability to be generative rather than mummifying" (243). According to Donahoo, then, good scholarship will explore O'Connor more deeply and generate further study, which is exactly what this comparison of O'Connor and Robinson intends to do: explore the contradiction that underlies O'Connor's work, exemplified by "The River," and use the strategy invited by her work to generate further study of another author's work, namely Robinson's *Gilead*. Furthermore, my analysis speaks for itself in proving the fruitfulness of reading Robinson's *Gilead* in this way as it reveals meaningful ideas within the novel.

⁴ From this point forward, my analysis of this structure in O'Connor's work (which I argue invites the reading strategy) will be based on the Structuralist principle of seeking the *langue*, or "the structure that allows texts to make meaning" (Tyson 220), as will my analysis of the structure I find in *Gilead* (which I argue further invites this strategy).

To read Marilynne Robinson through the lens of O'Connor, I choose *Gilead* as the focal point of Robinson's body of work. While O'Connor is known primarily as a short story writer, Robinson is recognized primarily for her novels. It follows, then, that an ideal work for comparison would be her second, *Gilead*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2004. *Gilead* is composed of a series of journal entries by 76-year old pastor Reverend John Ames in the light of his imminent death. Ames intends these entries as letter for his seven year-old son after Ames is gone. Ames' reflections center on the lives of his father and grandfather, memories from his youth, his relationship with his prodigal godson who has returned home, and his meditations on vision and forgiveness. Applying to *Gilead* the strategy that works in "The River" will generate new insights into this truly lovely novel. Consequently, the second section of my paper will explore Robinson through the lens of O'Connor by applying to *Gilead* the strategy shown in the first section on "The River." As in section one, I will first discuss the critical conversation surrounding Robinson and will then dive into an analysis of *Gilead* according to the strategy I have developed.

In summary, this paper is divided into two sections: section one analyzes contradiction in the work of Flannery O'Connor and demonstrates the reading strategy inspired by this contradiction, using her short story "The River"; section two analyzes Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* using this strategy. Reading Robinson's *Gilead* through the lens of this reading strategy, (perhaps most simply labeled the "O'Connor reading strategy") will not only demonstrate the ability of O'Connor's fiction to serve as a structure for interpretation, but also generate fresh insights into a moving contemporary novel.

2. The Confusing, the Contradicting, the Ever-Celebrated Flannery O'Connor

In his essay "On Belief, Conflict, and Universality: Flannery O'Connor, Walter Benn Michaels, Slavoj Žižek," Thomas F. Haddox outlines the major critical trends in O'Connor studies. Haddox begins his assessment by describing the reactions of most first-time readers of O'Connor:

Anyone who has taught O'Connor repeatedly knows that uninitiated students typically adore her work and are deft at generating interpretations, but they almost never arrive at those that O'Connor intended. My avowedly secular students, upon hearing of O'Connor's religious orthodoxy, are puzzled and sometimes intrigued by what they perceive as the exoticism of her position, but they then shrug and go on pursuing their own interpretations, not converted, not feeling the slightest need to argue with her. My Christian students, on the other hand . . . are usually shocked. I almost always receive papers arguing either that O'Connor's vision cannot possibly be Christian or that her efforts to persuade are at best counterintuitive, at worst perverse, because she makes Christianity look depraved and unattractive. (232)

Other critics also confirm what Haddox describes, that readers are confused by O'Connor's Christian faith and its role in her fiction.⁵ For example, Vigen Guroian succinctly concludes, "Flannery O'Connor was badly misunderstood" (par. 10). Additionally, Critic Timothy P. Caron also feels confused by the contradiction apparent in the ending of "The River," in which a small boy drowns in a river while trying to baptize himself. Caron writes, "The grief of the young boy's family, the pain of his death—neither of these factors is allowed to weaken the story's

⁵ O'Connor was in fact a devout Catholic, whose core motivation for writing was to speak the truth of the Christian gospel. According to the author herself, the way she understood the world, the framework through which she interpreted reality, was undeniably and intentionally Christian. "If I were not a Catholic, I would have no reason to write, no reason to see, no reason ever to feel horrified by anything or to enjoy anything" she once said (qtd. in Wood, "Witness" 1).

ending, nor are they acknowledged in O'Connor's insistence that her readers view this character's death only in the best possible terms" (52). Just as many of Haddox's students are shocked and confused that O'Connor's stories were written with a "Christian vision," Caron also feels it is counterintuitive to use a child's accidental death to convey a Christian message. Furthermore, this conflict that Caron feels in "The River" is no anomaly. The central action of the stories in *A Good Man is Hard to Find* alone includes a family's murder, a stranger marrying and promptly abandoning a deaf girl for a car, a bible salesman stealing a prosthetic leg, and a man being run over by a tractor in addition to a small boy drowning. In fact, these are only a few examples of O'Connor's violent plots that can easily be so "badly misunderstood." O'Connor is known for spinning shocking and humorous tales out of the stuff of everyday Southern life that tell of God's saving grace, yet to many "uninitiated" (as Haddox calls his students) readers, her stories appear grossly inhumane, atheistic, and all-around confusing.

Haddox's students represent a common reaction to O'Connor's work—that her plots do not seem to align with her intended meaning—which is addressed by O'Connor herself in "Writing Short Stories." In this essay, the violent surface plots and deeper Christian meaning that feel inconsistent to Haddox's students and are explored by critics are given names by O'Connor. She famously names these two elements at work in her stories in this way: "There are two qualities that make fiction. One is the sense of mystery and the other is the sense of manners" (*MM* 103). O'Connor calls the acute sense of profound truth entangled in her distinctive narrative her "mystery and manners."⁶ In O'Connor's language, then, Haddox's students feel that her mystery and manners often seem to contradict.

⁶ In "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," she further writes of the (Southern) writer: "He's looking for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is appoin in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everybody sees" (*MM* 42).

O'Connor is not the only critic to identify mystery and manners as the two elements in conflict in her work, though later critics have addressed this surface narrative and subtext meaning under other names.⁷ Later critics have additionally attempted not only to address mystery and manners, but further to resolve the conflict between them. For example, in her essay on grace manifested in "The Artificial Nigger," Joyce Carol Oates describes how "the skeleton beneath the story is not nearly so engaging as the story itself" (46). Put succinctly, Oates reconciles the disconnect between mystery and manners by prizing O'Connor's story (manners) over her skeleton beneath (mystery). In addition, what Oates calls the conflict between the story and the skeleton beneath, Richard Giannone refers to as "[O'Connor's] basically joyous and mystical outlook" that "unfolds through an intellectual approach that could be severe" (101). In his essay, which compares *The Violent Bear It Away* to *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, Giannone seems to value her joyous mystical outlook (mystery) over her severe intellectual approach (manners). Like Oates, Giannone uses his own terms, but still perceives the presence of what O'Connor calls "mystery and manners." In addition, again like Oates, Giannone resolves the disconnect he feels between mystery and manners by prizing one over the other, in his case mystery over manners.

Like these critics, readers who feel that O'Connor's mystery and manners (or, again, surface narrative and subtext meaning) are in conflict often attempt to resolve this conflict by disregarding one and asserting the preeminence of the other. In his essay discussed above, Haddox goes on to address this tendency. Haddox explains that in order to assert the preeminence of either O'Connor's seemingly non-Christian manners or assumedly Christian mystery, readers must in effect debate whether O'Connor's stories are Christian or not.

⁷ One significant example not addressed here is Harold Bloom's introduction to his volume of criticism on O'Connor, in which he speaks of the Gnosticism he finds in O'Connor's work.

Essentially, the debate hinges on whether O'Connor's mystery is Christian and her manners should be read (counter-intuitively) to support that Christian theme, or her mystery is not Christian and her manners are being read correctly. Haddox further claims that those readers who wish to determine whether O'Connor's mystery is Christian or not must necessarily look to extra-textual evidence—often O'Connor's commentary on her own work—to support their analysis. However, Haddox judges this practice of reading O'Connor through the lens of O'Connor's explanatory commentary on her own work a worthless endeavor. He writes, “. . . to do so is to go outside the text, to refer to structures of belief rather than to simple, unproblematic evidence” (233).⁸ He intends to criticize this practice of looking outside the text to determine if O'Connor's mystery is Christian and thus resolve the conflict between the two. In other words, Haddox identifies the presence of mystery and manners, acknowledges the conflict between the two, and asserts that the only way to definitively resolve this conflict is to look outside the text for evidence, yet he declares that looking outside the text for evidence is an illegitimate practice. In effect, Haddox finds this conflict indeterminable. He writes that the debate over O'Connor's fidelity to orthodox Christianity in her fiction is based “not on the interpretation of the text but on the proper context to choose for the interpretation of the text—and as such it is irresolvable” (233). Broadly, recalling his uninitiated students who consistently feel that O'Connor's surface narrative conflicts with her assumed Christian meaning, Haddox finds that this conflict cannot be settled.⁹

⁸ Noteworthy is that, like the critics cited above, Haddox too is acknowledging the mystery in O'Connor's work which prompts readers to look not only at the “unproblematic evidence” of the surface narrative (manners), but also for the deeper meaning (mystery) that might be illuminated by “structures of belief.”

⁹ Haddox's critical assessment of the problems with reading O'Connor through O'Connor's professed faith is further supported by critic Frederick Crews, who asserts that “where the religious critics go most seriously astray is in assuming that O'Connor must have chosen the bare ingredients of her artistry—her characters, settings, actions and tone—with a didactic end already in mind” (qtd. in Donahoo 246). Further, in support of Crews, O'Connor herself writes about “Good Country People”: I wouldn't want you to think that in that story I sat down and said, ‘I am now going to write a story about a Ph.D. with a wooden leg, using the wooden leg as a symbol for another kind of

While I agree with Haddox that attempting to assert the Christian orthodoxy of O'Connor's fiction leads to a debate that is irresolvable, I think this debate is nonetheless generative. Though readers cannot definitively prove that *either* O'Connor's seemingly non-Christian manners or her assumedly Christian mystery should dictate the way its counterpart is understood, readers *can* explore the two sides of this debate, asking why these two interpretations exist and what their existence might tell us about O'Connor's stories. In other words, instead of asking, "Should I read this story according to what seems to be O'Connor's intent to share her Christian faith (mystery) or according to what seems to be her non-Christian surface narrative (manners)?" or "Are O'Connor's stories Christian stories?" readers should ask, "How might O'Connor's mystery and manners, which seem to contradict, actually work together in this story?" and "What might the contradiction between mystery and manners reveal in this story?"

Where Haddox may represent a group of critics who trace the conflict between O'Connor's mystery and manners, there are also many critics who write of O'Connor's mystery and manners in cooperation.¹⁰ These critics exemplify the approach I will take. For instance, in an essay that attributes O'Connor's characteristic shocking twists¹¹ to her eschatological vision, critic Ralph C. Wood explains: "her belief in the Life beyond gives a sharp urgency to ordinary experience" ("World to Come" 105). Wood sees O'Connor's mystery, or the "sharp urgency" he observes in her work, succeeding *in conjunction* with her manners, or her narration of "ordinary experiences." While Wood discusses O'Connor's ordinary experiences and sharp urgency, John

affliction.' I doubt myself if many writers know what they are going to do when they start out. When I started writing that story, I didn't know there was going to be a Ph.D. with a wooden leg in it. I merely found myself one morning writing a description of two women that I knew something about, and before I realized it, I had equipped one of them with a daughter with a wooden leg" (*MM* 100).

¹⁰ Though in introducing "mystery and manners" I may have implied otherwise, I will go on to demonstrate that O'Connor would actually argue that mystery and manners work *together*; furthermore, with this paper I will go on to develop how they work together *by* conflicting.

¹¹ I will go on to explain that these shocking moments most poignantly reveal the layered nature of her narratives.

