

“Whole World of Belief”: American Spiritual Changes of Post 1960s Literature




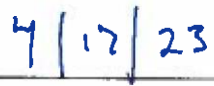
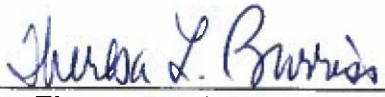
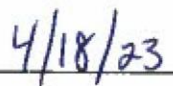
by

Emily R. Dix

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English.

April 2023

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Abstract

Post-1960s America saw a change in how society viewed religion and spirituality. Prior to this, Americans were mostly Protestant or Catholic and the entire state was closely intertwined with the church. This shift allows for writers to push the boundaries of religion and religious writing. Starting with but ultimately departing from Amy Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*, I will examine *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson, *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison, and *River of Earth* by James Still to understand Americans' changing views of religion and spirituality and how this has affected American literature. *Religion* and *spirituality*, though often used interchangeably in casual conversation, mean different things in my project. Using connotations and denotations of the terms will be especially helpful when considering the different viewpoints held by my primary authors.

In my first chapter, I analyze *Gilead* as an example of a transitional piece between conventional religion and unconventional spirituality. Marilynne Robinson uses secular and religious influences to create new and different spaces for Americans of faith to exist in. In chapter two, I argue that Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is another example of a transitional piece between conventional religion and unconventional spirituality. Morrison, like Robinson, also uses genre techniques from biblical texts, but she combines them with African myths to create a different spiritual space than we find in *Gilead*. Morrison further uses allusions to classical myths and fairytales as another way to describe this new space between conventional religion and unconventional spirituality. In chapter three, I refine my argument by looking to earlier, Appalachian texts. While most critics claim that there was a significant shift in American religious thinking following World War II, I demonstrate that Appalachian spirituality was in fact already more creative and flexible before the mid-twentieth century. James Still's *River of Earth*

is an example of a text that is a firmly spiritual piece. Still uses techniques from Appalachian myths and legends to explain Appalachian spirituality. Still does use some references to conventional religion but he does not rely on these influences to function as the main spirituality in his novel.

These chapters help us to understand and to complicate the transition in American literature post-1960s from conventional religion to unconventional spirituality. This transition coincides with American acceptance of unconventional spiritual practices that were likely formed from the adaptation of strict religious rituals to secular theories or practices. These combinations can be seen in *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson, *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison, and *River of Earth* by James Still. I argue that these authors have taken conventional religion and created a more flexible spirituality that allows for Americans to practice faith in new ways.

Dedication

For all my teachers, bible school leaders, and friends that made me think about my place in the world.

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Introduction

Religion and literature have been closely aligned since before the establishment of the United States and have influenced many things we are accustomed to culturally. This relationship has become less and less a focus as America moves into a modern age and Americans are seemingly becoming less religious. Post-1960s America saw a change in how society viewed religion and spirituality. Prior to this, Americans were mostly Protestant or Catholic and the entire state was closely intertwined with the church. This shift allows for writers to push the boundaries of religion and religious writing. Analyzing literature with religion and spirituality in mind is not a common approach even with the changing views of the time and should be a top priority for readers as we move forward with more texts with the same themes.

This should be a top priority because understanding an author's possible religious ideologies or spiritual orientations can expand the meaning of their works. By differentiating "religion" and "spirituality," I will lay a basis of understanding that has not been discussed before. Starting with but ultimately departing from Amy Hungerford's *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*, I will examine *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson, *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison, and *River of Earth* by James Still to understand Americans' changing views of religion and spirituality and how this has affected American literature.

In these chapters, I will define a transition in American literature from conventional religion to fluid spirituality. This transition primarily takes place post-1960s and reflects the social acceptance of a more fluid spirituality over conventional religion. However, this transition is not entirely chronological, as there has been some back and forth between the two understandings of American faith. For example, Appalachian literature prior to World War II has

long displayed a tradition of fluid spirituality in its storytelling. The combination of outside sources, both secular and religious, helps to aid in this transition. These extra-religious sources show how Americans have changed their views on secular and religious readings.

Religious historians argue that American religious thinking changed starting around World War II to become less culturally central. Scholar Andrew Hock Soon Ng discusses this cultural shift. Ng specifically argues that this changed the acceptance of literature that explores religion in less dogmatic forms. He states that “Prior to this, there were limits as to how far literature could confront Christianity” (Ng v). Ng doesn’t describe this confrontation as malicious, but as an attempt to understand religious expectations outside of conventional religious rituals. He goes on to discuss authors before World War II that would have been censored or banned for their ideas about religion (Ng vi). Post-1960s, this change was even more acceptable in society and allowed for more unconventional, spiritual interpretations of faith. Due to this change in social acceptance of unconventional spiritual practices in America, various authors were able to write texts that created a new space for Americans of faith.

In the field of late-twentieth-century literary criticism, we often don’t discuss religious criticism as much as we might, and it is an important framework for understanding societal views on religion and spirituality and the influence of religious writing practices on literature. Scholars will address religious symbolism with a few lines in their works but hardly ever discuss a text’s spiritual influence, how the author defines spirituality, or how this definition can change the meaning of a text. One notable exception to this dearth of critical study is the work of Amy Hungerford. Hungerford argues, “I am convinced that to live a belief in meaninglessness as that form of belief emerges in all its variousness in this book – to live it especially through the practice of writing and reading – is undoubtedly to live religiously” (“Introduction” xv). This

belief in meaninglessness, according to Hungerford, is the basis of postmodern literature, and she suggests that scholars and readers begin to think of literature as a religious ritual itself. This may not be faith in the traditional sense of the word, but Hungerford's work does encourage us to think more deeply about how religious forms survive into the postmodern period.