D. Sykes Jr. describes her layered narrative in this way: “For her, the fulfillment of this life is to be found in what lies beyond it. Indeed, it is the fullness of life beyond the natural that gives substance to nature itself” (“Body” 139). Like Wood, Sykes writes that O’Connor’s sense of “life beyond the natural,” or her mystery, is *crucial* to her ability to express “nature itself,” or her manners.¹² While these critics distinctly identify mystery and manners in O’Connor’s work, they are further able to see that their distinctness is what allows mystery and manners to work in cooperation.

How these critics approach the conflict between mystery and manners—by exploring what this conflict reveals about O’Connor’s work—is in fact how I think O’Connor herself would approach this conflict. Moreover, not only would O’Connor choose to explore this conflict, but she further believed that the presence of such an irresolvable conflict was the mark of good work. She believed that a good story could not be solved as a puzzle or summed into a single theme. She writes, “a story that is any good can’t be reduced, it can only be expanded. A story is good when you can continue to see more and more in it, and when it continues to escape you” (*MM* 102). Not only would O’Connor face a contradiction by looking for how it expands a

¹² O’Connor did not write her characters as symbols from the start. As discussed, she did, however, write from the basis of “sacramental theology.” In answer to questions of writing didactically symbolic fiction, O’Connor writes in “Novelist and Believer”: “They think that inevitably the writer, instead of seeing what is, will see only what he believes. It is perfectly possible, of course, that this will happen. Ever since there have been such things as novels, the world has been flooded with bad fiction for which the religious impulse has been responsible. The sorry religious novel comes about when the writer supposes that because of his belief, he is somehow dispensed from the obligation to penetrate concrete reality. He will think that the eyes of the Church or of the Bible or of his particular theology have already done the seeing for him, and that his business is to rearrange this essential vision into satisfying patterns, getting himself as little dirty in the process as possible. His feeling about this may have been made more definite by one of those Manichean-type theologies which sees the natural world as unworthy of penetration. But the real novelist, the one with an instinct for what he is about, knows that he cannot approach the infinite directly, that he must penetrate the natural human world as it is. The more sacramental his theology, the more encouragement he will get from it to do just that” (*MM* 162-3). While O’Connor did not intend to write sermons before stories, she did write from a Christian understanding of the world. This fact, alongside an enormous body of criticism devoted to the Christian themes of O’Connor’s work, merits a mystery reading that is aligned with a broad assumption of her theological framework. See for example Timothy P. Caron’s inventory in “Evangelicalism in Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*” (51).

work rather than how she could reduce the contradiction to right and wrong, but further, it seems O'Connor would count the apparent presence of two starkly disparate yet equally valid readings of her work a sign of her success; it seems she *intends* this contradiction. Furthermore, even more than her own remarks, O'Connor's best work speaks for itself as the biggest proof of her conviction that a "story that is any good" invites debate that cannot be resolved, only explored.

The contradiction between mystery and manners that can only be explored makes up the most meaningful part of O'Connor's most esteemed fiction. More concretely, the contradiction inherent in her violent plots which bring her characters to grace and the insight generated by exploring that conflict makes up the most meaningful part of O'Connor's most esteemed fiction. For example, I began this discussion by succinctly surveying the short stories that fill *A Good Man is Hard to Find* in order to demonstrate her affinity for spinning these violent plots to bring her characters to grace. The title story of that collection, in which the grandmother sees truth only in the moment of her death, is arguably the most famous example. In this story, the contradiction between O'Connor's mystery, the workings of grace in the grandmother, and her manners, the indiscriminate murders committed by the Misfit, is generative. The contradiction leads readers to consider human nature, that perhaps the grandmother *had* to face death before she could face herself. It further leads readers to consider the nature of grace, that an entire family's murder could still somehow serve as the instrument of grace, the means to shock the grandmother into seeing truth and seeking redemption. This very brief exploration of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" serves as recognizable example of how the conflict between mystery and manners reveals the most meaningful part of O'Connor's most beloved stories.

As this example of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" further exemplifies, it is O'Connor's shocking twists, like the happy family running into the Misfit on their way to Florida, which

make the conflict between mystery and manners most obvious. I will call these shocking twists “moments of revelation,” because they most clearly *reveal* the conflict between mystery and manners. Moments of revelation make the contradiction between mystery and manners most obvious because these moments of revelation surround what O’Connor calls a “gesture” (MM 111). O’Connor writes that in a “gesture,” like the grandmother reaching out her hand to the Misfit, her characters (her manners) “make contact with mystery” (MM 111). In other words, the gestures in the center of moments of revelation are where manners and mystery confront one another head on. She articulates this element of her fiction in this way:

I often ask myself what makes a story work, and what makes it hold up as a story, and I have decided that it is probably some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the story lies. This would have to be an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity. The action or gesture I’m talking about would have to be on the anagogical level, that is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. It would be a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make. It would be a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery” (MM 111).

To get to the heart of a story by O’Connor, then, is to explore the convergence of mystery and manners as it is revealed most clearly—where the “gesture” takes place: in a moment of revelation.

In summary, first time readers and critics alike observe the contradiction between O'Connor's mystery and manners.¹³ Readers who approach this contradiction by reducing it, asserting that O'Connor's stories should be interpreted according to either her assumedly Christian meaning or seemingly non-Christian manners, find themselves in an irresolvable debate. However, I think that these contradictions, if explored rather than reduced, actually make up the best part of O'Connor's best work. O'Connor's work invites readers to read with the strategy of seeing the contradiction between mystery and manners and exploring what that contradiction means for her story.

I briefly demonstrated this reading strategy with the succinct example of the conflict between mystery and manners made clear in a moment of revelation in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," but to further demonstrate my argument, I will use the strategy of exploring the contradiction between mystery and manners in a moment of revelation to analyze "The River." According to this strategy, I will first set up the contradiction in "The River": the first side of the contradiction will be a reading of "The River" which focuses on O'Connor's manners as they build to the moment of revelation, demonstrating how focusing on this element of O'Connor's story dictates that readers understand "The River" as the story of the violent death of a little boy thanks to false hope created by a false religion; the second side of the contradiction will be a second reading of "The River" which focuses on O'Connor's mystery as it builds to the moment of revelation, demonstrating how focusing on this second element of O'Connor's story dictates that readers understand "The River" as the story of a little boy baptized into salvation and the

¹³ I think the contradiction between mystery manners in O'Connor's tales are characteristically driven by the possibility of multiple interpretations of her prophetic figures—Mason Tarwater,¹³ the Misfit, Rufus Johnson, Manley Pointer, the circus freak from "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" to name a few—and biblically saturated scenery, what she famously deemed the "Christ-haunted" south—preachers, baptisms, and innumerable reference to scripture come to mind (*MM* 44). Understanding O'Connor's manners and mystery, her story and her meaning, hinges on understanding O'Connor's prophetic characters and biblical imagery. However, this thread of analysis lies beyond the scope of this study.

Kingdom of God. Finally, I will articulate how these two readings contradict, and how this contradiction reveals greater meaning for “The River.”

As my introduction explained, once I have used “The River” to model the strategy of exploring the conflict between mystery and manners in a moment of revelation, I will go on to use this strategy for reading to explore two elements in conflict in a moment of revelation in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*.

My first reading of “The River,” or what I will call my “manners reading,” traces O’Connor’s manners as they build to the moment of revelation. Consequently, I will attempt to present a reading of the story which is based solely on conclusions that can be drawn from the surface narrative. I will let O’Connor’s manners, the information that she gives in her surface narrative about her characters and action, guide my interpretation of her mystery, disregarding what I know about how her faith might have lead her to write a pro-Christian mystery.

To begin, in a manners reading of “The River,” O’Connor’s description of Mrs. Connin does little to earn readers’ confidence. In the story’s opening scene, she is depicted as a speckled skeleton in pea-green; she surveys the Ashfield apartment—the smoke-soaked furniture, a lackluster watercolor on the wall—with judgment and an instinctive half-frown; the reader is immediately wary of her unfriendly appearance and disposition. Mrs. Connin tells Harry Ashfield’s father that she will have his son back later than eight because, “‘we’re going to the river to a healing. This particular preacher don’t get around this way often. I wouldn’t have paid for that,’ she [says] . . .” (31). As the narrator pauses in the middle of Mrs. Connin’s thought to attribute the dialogue to its speaker, she leads the reader to infer logically that the antecedent of “that” is “the preacher not getting around much.” The reader is led to believe that Mrs. Connin would not have paid for a preacher who was not famous enough to travel often. In this second’s

pause on the second page of O'Connor's story, the reader's first impression of Mrs. Connin is cemented: her faith must be at best simple, more likely nominal, or at worst completely self-interested. She seems to be openly admitting that she is more interested in the spectacle of a healing than in substance of faith. Yet, once the narrator has attributed this dialogue to Mrs. Connin and caused the reader to draw such a conclusion, the narrator allows Mrs. Connin to finish her sentence: “. . . This particular preacher don't get around this way often. I wouldn't have paid for that,” she said, nodding at the painting, ‘I would have drew it myself’” (31). So, perhaps, Mrs. Connin has been acquitted. Nevertheless, the odd placement of “I wouldn't have paid for that.” has done its work and, for the reader taking her cue from manners, the slightest shade of doubt has been cast on the sincerity of Mrs. Connin's faith.¹⁴

In a manners reading of “The River,” unlike Mrs. Connin, Harry easily wins readers' sympathies as a neglected little boy with a bad home life. Harry Ashfield, a child of four or five, is Mrs. Connin's charge for the day, which explains why this rather unpleasant woman finds herself discussing the wall decoration of the Ashfield home at six in the morning. Mrs. Connin is babysitting Harry because his mother is in bed with a hangover; his father doesn't even bother to put Harry's coat on straight. The boy is described unattractively and compared to an “old sheep,” as if he has grown up too fast, and is in need of direction (31). Mrs. Connin takes him by the hand, leads him to the bus stop, and asks his first name. Earlier that morning Mrs. Connin had mentioned the name of the traveling preacher, Bevel Summers, and so Harry suddenly decides to be Bevel too, though “he had never thought at any time before of changing [his name]” (32). Telling white lies may not constitute unusual behavior for a child of four or five. Still, the substance and form of this particular lie is telling: it is spontaneous yet specific,

¹⁴ This working of O'Connor's manners demonstrates the way that a reader's response to a text can be greatly affected by the structure of that text, as asserted by the theory of affective stylistics (Tyson 135).

revealing a repressed psychological need to be recognized and important, as the preacher is recognized and important.¹⁵ When Mrs. Connin asks why Bevel might need the preacher to heal him, he answers: "'I'm hungry,' he decided finally" (33). This admission, too, could reveal a subconscious need, its foremost meaning in reference to physical hunger. As the reader learns after Bevel returns home from his day with Mrs. Connin, the little boy must scavenge his house to find his own breakfast. In this light, his request to be healed from hunger constitutes a request to be taken care of. Bevel's request to be miraculously healed from hunger pangs could also suggest a subconscious desire to satisfy a deeper longing. Hunger is often a biblical metaphor for spiritual poverty. Yet, the reader following manners has no reason to think that this is the case. That Bevel "decided finally" suggests that he struggles for more than a moment to find an answer, or rather to fabricate an answer, because he is not actually in dire need just as his name is not actually Bevel. He is a small child, playing along with a game. While changing his name reveals a subconscious need for attention, he tells Mrs. Connin that he did not eat breakfast because he "did not have time to be hungry yet then," as if he did not feel himself in need of healing—of hunger physical or spiritual in nature—until someone suggested that he should be. Bevel needs to eat breakfast, not to be miraculously healed of hunger pangs. He does not need divine intervention; he needs to be taken care of.

As the narrative progresses in this manners reading, a meaningful association develops between unbelief, evil, grey pigs, and the character of Mr. Paradise. Upon arriving at Mrs. Connin's house, Bevel meets her daughter and three sons, and takes his turn at examining *her* wall-décor. Just as he is about to ask about the picture of Jesus hanging over her bed, he is beckoned by the three boys out the door and toward a pig pen. They trick him into un-caging an

¹⁵ This reading of Harry's repressed psychological need is based on psychoanalytic theory as it is presented by Lois Tyson; in brief, she writes, ". . . repression doesn't eliminate our painful experiences and emotions. Rather, it gives them force by making them the organizers of our current experience" (12-13).

ugly, angry grey pig. The boys watch with silent relish as it frightens him to tears and chases him back to Mrs. Connin. The somber satisfaction the boys receive from tormenting Bevel seems to represent everything harmful in Bevel's world: the mischief of the boys drives Bevel to Mrs. Connin's arms like his unhappy home life will drive Bevel to the arms of the river. In addition, the narrator describes how the boys' "ears twitched slightly," which the reader of manners later connects to a comment by Mrs. Connin; reminiscent of the boy's twitching ears, Mrs. Connin's later compares a pig's chewed ear to Mrs. Paradise's cancerous ear. Mrs. Connin says she sees Mr. Paradise's ear as a sign of his unbelief, connecting the mean boys, pigs, and evil to Mr. Paradise and unbelief (36). This developing association of the boys to evil to pigs to Mr. Paradise to unbelief is further reinforced when Mrs. Connin reads to Bevel from her storybook of *The Life of Jesus Christ for Readers Under Twelve* about Jesus "driving a crowd of pigs out of a man" (38). Though the gospels actually speak of Jesus driving demons out of two men and into a herd of pigs, to the reader following manners, Mrs. Connin's phrasing only finally cements the direct connection between the image of the pigs and the evils of this world.

As the whole group together travels to see Preacher Bevel speak and heal, the reader of manners feels apprehensive about what will happen once they reach the river. O'Connor describes their walking form along the highway as "the skeleton of an old boat," suggesting a ravaged, forlorn vessel about to be overtaken by the sun (37). The words "skeleton," "boat," and "overtake" together evoke the image of a pirate ship, lending an air of foreboding to the hot sun's eminent assault.¹⁶ The sun's attack from behind on the little ship, containing Bevel,

¹⁶ This analysis of O'Connor's language is based on Deconstruction theory. The slippery nature of language, as defined by deconstruction theory, muddles up "The River" by complicating O'Connor's character descriptions. From "an old sheep" to "wild leaps," from "almost but not quite to smile" to "soft and musical," and from "he was gradually seeing appear what he didn't know he was looking for" to "the river wouldn't have him," O'Connor's descriptions are frequently open to interpretation from either a manners or mystery standpoint (Tyson 250). As a result, her characters themselves are left open to interpretation. I think the two wholly dissonant interpretations of "The River" are possible in part because this fluidity of language.

foreshadows the harm to befall him at the hands of the river. As the sun, first behind the group, eventually overtakes and surpasses them, Bevel suddenly wishes to catch hold of that dangerous, pirating sun. The narrator relates that “he began to make wild leaps and pull forward on her hand as if he wanted to dash off and snatch the sun which was rolling away ahead of them now” (39). Bevel is oblivious. He is plainly energized by simply getting away from his house and seeing somewhere new.¹⁷ Since the reader of manners feels apprehensive about the coming religious encounter at the river, this second mention of the sun seems to foreshadow that, just like the sun, though Christianity may consume Bevel, still will its promises be perpetually out of reach. He will not get at the essence of what Christianity claims, no matter his crazy, inane, “wild” efforts. It has rolled away, now and always to be beyond him. He will not find it at the river.

In a manners reading, the negative color red goes on to negatively frame the scene at the river. The Connins and Bevel follow a red clay road to a red leaf-covered trail until they arrive at the red river. The color has connotations of danger, fire, fear, and violence, yet the most obvious connection is to blood, particularly in the case of the river. Indeed, the preacher will compare the river to a River of Jesus’ blood, flowing to the Kingdom of God. Upon arriving at the river, Mrs. Connin pushes the boys past the food, harkening back to Bevel’s request to be healed from his hunger. He will not find physical satiation at the river. He will not be getting what he really needs, but a poor substitute instead. The Reverend Bevel Summers stands in the red river bathed in red light, wearing a red scarf. This description connects the preacher to

¹⁷ At this point the reader learns that Bevel has taken Mrs. Connin’s Christian storybook out of fascination—until now “Jesus” was just another swear word—and has secretly hid it in his coat lining beside her handkerchief. He is naively interested only by the novelty of his new experience with Christianity.

Christianity,¹⁸ as well as to that more subtle sense of danger and violence that the color suggests.¹⁹

Once at the river the reader meets the Reverend, who in this manner reading the reader understands to be an insincere man who represents the true nature of Christianity. The Reverend begins his sermon with a frank declaration that he has not come to heal physical ailments, but to point people to spiritual healing. When a woman in the crowd declares that she has seen the preacher heal before, O'Connor writes that "he seemed almost but not quite to smile" (40). His attempt at hiding a grin indicates that he must find something comical. This slight smile emerges as weighty proof: the preacher is a plain phony who has not healed anyone and his half-smile reveals a hidden smugness. He tells her, "You might as well go home if that's what you came for" (40). If his initial reaction had been only to reply with this statement, the reader might easily have believed his sincerity. However, his hidden smile completely alters the reader's perception. The reader of manners understands this description to indicate that he is replying haughtily, lording his supposed powers over this woman. Reverend Bevel Summers then begins to preach, telling those on the shore about the River of Life that was made to carry sin. His voice grows "soft and musical," reminiscent of theatrics, yet his message rings true with the Christian doctrine (41). The implication of this description for the reader of manners is that the preacher

¹⁸ To clear up any confusion, let me note here that in my analysis of the contradiction between a manners reading and a mystery reading, I will discuss at length the fact that the preacher specifically speaks for Protestant Christianity, not the Christian faith in general. For the purpose of this first reading, however, it is important that I do not draw any conclusions based on the point of view from which O'Connor is writing, but only based on what is indicated by the text. The characters do not make an explicit distinction between Protestantism and Catholicism, so neither does this manners reading. To draw such a conclusion would require outside knowledge of O'Connor's faith.

¹⁹ O'Connor's manners further seem to implicate the preacher and the Christianity he represents when the color red comes back into play a few pages later. When the preacher later tells the crowd that he has not come to heal, O'Connor writes that "his face burned redder for a second," communicating his embarrassment and suggesting a lack of credibility (42). In addition, his reddened face again conjures up images of danger and violence. The reader is then reminded of the connection drawn earlier between the grey pigs and the evils of the world when a mocking voice from the crowd shouts out in derision. The voice comes from Mr. Paradise, the man with the cancerous ear, who wears a grey hat and sits on a grey car. Manners draw a clear distinction with this trend of colorful descriptions: red stands for Christianity and grey for the unbelief of a corrupted world.

still speaks for Christianity, though his authenticity may be questioned by both the reader and those on the shore. By connection, then, it is the authenticity of Christianity that is in question.²⁰

By this point in a manners reading of "The River," O'Connor's narrative has lead her reader to make judgments about the key characters in the story. First, Mrs. Connin is understood to be judgmental and disagreeable, yet the voice for Christianity. Mr. Paradise is foreshadowed as a voice for unbelief. Red is connected to Christianity as well as danger, as are the river and the Reverend by association. Bevel, finally, is understood as a small boy in need of attention who is naively fascinated by the increasingly suspect Christian faith. These interpretations, based on the way a manners reading understands these characters, become key as the story develops further toward the moment of revelation.

Back at the riverside, the reader is lead by O'Connor's surface narrative in this manners reading to understand Bevel's first baptism as a traumatic incident. When the little boy is handed over by Mrs. Connin to the real Bevel to be baptized, he rolls his eyes, brings his face in close to the preacher's and says "in a loud deep voice," "My name is Bevvuuuuuul," sliding his tongue across his mouth like a serpent (44). There has been something unnerving about Bevel's actions since setting out toward the river, beginning with his wild leaps toward the far off sun and culminating in his reaction to the preacher. He seems nearly hypnotized as he wildly jumps and sedately daydreams.²¹ Yet here as he shouts satanically at the preacher he appears

²⁰ The character of the preacher, and thus the nature of the faith he preaches, is further revealed by manners as the riverside sermon continues. The narrator reports that in reaction to Mr. Paradise's mocking, "The preacher lifted his arms quickly and began to repeat all that he had said before about the River and the Kingdom of Christ and the old man sat on the bumper, fixing him with a narrow squint" (43). The fluidity of this sentence is created by the repeated use of "and," which does not lead the reader to pause, as a comma would, between phrases. As explained by affective stylistics, this fluid structure works on the reader, giving this scene an air of flippancy, as if the narrator too doesn't take this preacher very seriously or is skeptical of his message.

²¹ By the end of the passage, Bevel seems not just hypnotized, but almost brainwashed. The entire sermon ordeal permanently alters his disposition: the narrator tells us he is "dreamy and serene" amidst the riverside proceedings (39). He does not appear to comprehend the Reverend's message. Instead he is hardly cognitive, enthralled by the

possessed. The narrator then tells us that Bevel realizes “this was not a joke,” implying that the boy had been joking moments before (44). Where could a small child have learned to purposefully mock Satan? If joking, Bevel must have been unaware of the subject of his imitation.²² Whether he be unconsciously overcome by or “coincidentally” mocking something so evil, the reader is quite frightened for the little boy. In a manners reading, every sign points to this river as a place of danger and evil,²³ but the little boy is unaware. He misunderstands, thinking simply that if he is baptized he will not have to go back to his apartment. The preacher tells him that he “counts now,” that he “didn’t even count before” (45). Readers are lead to understand that the Reverend Summers is, in other words, telling the little boy that he has no worth until he subscribes to this religion and undergoes the arbitrary and mystical act of being dunked in filthy red water (45). His first taste of the river leaves Bevel shocked and gasping.

At the end of the day at the river, the reader of manners understands that Harry has been taken in by what he saw and feels as if it has separated and saved him from the world he knows at home.²⁴ So, the next day when he can find nothing to eat and nothing to do, Harry decides to go back to the one place where he felt like he mattered. Standing alone in his apartment, he remembers the river and is suddenly struck as if “gradually seeing appear what he didn’t know he’d been looking for” (50). Harry did not know he was looking for something because he was

atmosphere, and drowsy, drugged by the music of the Reverend’s voice. When he is committed by Mrs. Connin to the preacher to be washed in the waters, he only grins.

²² Dr. Amy Sonheim pointed out to me that in one sense, the subject of his imitation is the Preacher Bevel. Both preacher and little boy are referred to as Bevel in this section of the story. Thus, when little Bevel mocks Satan, it feels to the reader of manners that this connection to the satanic reflects on the Preacher Bevel.

²³ Just before Bevel is baptized, many from the audience show their support of the preacher by trudging into the river. That each one commits to the waters only an isolated part of his or her body is emphasized in the account, suggesting a lack of faith in the river’s power. Here, manners lead the reader to link the red river even more concretely with Christianity: these people’s efforts in the river are futile, just as their belief is futile.

²⁴ When Mrs. Connin takes the wet little boy back to his apartment, he is so tired and confused that he traverses the apartment with only one eye open. Yet his parents and their friends are only interested in the monetary value of the book he took from Mrs. Connin, not in Harry and his needs. In contrast with his home, where he is neglected, Harry is convinced that the river is a place where he matters. When his mother comes to his bedside to ask him about the day’s events, he feels separated from her, as if he is still under the river and she above it. He tells her that he counts now.

not ever looking for anything. Now he has been convinced that he needs a different life, a life that exists in the depths of that muddy river's currents. He turns back to the river and the preacher's words, "that river leads to the Kingdom of God," leaving his old home behind as he walks again toward Mrs. Connin's house. This decision marks a change in the narrative; as Harry begins his journey back to the river, the story approaches the moment of revelation.

In this manners reading, the surface narrative has led readers to understand that Mr. Paradise is connected with unbelief, an association that becomes crucial when Harry returns to the river. Harry passes Mr. Paradise as he is walking from the house toward the river, and Mr. Paradise, understandably concerned by this scene of a small boy walking alone into the woods, quickly goes after him, grabbing a peppermint stick along the way presumably in order to win Harry's trust. Mrs. Connin may have earlier connected Mr. Paradise's unbelief with the evils of the world, but here Mr. Paradise redeems himself, indicating by example that unbelief should not necessarily be connected with evil. The river has been established as filthy and dangerous, and the faith that it represents has been discredited as fruitless and deceptive. Mr. Paradise's concern translates into salvation from the danger that awaits Harry.

Following a manners reading of the story, the reader understands that Henry is hardly intending to drown himself as he bounds into the water with all of his clothes on, determined to find the Kingdom of God. He instead seems to be under the delusion (though perhaps somewhat subconsciously) that somewhere under the river's surface is a tangible place where there is no pain and where he will be cared for. Harry dives forward, pushing with all of his might to reach this place that will save him from the apartment and the world that he knows, but "the river wouldn't have him" (52). The reader following manners understands that Harry must struggle to keep himself under the water and fails to find anything there. The River of Life, the

river that wants and accepts him, will not have him because this River exists only in his imagination. Harry realizes suddenly that the River of Life was “just another joke,” but “his feet were already treading on nothing” (52). For a moment he clearly sees the state in which he has found himself and struggles to fight against the river, but it is too late. The reader of manners sees that the refuge in which Harry has placed his hope is utterly insubstantial. His hopes are treading on nothing. The weight of the world has nearly crushed his five-year old shoulders and has pushed him into the arms of the river. He is completely vulnerable, at the mercy of the churning waters. The reader is horrified.

Mr. Paradise, who the reader of manners understands as the voice of rational unbelief, runs after Harry to save him from going under, but Harry only sees a giant pig coming to attack him.²⁵ Harry is pushed to the edge by the harsh reality that Mr. Paradise represents; just as the desire to run away from home pushed him to the river, so the fear of the pig (which for the reader of manners also represents harsh reality) pushes him under the water for the last time. Harry does not understand that the world is not all bad, and that Mr. Paradise wants to save him from a far worse alternative. Harry will find in that river neither the safe escape he seeks nor the magical kingdom he has been promised. The “long gentle hand” of death pulls him under swiftly before he can understand what is happening. He dies in the eerie, merciless grasp of the muddy waters, blissfully ignorant, confused and alone. The reader does not see the last few minutes of Harry’s life, but can only imagine the moment when he realizes that he has been tricked: his fear, panic, struggle, and regret. Mr. Paradise cannot find the little boy. He emerges from the water hunched and sorrowful like a sea-creature with dull, sad eyes and empty hands. The reader feels that even

²⁵ This juxtaposition of the river with Mr. Paradise, the symbol of rational unbelief associated with evil, may seem to suggest that the river, the symbol of Christianity, should be associated with the holy and good. In fact, given the horrendous result of Harry’s second “baptism,” Mr. Paradise and his lack of faith plainly represent harsh reality, while the river represents a far worse alternative. The hope of the river, as Harry finds out only too late, is an illusion.

a life of hardship and facing the skepticism of Mr. Paradise would have been better than no life at all. No child should die this way. The reader is left sickened with the violent end brought to this short life and the false hope religion has given to such a small, helpless sheep. In this manners reading, "The River" culminates in a terrible mockery of the fruit of "childlike faith."

Where this first manners reading is an attempt to interpret "The River" by drawing conclusions based purely on O'Connor's surface narrative and by disregarding O'Connor's Christian background, to continue my demonstration of the O'Connor reading strategy I will present a second reading which is directed by O'Connor's assumedly Christian mystery. This second reading, which I will call my "mystery reading," will attempt to interpret "The River" from the view point that O'Connor intended her stories to share a pro-Christian message. Consequently, I will let the assumption that O'Connor's ultimate goal is to communicate a Christian mystery guide the conclusions that I make about her manners.²⁶ I will follow the same method as in the first reading, weaving interpretation among facts as I relate key moments in "The River" from a mystery-focused perspective.

In this mystery reading, different details of the superficial narrative will rise to the forefront as the story moves toward the moment of revelation, Harry's second baptism and drowning. As I continue with this reading strategy and as my interpretation builds to that moment for the second time, the strategy will bring into focus the conflict between this second mystery reading and the first manners reading.

²⁶ As I noted in an earlier footnote, I will address at length the distinction between Protestantism and Catholicism that is crucial to understanding "The River" when I explore the contradiction between the manners reading and mystery reading in the section to follow. I definitely think O'Connor intends such a distinction to be obvious to the reader, but I further think that she makes that distinction obvious through the contradiction that I am developing. As I think will become clear, in order to develop that contradiction it is crucial to read for mystery with as broad a definition of Christianity as possible. Therefore, for the purposes of this mystery reading, I will take a view of Christianity which does not make a distinction between denominations. I will work purely from the assumption that O'Connor intends to support Christianity with her mystery.

In a reading directed by O'Connor's assumedly Christian mystery, Bevel is set forth from the first pages of "The River" as a representation of the unsaved. With scripture in mind, O'Connor's initial description of Bevel as an "old sheep" has connotations of John 10, in which Jesus compares himself to a shepherd and his people to sheep. The implication is that Bevel is a lost sheep in need of a savior. Further, Bevel's lie about his name and the fact that "he had never before thought of changing it" is further evidence of divine intervention. The reader looking for a pro-Christian mystery feels that something remarkable must prompt him to name himself Bevel, an act which will lead him straight into the baptizing arms of the preacher. Bevel's habits of lying and stealing remind the reader that his age does not make him innocent. Bevel's request to be healed from his hunger is a request to be spiritually filled, reminiscent of Jesus' words in Matthew: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (*The NIV Student Bible*, Matt. 5.6). In a reading looking for mystery, the reader sees that Bevel "decided finally," that he was hungry, implying that this realization has been long coming, as God's people were chosen in Him to be holy before the beginning of time (*The NIV Student Bible*, Eph. 1.4-5). The suddenness of Bevel's hunger ("I didn't have time to be hungry yet then") also mirrors the captivating nature of God's grace, awakening His people to their depravity and His salvation (33). From the very beginning of a mystery reading, Bevel is the representative of all people, the common man in need of salvation from himself and from the world.

By the time Bevel arrives at Mrs. Connin's house and meets her three sons, the reader of mystery is already aware of the main conflict present in this narrative: Bevel is slowly awakening to his need for salvation. The biblical symbolism, highlighted when looking for mystery, that pervades his encounter with the boys reinforces the seriousness of that struggle and

of the events to follow. The boys, pigs, and Mr. Paradise all represent the corruption and unbelief of an evil world, seeking to prevent Bevel from learning about Jesus and turning to Him. As the boys, Mrs. Connin, her daughter, and Bevel all move together as the “skeleton of an old boat,” while “the white Sunday sun followed at a little distance, climbing fast through a scum of gray cloud as if it meant to overtake them,” the narrator indicates what lies ahead (37). The little group is helpless, a lone boat sailing in a vast sea of asphalt, searching after truth. The sun overtakes them, signaling to the reader who is following along with mystery that a spiritual encounter is eminent. Bevel runs after the sun, and so the Son, with wild abandon. He has been possessed by joy.²⁷ In a mystery reading, the red which paints the path to the river signifies the blood of Christ and its cleansing, redeeming power. The red clay road and red leaves further indicate the coming spiritual encounter. The path to the river becomes a path to Christ. Finally, Mrs. Connin completes the metaphor of Bevel’s hunger as she pushes the boys past the table of food to the river, pointing Bevel away from the physical nourishment that he thinks he needs toward the spiritual nourishment that he actually needs. As the sun sets in the red river, Bevel is standing on holy ground.

The Preacher Bevel Summers takes on a different role entirely when reading from this mystery perspective. He wades into the red river, and stands bathed in red light and wrapped in red scarf, all indications in this mystery reading that he is in fact a man ordained by God. In this new red light, the reader gives the preacher the benefit of the doubt. In turn, when the woman from the crowd mentions his healing powers, his half-smile perhaps reveals that he is remembering the joyous occasion of the healing, or that he is lovingly tolerating the woman’s

²⁷ Before hearing Mrs. Connin read from the children’s book, Bevel thought “Jesus” was just a swear word. “They joked a lot where he lived,” but this story that he learned from Mrs. Connin was not a joke (38). It so captivated him that he hid the book away in his coat lining. In a mystery reading, the reader would assume that O’Connor is perhaps signaling to the reader through Bevel’s thoughts that despite her humorous style, she has no intention of parodying the gospel of Christ.

misplaced fervor. When he then tells the crowd that they might as well go home if they have come to see a healing, it seems a testament to his sincerity. The soft, musical quality of his voice becomes a sign of divine inspiration. When Mr. Paradise stands mocking the preacher in unbelief, the preacher's face only burns redder in demonstration of God's approval physically manifest, as Moses' face glowed after standing in the presence of the Lord.²⁸

In a mystery reading, Bevel's first baptism is a completely different experience. In the preacher's arms, the little boy makes faces and repeats his name in a low, chilling voice; Bevel may not realize the significance of what he is saying, but the allusion to Satan is all too clear. Now more than ever, on the brink of baptism, does this little boy need salvation from the world that has infected and overpowered him. Again, in a reading attuned to mystery he is the everyman; he represents every person that has been beaten down by the world and overtaken by its brokenness. Waiting to be baptized, Bevel thinks that if he can just find the Kingdom of God then he won't have to go back to his apartment; his simple statement speaks heartbreaking volumes about how unhappy he must be. In a mystery reading, the reader feels that even in his small understanding, Bevel is right. His needs will be met in the River.²⁹ As the preacher dunks the boy under, the shock of the water, signifying the shock of grace in a mystery reading, stuns him into awakening. Before the preacher's words had lulled him to blissful calm,³⁰ but now suddenly he listens with the utmost attention as Preacher Bevel tells him that he counts. Mrs. Connin takes him home with one eye open, a physical representation that Harry is beginning to see with new eyes and new understanding.

²⁸ See Exodus 34:29

²⁹ According to a mystery reading, the people at the river are interested in physical healing, and only commit part of themselves to the waters in half-hearted hopes of seeing a miracle. Bevel, though, is submerged fully in the river. The reader reading for mystery sees that Bevel's faith will be rewarded.

³⁰ At the riverside Bevel is drowsy and dreamy, lulled to peace by the beauty and wonder of the Word of God. At home he is a tired sheep, but here at the river he finds rest, as Psalms says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters" (*The Student Bible*, Ps. 23.1-2).

Harry returns home greatly affected by his baptism in the river, and, to a reader of mystery, by extension greatly affected by his experience of the presence of God. In this reading, the line becomes increasingly clear between Harry's home life, neglectful and worldly, his time at the river where he learned that he mattered.³¹ When he wakes up the next morning he has to search the house for his breakfast. This isolated scene speaks volumes about how dimly lonely Harry is in the apartment. Suddenly while searching he is struck with remembrance of the river, as if "he were gradually seeing appear what he didn't know he'd been looking for" (50). In a reading according to mystery, God's mercy has taken hold of this little boy, who did not know he had any choice but to be unhappy. As he easily leaves his old life behind, taking only what he needs to make it to the river again, his decision marks the move toward the moment of revelation—Harry's second baptism.

The sun shines high in the sky as Harry walks alone toward Mrs. Connin's house, and the reader informed by mystery knows that something miraculous again lies ahead. As Harry treks along, Mr. Paradise spies the little boy and makes his way secretly behind. As the representation of evil and unbelief, his intention could not possibly be to save Harry. At best, he is attempting to prevent him from reaching salvation in the river, and at worst he plans to abduct or abuse him. Mr. Paradise waits, hidden in the woods, as Harry works with all his might to baptize himself in the river. Yet, feels the reader of mystery, the Kingdom is not so easily found. Harry struggles to keep his head under the water. "The river wouldn't have him," just as the apostle Paul says the flesh struggles against the Spirit (52).³² Harry remembers being baptized by the preacher, and how he had struggled then, too. The connection between his first dunk and this second swim

³¹ His parents seem more concerned with the picture book Harry has taken than with his obvious fatigue and more with the book's monetary value than the impact it had on him. When he talks with his mother, he feels as if she is trying to pull him out of the river again. Yet he resists, clinging to the hope that he found there and telling her, "I'm not the same now, I count" (48).

³² See Galatians 5:17

is obvious, and the reader guided by mystery feels that Harry's true salvation is to be found in this second baptism.

When Harry thinks, "It's just another joke!" the reader of mystery feels that for a moment Harry's faith lapses and he questions the promise of the Kingdom (52). Yet, his feet are "treading on nothing" (52). The river has already taken hold of the boy. While the reader following a pro-Christian mystery is shocked to discover that Harry's second baptism ends in his death, the shock of Harry's death actually works to remind this reader that Harry should not be understood only as an innocent young boy. Instead, in a mystery reading, Harry has been set forth as the symbol for sinful humanity since the story's beginning. Thus, the reader looking for a pro-Christian mystery is forced to understand Harry's death as symbolic: so must the sinner die to himself to receive eternal life. In this light, his death is logical: Harry is not simply a little boy in a story, but the representative everyman in a pro-Christian allegorical tale. Furthermore, the reader following mystery feels that Harry is saved by the grace of God from Mr. Paradise's perverse hands and from the evils of the world. In his death, he escapes the harm to befall him and is swept away into the redeeming arms of the river current, flowing to heaven's gates. Harry will never again face suffering or pain. He is beyond their grasp, even beyond their sight. Pushing himself under with one last ounce of strength, he is taken away gently and quickly (52). Though Mr. Paradise' eyes scan as far down the river as he can see, he emerges from the waters without his prize, as a grey monster without a meal. Pro-Christian mystery concludes that in death, Harry has found life.

In this moment of revelation, the contradiction between reading for manners and reading for mystery becomes abruptly clear. As the O'Connor reading strategy has shown, "The River" can be interpreted to depict a little boy seized by irrational hope, running away from the world

and into the violent arms of death, or a little boy saved from the evils of the world by faith in the grace of God. In this moment of revelation, Henry's second baptism and drowning, these two readings of "The River" are utterly incongruous.

In fact, the O'Connor reading strategy has shown that these two readings of "The River" are opposed from the story's first pages through its development toward this moment. Mrs. Connin is either, according to the manners reading, the unpleasant and insincere vehicle for deluding Harry into curiosity about a false faith or, according to the mystery reading, the caring representative of refuge from the world who leads Harry to salvation at the river. Mr. Paradise stands for either, according to the manners reading, rationality and skepticism or, according to the mystery reading, the evils of the world. The preacher may be understood either as a hypocrite who represents a phony religion, or a sincere and inspired emissary of true faith. Harry is either a typical child cursed with a bad home who has been tricked by religion into believing that a fantasy world exists under a river, or a boy representative of humanity who is in spiritual need and has been seized by divine intervention. The reader cannot reconcile the way that these two readings lead him or her to feel about each of these characters. Finally, at the story's moment of revelation, the reader understands either that Harry drowns at the hand of the illusion forced upon the little boy, or that Harry is pulled into the Kingdom of God by the merciful hand of salvation. These two readings are simply contradictory. That a boy of five or six could both receive salvation and accidentally drown in the same moment feels categorically unjust. This moment of revelation cannot be understood as both. Yet, the most meaningful part of this story is found not by debating which reading of "The River" is the correct reading, asserting the supremacy of one and throwing out the other. Instead, according to the O'Connor reading

strategy, the most meaningful part of this story is found by exploring how these two readings might be intended to work together.³³

I am arguing that O'Connor's work invites a reading strategy where contradiction is intended to be explored. According to this strategy, the reader is *supposed* to feel the utter unjustness in the story. The reader is supposed to feel that Mrs. Connin should not be both a Christian believer and insincere, that the fact that Mr. Paradise is rational or skeptical should not also make him evil, and that the preacher should not both preach the Bible and lead Harry to believe untrue things about Christianity. The reader is supposed to feel that it is utterly unjust that baptism, an act of salvation, should ever lead to a little boy's death, and that a little boy's tragic drowning cannot represent the salvation that all of humanity should hope to receive. Furthermore, if these contradictions are not solved but rather, according to this reading strategy, explored, they reveal the utter unjustness of the sort of Christianity that allows these contradictions to go on in real life. O'Connor intends her writers to be horrified by the unjustness in "The River," made most poignant by the contradictions inherent between mystery and manners throughout; as a Catholic living in what she famously called the "Christ-haunted" south, O'Connor would have seen the blasphemy of nominal, self-interested Christianity as well as the danger posed by even well-meaning but ignorant Christianity (*MM* 44). "The River" is intended as a blazing criticism of those misguided "Christians" who would teach false doctrine and practice sacraments outside of the sanction of the church. The reader is supposed to be horrified

³³ I think O'Connor's work is structured to be read for contradicting interpretations because of her commitment to writing as a "realist of distances." As she explains, "In the novelist's case, prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up. The prophet is a realist of distances . . ." (*MM* 44). The framework of reading that this essay has proposed and demonstrated is primarily concerned with exploring layers of meaning to reach farther into those mysterious distances for which O'Connor's fiction strives.

that little Harry Ashfield is misguided. Harry's tragic death is a staggering warning against what can be formed from the fires of the "Christ-haunted" south.³⁴

This theme of "The River," revealed by the O'Connor reading strategy, could be explored and proved for pages; my purpose here is not to specifically explore contradiction in "The River," but instead to provide an extended example of this strategy and to demonstrate its worth for discovering meaning in O'Connor's fiction in order that I may ultimately demonstrate the worth of this strategy for analyzing Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*. With this purpose in mind, this paper will be best served by leaving "The River" behind and moving to once again consider Robert Donahoo's assessment of the potential future for O'Connor studies.

A final word will confirm my argument for O'Connor as a lens for understanding other authors. Donahoo contends in his assessment of the state of O'Connor studies, "one potential future step for rhetorical/stylistic approaches to O'Connor will be to move from using her as the subject of analysis to using her as a tool for theory creation. Given O'Connor's continued importance to short story writers both in America and abroad, such theorizing seems long overdue . . ." (249). As Donahoo suggests, I contend that O'Connor's work invites the reading strategy I have demonstrated through my reading of "The River," and furthermore that this strategy can serve as a model for understanding other authors.

3. **Robinson's Vision through the Lens of O'Connor**

As a novel by a Christian writer which centers on the life of a pastor, Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* is an ideal example for how the O'Connor reading strategy may generate further discussion and "open up and deepen awareness of mystery" (243). As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, among the striking number of similarities between Robinson and

³⁴Thanks to Dr. Amy Sonheim, who illuminated for me that when looking back through these two readings with this understanding, it becomes clear that O'Connor uses several allusions to specifically Catholic traditions, such as how Harry's baptism seems a twisted parody of infant baptism and the significance of the color red for Pentecost.

O'Connor are their shared Christian faith and shared Christian subject matter. Because of their perspective and this subject matter, Robinson and O'Connor also share a penchant for employing characters and imagery with Biblical roots. Furthermore, because of the fluidity of language relative to these Christian motifs, motifs that have taken on so many varying connotations in the "Christ-haunted" south, Christian authors are prone to writing characters and images pregnant with contrary interpretations. For this reason, Robinson's work, like O'Connor's, invites a strategy for reading which traces these contrary interpretations and explores the way they contradict. The O'Connor reading strategy, then, as a strategy for reading Robinson's *Gilead* will reveal meaning in the slow and lovely thoughts of an aging pastor as well as it did in the peculiar and shocking tale of a riverside sermon.

To analyze Robinson's *Gilead* through the lens of O'Connor, I will apply to *Gilead* the O'Connor reading strategy I have explained and demonstrated in the first section of this paper. As with my analysis of "The River," I will trace two elements that conflict throughout the novel, presenting an interpretation of the novel's theme from two contradicting perspectives, articulating how these two interpretations contradict most poignantly in the moment of revelation, and finally exploring that contradiction. In O'Connor's work, the two elements that are perennially in contradiction are her mystery and manners;³⁵ in *Gilead*, the two elements I intend to trace in contradiction are two conflicting definitions of vision.

While it is important that I provide a clear working definition of *vision* as I will use the term in my analysis of *Gilead*, it is difficult for me to provide that clear working definition at the outset. Indeed, clearly defining vision as I will use the term in my analysis is almost impossible

³⁵ Any work primarily concerned with communicating what O'Connor calls "far away" truth (remember her explanation of a "gesture") is particularly well-structured to be read by looking for mystery and manners. Although I will not be analyzing Robinson's mystery and manners, Christian authors in particular tend to fall into this category of writing about far away truth and are worth exploring with this reading strategy because of their invested interest in conveying the spiritual as it invades the physical.

because my analysis centers on Robinson's use of two conflicting and evolving definitions of vision through *Gilead*. The true definition of vision will become clear only at the end of my analysis of *Gilead*, because the true definition of vision as *Gilead* presents it can only be understood by tracing the contradiction between its two conflicting and evolving definitions as they move toward the moment of revelation. Broadly, however, the definition of vision as I will use the term in my analysis will include, "the act or power of seeing," "a supernatural appearance that conveys a revelation," "mode of seeing or conceiving" as in perspective or point of view, "unusual discernment or foresight," and "a thought, concept, or object formed by the imagination" (as given in the entry "vision (noun)" in Merriam-Webster Dictionary online).

Thus, with this multifaceted definition of vision, begins section two of this paper in which I read *Gilead* through the lens of O'Connor. In the first part of section two, I discuss the critical conversation that surrounds vision, particularly as it encompasses perception, in Robinson's novel. I then continue section two with my analysis of *Gilead* using the O'Connor reading strategy. The organizational structure of this analysis will be explained in detail in this second part of section two.

Much contemporary criticism of *Gilead* focuses on the mentality of the aging John Ames and the quality of his perception. For example, in a special issue of *Christianity and Literature* devoted to Robinson, critic June Haden Hobbes traces "memorialization" through *Gilead*, what she defines as the process through which Ames interprets and "invests meaning in" his experiences as he reflects back on them (245). According to Hobbes, knowing that he is about to die affords Ames with a fresh perspective on the events of his life. Similarly, critic Laura E. Tanner contends that Ames' awareness of his heart condition leads him to "immerse" himself in "the sensory details of lived experience" (224). Tanner's work concerns the effects of old age on

Ames' perception of current events. She cites neurological studies on old age's effect on "intensity of perception" to support her argument that Ames' numbered days impact his capacity to observe and interpret his day to day life (226). Thus Hobbes and Tanner both detail how Ames' changing perception influences the way *Gilead* is narrated.

Further, not only does Ames' perception of his past and present life influence the way the novel is narrated, as these critics note, but the nature of vision is also a thematic focus of *Gilead*. The novel breaks up into three main sections, each of which center on a discussion of vision: the fallout between Ames' father and grandfather, Ames' reflections on his point of view in his earlier life in contrast with his point of view as a dying man, and Ames' internal struggle over the way he sees his godson, Jack.

In the first thematic section, Ames begins his account by recording for his son memories of his father and grandfather: the man each was, who they were to him and to each other, and their ultimate falling out over differing understandings of their faith. Ames' father and grandfather had disparate visions of following the Lord; Ames must come to terms with whom to follow.

In the second section, Ames weaves his daily observations amongst stories from his past, often mulling over, as Tanner describes, his heightened awareness of his experiences and, as Hobbes details, the significance he has attributed to certain enigmatic events only years after they occurred. He grapples with trusting his own perception—whether reality or his increasingly metaphorical vision of it is more reflective of the truth.

This conflict between seeing the world with realistic or dreaming eyes carries into the third thematic section of *Gilead*: Ames' struggle to forgive Jack. A third into the book, when his godson, John Ames (Jack) Boughton, returns to Gilead, Ames is torn between resentful

distrust of his namesake and his conviction to forgive. He must decide whether to see his godson through eyes of cynicism or hope. In addition, this third thematic section of *Gilead* ultimately culminates in the novel's moment of revelation. Ames' relationship with Jack is at the heart of the novel, and when Ames blesses Jack for the second time before Jack leaves town, his gesture cuts straight to the heart of what vision truly is.³⁶

As I seek the true nature of vision, the two conflicting definitions of vision (as they develop through these three thematic sections of *Gilead*) will be the two conflicting elements for my analysis of *Gilead* based on the O'Connor reading strategy. According to this strategy, I will demonstrate that the two definitions of vision in *Gilead* lead to a contradiction which, when explored, reveals meaning in the novel.³⁷ I will refer to these two definitions of vision interchangeably as two conflicting or divergent narratives of vision in *Gilead*. I choose the term "narrative" because it encompasses the fact that these definitions develop and evolve as the events of the story progress. Thus, I will demonstrate how these two conflicting narratives of vision develop and evolve through each of the three thematic sections of the novel and converge at the moment of revelation, when Ames blesses Jack for the second time. I will then, according

³⁶ Critic Rebecca M. Painter identifies this scene, "Ames' reconsideration" of the first time he blessed Jack, as "the revelatory peripeteia of *Gilead*" (329).

³⁷ I think the presence of two conflicting interpretations of vision can be similarly attributed to two different interpretations of prophetic characters and biblical imagery, as explained in section one of this paper (footnote 13). Ames' father and grandfather—are the prophetic characters of *Gilead*, the speakers of truth and seers of visions. Several extended images communicate the two definitions of vision in conflict through *Gilead*. Hobbes traces "baseball, burial, and baptism" as "types" that Ames appropriates to make meaning from his experiences (241-2). Each plays a role in Ames' conversation with his son about the meaning of vision. A notable example of baseball in Ames' discourse of vision is found on page 44, where he compares two sides of a conversation to the exchange in a baseball game; a notable example of burial in relation to vision is found on page 210, when Ames remarks that "Light is constant, we just turn over in it," and continues that his "grandfather's grave turned into the light." Further, Lisa M. Siefker Bailey notes a fourth prevalent image in the novel in her essay on race in *Gilead*. She writes that fire in the novel represents "destructive forces of society and the power of the spirit," by which she means both the Holy Spirit and the human spirit (266). More than any other image, fire particularly pervades Ames' ponderings over vision. I think that this last image, along with the reader's understanding of the two prophetic John Ames, forms the basis for two divergent narratives in *Gilead*.

to the O'Connor reading strategy, explore what this contradiction reveals about the nature of vision and about *Gilead*.

The two narratives of vision take shape as Ames opens the first part³⁸ of his journal by writing to his son about the relationship between Ames' father and grandfather, or what he calls his son's "begats" (9). Both Ames' father and his father's father were pastors, though never of the same mind: his father was an unqualified pacifist and his grandfather a passionate abolitionist and supporter of John Brown. Ames' father and Ames' grandfather were never able to see eye to eye about the meaning of vision. His grandfather saw visions of the Lord calling him to fight injustice. His father believed the visions that Ames' grandfather saw were far from the truth of Scripture, the only source of revelation that Ames' father followed. As Ames narrates memories from his childhood of the two men, the reader follows his attempts to navigate the chasm between their conflicting understandings of vision.

Ames explains his grandfather's understanding of vision by recalling the day he attended a baseball game with his grandfather to watch Bud Fowler play second base. It was a lifeless game. The still field was overshadowed by a brooding storm above, which finally washed the game out altogether in the fifth inning. As Ames remembers his grandfather's frustration at the game's stagnancy, he interprets it to be a picture of the old pastor's increasing distance from the people in Gilead:

But it does remind me of that afternoon when nothing flew through the air, no one slid or drifted or tagged, when there was no waltz at all, so to speak. It seems to me that the storm had put an end to it, as if it were a fire to be put out, an eruption into this world of an alarming kind of nullity. 'There was silence in heaven for about half an hour.' It

³⁸ The book, a series of journal entries, has no chapters. There are, however, breaks which indicate the passing of time between Ames' entries.

seems a little like that as I remember it, though it went on a good deal longer than half an hour. Null. That word has real power. My grandfather had nowhere to spend his courage, no way to feel it in himself. That was a great pity. (47)

Ames' grandfather believed that Christ called his followers to bring peace to the earth by freeing the captives, but in his later years he no longer found himself in like-minded company. The fire of inspiration that drove Ames' grandfather to fight for abolition was dead in Gilead. The nullity he saw in the game was the same nullity he felt from the people of Iowa, the church there, and his family. Ames compares the silence of that game and the silence his grandfather felt in Iowa to the silence in heaven before the seventh seal is opened in chapter eight of Revelation. It is a pregnant silence. It is the silence of waiting for judgment to be poured out on the earth. Ames' grandfather could not take the silence of waiting any longer. He saw vision as an unshakeable and weighing prophecy of what should be. Vision brought judgment and justice and peace—the kingdom of God—to earth in the present. He therefore could not see that his response might be anything but uncompromising action.

Ames' grandfather claimed a kind of vision that was utterly contrary to the kind respected by Ames' father. Ames' father made this clear when once as a young boy Ames asked him about a story Ames' grandfather had told, a story about seeing a vision at sixteen. Ames recalls how his grandfather once said he knew he was being called to fight for abolition when he saw "the Lord, holding out His arms to him, which were bound in chains" (49). When Ames asked his father about the story, Ames' father explained his father's vision as a product of the times. Ames recounts: "He himself never claimed any such experience, and he seemed to want to assure me I need not fear that the Lord would come to me with His sorrows. And I took comfort in the assurance. That is a remarkable thing to consider" (49). Though Ames's father respected Ames,

Senior, he did not think Ames, Senior's direct communication with God was authentic. In fact, Ames' father "never encouraged any talk about visions or miracles, except the ones in the Bible" (48). The sort of vision Ames' grandfather lived for was for his father unnecessary and eccentric at best, contrived and dangerous at worse. The sort of vision Ames' strictly rationalist father knew to be holy was to live the words of Christ and wait on Him to bring justice and peace in His coming. He did not believe in bringing one's own version of it.

Ames' father and grandfather never resolved the tension that their contradictory visions caused. Ames' grandfather left home for Kansas after an argument with Ames' father. Ames' grandfather had left church in the middle of his father's sermon, disappointed in his son's preaching and his lack of conviction to fight for the cause of abolition. Ames' father resented this disappointment as much as he resented his father's involvement with John Brown and his determination to take a life in the name of peace. Addressing his father as "Reverend," Ames' father told Ames' grandfather that Ames' grandfather's vision and violence had "nothing to do with Jesus. Nothing. Nothing" (85). Ames' father concludes that he felt "as certain of that as anyone could be of any so-called vision" (85). Ames' grandfather told Ames' father that his vision of the Lord was more real than Ames' father was standing there in front of him. In effect, he told Ames' father that he cared more for his vision than for him. At this, the two split finally and Ames' grandfather left soon after. Neither could see through the eyes of the other.

Though in his youth Ames marveled at his grandfather's understanding of vision, as he grew older he came to accept his father's understanding. He describes his childhood understanding of John Ames, Senior: "My grandfather seemed to me stricken and afflicted, and indeed he was, like a man everlastingly struck by lightning, so that there was an ashiness about his clothes and his hair never settled and his eye had a look of tragic alarm when he wasn't

actually sleeping” (49). He further remembers the old reverend’s grave to look like “a place where someone had tried to smother a fire” (50). The image of fire, of being struck to burning with inspiration, was for a young Ames the best way to understand his grandfather’s vision. Yet, fire had a dual meaning for Ames: his grandfather’s vision was both awe-inspiring and a frightening affliction. In choosing whose legacy he will follow, Ames eventually falls to the side of his father. He writes to his son that he feels that his grandfather “did indeed have far too narrow an idea of what a vision might be” (91). At *Gilead*’s open, Ames understands the fire in his grandfather as a mysterious, misplaced fervor. He felt, like his father, that his grandfather’s vision was myopic and skewed. He saw his grandfather’s vision as satisfaction for a selfish, though not malicious, need to see tangible fruit of his faith and feel that he mattered. Thus in this first thematic section of *Gilead* read according to the O’Connor strategy, the two understandings of vision, according to father and to grandfather, are established.

The two conflicting narratives of vision, that of Ames’ father and grandfather, develop further as Ames reconsiders his grandfather’s kind of vision from the perspective of a dying man. This shift in Ames’ concentration is noticeable when, in the same paragraph noted above, Ames goes on from commenting on his grandfather’s vision to qualifying what he thinks a vision might be. He writes to his son, “Sometimes the visionary aspect of any particular day comes to you in the memory of it, or it opens to you over time . . . I believe there are visions that come to us only in memory, in retrospect” (91). As his words reveal, because Ames is aware that his days are numbered, he begins to find a new, powerful yet elusive significance in past events. As Ames reconsiders the weight of memories, such as watching his father clean up the remains of a church struck by lightning and observing a field full of fireflies alongside his best friend, he begins to see his past not only through realistic, but also through dreaming eyes. Though in his youth

Ames fell to the side of his father when navigating the two definitions of vision that his father and grandfather held, in the second thematic section of *Gilead* he reconsiders this position. As his age causes him to reconsider the weight of these memories, he also reconsiders his father's strictly rationalist view of vision which he too once held.

Both of the memories that will be used to show how Ames reconsiders the two narratives of vision in this second thematic part, the memory of the church and the memory of the fireflies, intimately involve fire. Accordingly, as Ames begins to see his past with both of the conflicting definitions of vision, two conflicting interpretations of fire emerge in each of these memories: one that sees fire from the perspective of vision as his father understands and one that sees fire from the perspective of his grandfather. Consequently, the presence of these two conflicting interpretations of fire in each memory reveals the presence of both of the conflicting definitions of vision.

The reader sees that Ames is reconsidering what vision means from the moment he begins his story of the burned church with "I was speaking of visions," to his conclusion, "I can't tell you what that day in the rain has meant to me. I can't tell myself what it has meant to me" (94; 96). Ames is not only reassessing what exactly can be called "a vision," but also reconsidering the point of view from which he interprets this particular memory or vision. The burning of a church would be a tragedy by most standards, yet Ames recalls a beautiful picture of the day his father helped to clean up the remains. He reminisces about the women almost dancing in the rain and his father stained by ashes, in a way consecrated by the ruins smeared on his skin.³⁹ Even so, he does not attempt to gloss over the calamitous scene. Instead, he finds beauty in the disaster of that day. He writes:

³⁹ This significance for Ames of receiving that biscuit from his father's hand cannot be given too much emphasis. Unfortunately, the focus of this paper does not allow further elaboration here. In short, this is both one of the most

I remember my father down on his heels in the rain, water dripping from his hat, feeding me biscuit from his scorched hand, with that old blackened wreck of a church behind him and steam rising where the rain fell on embers, the rain falling in gusts and the women singing "The Old Rugged Cross" while they saw to things, moving so gently, as if they were dancing to the hymn, almost. (95-6)

The progression in this sentence exemplifies the duality of Ames' memory. Until Ames reaches his description of the women singing, his portrayal creates a drastically negative picture. Yet, what should have been a mournful scene of loss Ames goes on to call "joyful" (96). In this scene, the image of fire is both an agent of destruction and a path to refinement and rebirth.⁴⁰ Ames begins to consider that vision might be seeing hope growing from, growing as a result of, devastation.

When he revisits the memory in his last days, Ames finds a deeper significance in the night he watched fireflies, "thousands of them everywhere, just drifting up out of the grass, extinguishing themselves in midair," alongside Boughton (72). By beginning his newest ruminations on the memory with, "And really, it was that night as if . . .," Ames signifies that he is again reconsidering a memory, or what he might now consider a vision, from his evolving perspective (72). He then relates that the night they were sitting together on the porch, Boughton had simply observed, "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward," quoting Job 5:7 (72). The verse is Job's friend's explanation of life's unexplainable sufferings. Job's friend, along with Boughton, intended the flying sparks to suggest the inevitability of pain. Just as sparks by

moving moments in *Gilead* and, in addition to the moment that on which I will focus, Ames' blessing of Jack at the end of the novel, what O'Connor would call a "gesture."

⁴⁰ Ames later recalls a tapestry woven by the women of his grandfather's church during the war. It read, "The Lord Our God Is A Purifying Fire" (99). He remarks that he "always thinks of my grandfather's church as the one struck by lightning. As in fact it was" (99). He continues to recount that his grandfather's church was eventually sold and burned to the ground. Here, too, Ames suggests that burning is both destructive and a sign of divine inspiration.

nature will always rise toward the sky, so man is by nature destined to suffering. From the perspective of his old age, Ames remarks that the fireflies made it seem “as if the earth were smoldering,” as it actually does smoldering at its core, as is each individual, city, even humanity as a whole (72). This observation with dual meaning might signify that people cover over hurts and doubts, but that each is at his core burning with heartbreak and with loss. Still, he writes that image that is so sorrowful in such an intriguing and eloquent way that he evokes a sight not solemn, but breath-taking. In fact, the reader can just as easily interpret that Ames is contemplating the smoldering core of passion and courage that make up the best of what it means to be human. Furthermore, Ames writes that the image of that night has brought him to love both the verse and fireflies “a good deal ever since” (72). When he returns to the image once more at the end of *Gilead*, he writes even more fervently of the goodness of it. He describes the fire smoldering at the heart of a person as the Lord’s breath, the impulse of life, and compares the radiance of its smoldering glow to Christ’s shine at the transfiguration (245).⁴¹ This memory is for Ames a vision of what is at the heart of being human and of what he was to expect from life. As the book of Job comforts the hurting even though it offers neither resolution nor an explanation for suffering, Ames appears comforted just by finding an image that resonated with his own suffering, whether or not it offered an answer. As his memory of the fireflies demonstrates, reflecting from the end of his life allows Ames to consider that true vision might be not only seeing life for the grief that it is, but also seeing the sacredness of that grief.

As these two passages exemplify, the weight of years affords Ames with a fresh perspective and brings him to rethink certain enigmatic events from his past. Ames writes to his

⁴¹ Ames’ association of fire to the transfiguration at the novel’s close has even more layered significance for the novel’s conclusion that cannot be discussed here. As I will go on to demonstrate, at the end of the book Ames has come to terms with his relationship with his godson, Jack, and in turn is able to see far more clearly than before the true paradox of vision, to which this association speaks beautifully. At the first third of *Gilead*, however, Ames is just beginning to reevaluate his understanding of vision and navigate the conflict between his father and grandfather.

son that the picture of his father pulling down the charred remnants of a church struck by lightning is the image that captures the course of his adult life; the ashy church represents for Ames both the painful loneliness of losing his wife and child and, surprisingly, the joy of his last years. In the same way, watching fireflies light up the night sky with Boughton represents for Ames the pain inherent in life alongside the spark that gives a human being life. Both conclusions are from the perspective of a man who has lived through years of suffering and periods of joy, who is able to understand how intimately the two are interconnected.⁴² As Ames' perspective is altered at the end of his life, he reconsiders the conflict between his father and grandfather over the nature of vision. Unlike his father, Ames is starting to understand vision as seeing significance in life and, further, as seeing a horrible event as the catalyst for a new beginning. Ames' father believed that true vision, seeing through the eyes of God, meant the God-given ability to see the world for what it is. His grandfather believed that true vision meant the God-given insight to see the world for what it should be. Ames begins to consider the views of his abolitionist grandfather: that destruction is necessary to bring what could be.

As presented by this discussion of *Gilead* using the O'Connor reading strategy, as Ames records his family history for his son, he works through the conflict in vision between his grandfather and father. Though in his youth he felt his father had the more genuine grasp of true vision, his age allows him to look at the unresolved schism between his father and grandfather from a new perspective. As he thinks back on the most enigmatic events of his life, Ames reconsiders his grandfather's eccentric ways. Yet Ames' reflective narrative is jerked back to the present when Jack Boughton returns to Gilead. His godson's arrival forces Ames to deliberate once more the true meaning of vision. As Ames remembers the pain that Jack has caused to his

⁴² This theme of *Gilead* is reminiscent of a common theme of O'Connor's demonstrated with the example of "A Good Man is Hard to Find": violent grace.

siblings and to his father, Ames' best friend, and as Ames feels anew the same profound resentment he has felt toward Jack since he abandoned his daughter decades before, he calculates whether he ought to warn his wife and son against Jack; a strong part of Ames wants to see Jack as the sum of what Jack has done. Still, Ames is directed by his faith to forgive Jack and hope that he might change. As Ames gradually learns of his godson's circumstances, he is persuaded to weigh the consequences of the way he sees Jack. In this third part of novel, the reader employing the O'Connor strategy follows as the two narratives of vision developed through *Gilead* converge at the moment of revelation, when Ames forgives Jack and blesses him for a second time.

The first of the two conflicting narratives of vision is manifest in that strong part of Ames which chooses to vividly remember Jack's unremitting wrongdoing and to see Jack as hopelessly lost, which in truth he is. Ames remembers how, as a child, Jack rebelled against his family without remorse. As an adolescent, Jack fathered a child and refused to acknowledge her, mentioning the girl to his family before leaving town, apparently unconcerned. More for the second transgression than anything else, Ames is unable to let go of the deeply personal anger he harbors toward Jack, which he will not admit to himself as such. He prefers, instead, to concentrate his resentment and condemnation of Jack into a fair-minded distrust. He writes of the matter to his son:

Jack Boughton had no business in the world involving himself with that girl. It was something no honorable man would have done. However I turn it over in my mind, that fact remains. And here is a prejudice of mine, confirmed by my lights through many years of observation. Sinners are not all dishonorable people, not by any means. But those who are dishonorable never really repent and never really reform. Now, I may be

wrong here. No such distinction occurs in Scripture. And repentance and reformation are matters of the soul which only the Lord can judge. But in my experience, dishonor is recalcitrant. When I see it, my heart sinks, because I feel I have no help to offer a dishonorable person. I know the deficiency may be my own altogether. (156-7)

Ames' anger pushes him to coldly assess Jack's past and what Ames sees as his godson's probable present circumstances. At points, Ames sees Jack as a threat to his family's happiness. A strong part of Ames does not believe Jack will ever change.

Jack intuits how Ames feels; he knows that his godfather does not hope for his salvation. Hoping to understand why he has never felt called to Christianity, Jack approaches Ames about predestination. The conversation begins on Ames' porch and is finished later in Ames' office:

“Does it seem right to you,” [Jack] said, “that there should be no common language between us? That there should be no way to bring a drop of water to those of us who languish in the flames or who will? Granting your terms? That between us and you there is a great gulf fixed? How can capital-T Truth not be communicable? That makes no sense to me.”

“I am not sure those are my terms. I would speak of grace in that context,” I said.

“And never of the absence of grace, which would in fact seem to be the issue here.” (170)

In fact, then, Ames' cold assessment of Jack is correct, at least in part. Jack feels himself unredeemable. When Ames thinks that Jack will always be the un-reconciled prodigal son, he is unsympathetically seeing Jack for who he is.

Yet, the more Ames sees that Jack's return is an instrument of grace which reveals to him his bitterness of heart, and the more he sees the pain Jack has undergone, the more Ames begins

to see his godson for who he could be. This, the second of the conflicting visions Ames holds of Jack, becomes most clear as Jack joins Ames and his wife on the porch for another evening conversation. Ames observes, "The idea of grace had been so much on my mind, grace as a sort of ecstatic fire that takes things down to essentials. There in the dark and the quiet I felt I could forget all the tedious particulars and just feel the presence of his mortal and immortal being" (197). The fire of grace melts away everything Ames calls non-essential, everything but the sacred soul of his beloved godson. Ames goes on to call Jack an angel at whose soul's feet he would like to sit and learn, expressing what he will later write: that he is "beginning to see where the grace is for me in this" (201). He has seen how Jack's presence has forced him to come to terms with the resentment he feels toward Jack, and is thankful to see through Jack's eyes. Ames is led to this second vision not only because he has learned from Jack, but also because Ames has begun to see pain as a refining fire. At the end of this passage Ames writes that it is a "good thing to know what it is to be poor, and a better thing if you can do it in company" (199). Though he is speaking directly of the virtue he has known in people who lived through the Great Depression, he is also speaking of Jack who, like Ames' wife, has known loneliness and misery, and finally, from experience, of his own poverty of company and his own loss. He has come to understand pain as a teaching, strengthening, consecrating fire, as the fire that destroyed the church his father helped to pull down and the fiery light of a thousand fireflies against the night sky. Seeing Jack's pain allows Ames to hope for Jack. He knows that pain can be a sort of grace.⁴³

For much of *Gilead*'s latter half, Ames battles with himself over whether to see Jack with realistic or hopeful vision, just as, as this analysis according to the O'Connor reading strategy has demonstrated, he has battled over which concept of vision is true vision through the first two

⁴³ Again, a theme much visited by O'Connor and a fertile ground for further comparison between the two.

parts of the novel. Yet as *Gilead* moves toward the moment of revelation, neither of the two concepts of visions is a sufficient answer to Ames' relationship with Jack. As the novel moves toward that moment of revelation, the two narratives of vision most poignantly contradict. To forgive his godson, Ames cannot see him only for who he might become. To forgive but not deeply acknowledge the offense committed is shallow. Yet Ames cannot see Jack only for who he is. Forgiveness that keeps a record of wrongs, too, is a shallow forgiveness. As *Gilead* comes to a close, the two concepts of vision that Ames' father and Ames' grandfather espouse fail Ames as they ultimately fail his father and grandfather.

At the end of his life, Ames' grandfather feels that the vision he saw at sixteen would not be taken up by those that followed. Asked to give an address at a 4th of July celebration in Gilead, he preached the following words:

We had visions in those days, a number of us did. Your young men will have visions and your old men will dream dreams. And now all those young men are old men, if they're alive at all, and all their visions are no more than dreams, and the old days are forgotten, we fly forgotten as a dream, as it says in the old hymn, and our dreams are forgotten long before we are. (175-6)⁴⁴

Ames' grandfather believed true vision was a calling to bring the kingdom of God to earth—the ability bestowed by God to see how the world should be. His grandfather, disillusioned from seeing so few results and such a lack of passion in Gilead after committing his entire life in faithfulness to that vision, proclaims to the unengaged crowd that a vision never realized becomes a dream soon forgotten altogether.

At the end of Ames' father's life, he feels that the vision of reality dictated by Christianity is too narrow. He writes to Ames while on an extended vacation from Gilead "of

⁴⁴ Tellingly, Ames transitions from this story to labeling Jack as a skeptic and his case helpless (176-7).

‘the courage required to embrace the truth’” (178). When Ames’ father returns to visit Ames, he again implores him, “‘I have become aware that we have lived within the limits of notions that were very old and even very local. I want you to understand that you do not have to be loyal to them’” (235). Disillusioned by the atheism of his older son, Edward, Ames’ father eventually leaves Gilead altogether like his father before him. For Ames’ father, the vision that allowed him to see the world for what it was and live in the anticipation that God would one day come to make it new was sufficient to explain neither the philosophy he heard from Edward nor that his son could be damned. Rather than trust in an unexplainable God, Ames’ father walks away from his vision. Ames’ father’s definition of vision was no more sufficient than his father’s before him.

The concepts of vision that fail Ames as they failed his father and grandfather contradict most clearly as Ames reconciles with Jack in *Gilead*’s last pages. To find reconciliation, Ames must see Jack for who he is, no offense passed over. Ames must look the pain Jack has caused in his life full in the face and choose to forgive it.⁴⁵ Still, Ames cannot reconcile with Jack unless he chooses, too, to forget Jack’s past. Ames must see Jack without marks against his character. He must see Jack both for everything he is and for who he was created to be. When Ames does so, when he carries out that gesture and blesses his godson for the second time, he reveals the contradiction that Robinson has been developing from the first pages of Ames’ letter. Vision is neither seeing the world for what it is nor seeing the world for what it should be. This contradiction cannot be reduced; neither concept of vision is sufficient on its own. So instead, by exploring this contradiction according to the O’Connor reading strategy, the mystery revealed is that vision is somehow both. When Ames sees a fire that burns away Jack’s past and Ames’

⁴⁵ I am not addressing how Ames must ask for forgiveness for his bitterness toward Jack, though this is obviously a big part of Ames’ transformation in vision as well.

judgment, he begins to see Jack for who he could be, which Ames realizes is the same as seeing him for who he really is.

This true vision becomes clear at the end of *Gilead* when the two narratives of vision—evolving through Ames’ discussion of his father and grandfather, his reconsideration of his own past, and finally his struggle over his relationship with Jack—finally contradict head on in the moment of revelation. Indeed, Ames is only able to have this true vision at the end of *Gilead* because his concept of vision has slowly been reconsidered and reworked throughout the novel. As this analysis using the O’Connor reading strategy has shown, as Ames navigates the chasm between his father and grandfather, and as navigating this chasm causes him to grapple with the way he sees his past, Ames comes to understand grief in his own life not just as grief, but as the seedbed for hope. Though neither Ames nor the reader is able to recognize this until it is illuminated by *Gilead*’s conclusion, once Ames sees his past with this understanding, or with this kind of vision—the vision that sees that what is *is the same* as what should be and that hope *is* what grief is about—he can see that Jack’s case is incredibly hopeful. Once Ames can understand the pain in his own past and present as grace, he can see how the pain in Jack’s life will be grace for him. Ames writes of Boughton’s extravagant love for Jack in this way: that Jack is who “. . . he has favored, as one does a wound” (238). Boughton loves him more, shows him more grace, because of the painful rebellion that has directed Jack’s entire life. Boughton’s extravagant grace is made possible only by necessity, made possibly only by the pain that wracks Jack. This vision, vision that sees that what should be *is* what is, is the vision with which Ames sees Jack, and the vision with which he shows grace to Jack—which we come to see are the same thing.

Finally, the mystery of vision as revealed by the O'Connor reading strategy has still further meaning at the novel's conclusion: Ames must see with this true vision, both his father's and his grandfather's eyes, before what true vision is becomes completely clear. When Ames sees that what the world should be *is* Reality—meaning the ultimate Reality that is God's intention for the world⁴⁶—the world becomes that Reality, becomes what it should be: when Ames sees his past pain as grace, that grace works in him; and when Ames sees Jack sitting on the porch, all the non-essentials burned away by fiery grace—when Ames sees that who Jack really is *is* who he should be—that vision changes things.⁴⁷ Ames vision is the grace given to Jack that Jack felt was “absent” (170).

Though Robinson gives her readers absolutely no reason to believe that Jack has converted to Christianity at the end of *Gilead*, in Ames' last interaction with Jack as he is leaving town, readers see a glimpse of how Ames' vision might change Jack. Ames tells Jack before he leaves that

... the Greek word *sozo*, which is usually translated “saved,” can also mean healed, restored, that sort of thing. So the conventional translation arrows the meaning of the

⁴⁶ Remembering his father and grandfather shelling black walnuts and watching his son and Tobias playing war with squash leads Ames to observe in the most elegant fashion, “Cataract that this world is, it is remarkable to consider what does abide in it” (193). Ames sees that the reality of this world is not reality; it is but a distorted and clouded glimpse into what is true.

⁴⁷ This further truth is also developed through *Gilead*, though only illuminated in its final pages as the two concepts of vision finally converge. For example, after reading a polemic article in a Christian magazine, Ames writes against the “insidious notion” that “religion itself is real but *your* belief that *you* participate in it is an illusion” (145). He defends “the essential dignity of [one's] endlessly flawed experience of belief” (146). In other words, Ames asserts that a person's understanding has worth and meaning. Furthermore, imagining that Jack has come to say goodbye to his father, Ames again affirms that a person's perception has power. He thinks to himself, “It seems to me that when something really ought to be true then it has a very powerful truth, which starts me thinking again about heaven” (244). Ames asserts that having vision has the power to enact something on earth as it does in heaven. He takes this thought a step further when he finally “puts before the Lord” his internal struggle over Jack (190). He concludes: Existence is the essential thing and the holy thing. If the Lord chooses to make nothing of our transgressions, then they *are* nothing, or whatever reality they have is trivial and conditional beside the exquisite primary fact of existence. Of course the Lord would wipe them away, just as I wipe dirt from your face, or tears. After all, why should the Lord bother much over these smirches that are no part of His creation?” (190). Ames sees that God's vision becomes reality. Put more simply, something is true just because God sees it as true, and when Ames sees Jack with grace, it is as a prayer before God in faith that His vision changes everything.

word in a way that can create false expectations. I thought he should be aware that grace is not so poor a thing that it cannot present itself in any number of ways. (239)

Grace has presented itself to Jack through Ames. Perhaps the healing and restoration of which Ames speaks started with Jack's relationship with his godfather. When Jack opens his eyes after Ames' blessing, Ames writes that he "sat back and looked at me as if he were waking out of a dream" (241). Robinson hints that Jack is somehow affected by a dream, something in Ames' language quite close to a vision. Robinson makes clearer the change that Ames' new vision works in Ames. When saying goodbye to Boughton for Jack, Ames tells his sleeping friend: "I love him as much as you meant for me to. So certain of your prayers are finally answered, old fellow. And mine too, mine too. We had to wait a long time, didn't we?" (244). Ames is changed for the way he sees Jack and the way he sees vision. His change in vision is like an answered prayer.⁴⁸

Vision disappointed father and grandfather before John Ames because the vision of these men failed to change anything. The vision of Ames' grandfather failed to call the town of Gilead to the cause of abolition and it failed to change his son. The vision of Ames' father failed to explain Edward's atheism and it failed to explain his father's offenses. An analysis of *Gilead* based on the O'Connor reading strategy reveals the contradiction created by these two contrary understandings of vision. Ames' vision, the convergence of the two, the vision sprung from contradiction as revealed by the O'Connor reading strategy, changes Jack and, more than that, changes Ames.

⁴⁸ The relationship between vision and prayer can be developed further: if vision is a way of seeing with the power to change things, then vision is, in a way, intercession. Prayer might be vision as directed by and directed to God, from where comes the power to change things.

4. Conclusion: Behind and Beyond the Fiction of O'Connor and Robinson

If this paper has succeeded in proving that the works of O'Connor and Robinson are marked by a certain structure which makes them ideally suited for analysis using the O'Connor strategy, it then follows that the works of these two authors must share a common structure. The same reading strategy that reveals deeper meaning in Flannery O'Connor's work where mystery and manners contradict is also able to reveal deeper meaning where two understandings of vision contradict in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* because contradiction is at the structural heart of both works. While the crucial similarities between the experiences and concerns of Flannery O'Connor and Marilynne Robinson may justify a nice conversation over tea, I think the true potential for a deep friendship between these two authors is found in this key shared characteristic of their work.

To make one last assertion, perhaps contradiction is at the heart of both *Gilead* and "The River" because a deep respect for contradiction is at the heart of the way both authors see the world. Perhaps the O'Connor and Robinson have more in common than a list of shared superficial attributes, however substantial, could convey. According to Structuralist theory, the structures that underlie a work of fiction are an echo of the structures that underlie our perception of the world (Tyson 220).⁴⁹ According to Structuralism, then, O'Connor and Robinson write about truth using contradictions because they perceive that truth in the world is structured in contradictions.

Once more visiting the non-fiction of these two writers will more clearly elucidate the way they see the world, or more clearly articulate the shared ideology—a sacred regard for contradiction—brought to the surface of their fiction when employing the O'Connor reading

⁴⁹ Professor of Critical Theory Lois Tyson articulates this tenant of structuralism in her book *Critical Theory Today* in this way: "... the final goal of structuralism is to understand the underlying structure of human experience" (Tyson 220).

strategy. As Flannery O'Connor would have counted apparently contradicting interpretations of her work a sign of her success, Robinson too counts the presence of contradiction an indication of truth. With precision and thoughtfulness, Robinson explains: "In the universe that is the knowledge of God, opposed beliefs can be equally true, and . . . complimentary because contradiction and anomaly are the effect of our very limited understanding" (qtd. in Painter 323). Given how Robinson's assertion—the assertion that truth can often be found in the form of a contradiction, that a contradiction might be the closest that mortal flesh can come to communicating sacred reality—resonates with O'Connor's belief that "a story is good when you can continue to see more and more in it, and when it continues to escape you,"⁵⁰ it only makes sense that the works by these two authors explored here both embody that sense of the irreducible and indefinable. Accordingly, it only makes sense that the O'Connor strategy—which in essence seeks to explore the contradictions, the apparently irresolvable, and the mystifyingly unaccounted for—would be an ideal strategy for understanding the work of these two authors (*MM* 102). Indeed, the purpose of this paper has been to defend this argument. Still, I think it is further clear from both these authors' own remarks and from the structure of their stories that they see the world in a markedly similar way, what seems to me a markedly Christian way.

While the two elements in conflict in "The River," mystery and manners, and in *Gilead*, the two definitions of vision, are certainly *not* synonymous pairs that converge in two identical contradictions, these two distinct pairs of conflicting elements, in a way, both point to a Christian perspective. Seeing the world for what it is, in a way, is like looking only at what is visible on the surface, or like tracing manners; seeing the world for what it could be, in a way, is very much

⁵⁰ In "The Church and the Fiction Writer," O'Connor writes further that "the fiction writer presents mystery through manners, grace through nature, but when he finishes there always has to be left over that sense of mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula" (*MM* 153).

like looking for the deeper significance, or like following mystery. The Christian perspective is rooted in the tension between fully knowing brokenness and fully knowing redemption—between the reality of what is and the reality of what could be, and will be. These works share a structure which prizes contradiction as a means of getting at unapproachable truth. The Christian feels that brokenness and redemption cannot be separated; they can only contradict; they only hold meaning in the contradiction. The Christian calls that contradiction, the moment of that intersection, grace. One of the more intriguing aspects of the fiction of both Flannery O'Connor and Marilynne Robinson is that it is appreciated by non-Christians perhaps more than Christians. Perhaps, finally, it is possible that the reason these two authors draw Christian and non-Christian readers alike is that the structures that underlie their fiction, the structures that mark the way they see the world, do not just point to something Christian, but, in a way, point to something very true.

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