Hungerford states that a twentieth-century audience is where the value of secular understanding allows us to interpret "the imaginative component" of religious belief (xiii). She contends, "What is special about literature of the late twentieth century, then, is the way that some prominent writers of the time use language as a religious form to salvage what they see as a threatened literary authority" ("Introduction" xix). This suggests that prominent American postmodern authors use religious forms to prop up the power of literature. However, I argue that we need to go further in our understanding of American literary spirituality. Hungerford only points to the specialness of literature being a new placeholder of religious ritual. She does not account for the fact that some of the literature she is using for her argument uses a combination of religious and secular writings to create a new space for religion and spirituality in American literature. Hungerford sees a "belief in meaningless," borrowing religious forms to reinforce literary authority; I see religion taking on new, spiritual literary forms to adapt to a more secular era. This type of adaptation can be seen in works by Marilynne Robinson, Toni Morrison, and James Still.

I argue that religion does not disappear into postmodernism but, on the contrary, transforms into a more flexible, adaptive kind of spirituality. This adaptive kind of spirituality may come from the combination of secular and religious readings. Specific secular readings that are used in the texts I am looking at are atheist theories, African legends, classical myths and fairytales, and Appalachian folk legends. Robinson, Morrison, and Still use these kinds of

influences in combination with conventional religious forms, whether that be the form of the epistles or Biblical names or other conventionally religious techniques. These combinations create an adaptive form of spirituality that can be used by anyone, in various walks of life, to explain the world in more accessible terms.

Religion and *spirituality*, though often used interchangeably in casual conversation, mean different things in my project. Using connotations and denotations of the terms will be especially helpful when considering the different viewpoints held by my primary authors. When asked what the term *religion* means, many people will think about organized religions, probably Christianity if they are from the Western hemisphere. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines the term *religion* as an “action or conduct indicating belief in, obedience to, and reverence for a god, gods, or similar superhuman power; the performance of religious rites or observances.” Another entry that is useful to broaden the term is also found in the *OED* and it states that *religion* is “a particular system of faith and worship.” This second entry is more useful for my purposes because it places an emphasis on religion being a formalized system and does not limit that system to Christianity.

The *OED* defines *spirituality* as an “Outlook or world view with respect to spiritual matters or concerns; spiritual belief, practice, or teaching in any religious or philosophical tradition.” This vague understanding of spirituality being “any religious or philosophical tradition” allows for many different influences to be combined to lead to a new philosophy of living. *Spirituality*, when applied to literature, allows us to consider a different realm of life and to view things separately from the physical world, which is a more flexible way of reading texts in relationship to faith. Another helpful entry from the *OED* defines *spirituality* as “The fact or condition of being spiritual esp. in nature, outlook, or behavior; attachment to or concern for

spiritual (as opposed to worldly or material) matters or pursuits; spiritual quality or character.”

This entry again allows for a combination of influences to obtain one’s own understanding of spiritual living. When asked what the term *spirituality* means, I typically think of meditation or working on oneself to reach a higher level of understanding about the world, which is in keeping with how I have defined the term for my purposes.

I will explain this spirituality and its literary implications by analyzing the work of Robinson, Morrison, and Still. I have chosen these authors because they all use the aforementioned combination of religious forms and secular influences to create the flexible spirituality I am discussing. These authors use this combination in different ways. Robinson, Morrison, and Still all build from religious influences towards a connection to the world of spirituality. By analyzing these works, modern readers can understand and begin to track this change from conventional religious societal standards to unconventional spiritual perspectives and leave room in our understanding of twentieth-century American fiction for the persistence of faith. I want to convey through this analysis that these novels use different techniques to achieve the same goal: the creation of a space for expressing modern spirituality.

Through a combination of close reading my primary texts, looking to the Bible, atheist theory, African legends, and Appalachian folk legends, I have compiled an argument about this spirituality and the period of transition that occurs (mostly) post-1960s. By using all of these primary texts, we can see how these various cultural influences help change readers’ understanding of religion and spirituality. Robinson, Morrison, and Still have used these influences to appeal to Americans who view faith as a more fluid, unconventional spiritual practice.

In my first chapter, I analyze *Gilead* as an example of a transitional piece between conventional religion and unconventional spirituality. Marilynne Robinson uses secular and religious influences to create new and different spaces for Americans of faith to exist in. This novel's protagonist, John Ames, is a pastor, but he uses secular readings that he learned from his older brother and other philosophical readings to inform his faith. Robinson uses these secular influences in conjunction with biblical readings to represent this transition from conventional religion to a more fluid spirituality. *Gilead* is much more "traditional" in the way that Robinson uses genre techniques from the Bible to create her main storyline. However, there are a few moments where John will admit that secular texts do have some merit when discussing God and religion. John's combination of secular and religious influences supports my overarching argument that these authors are creating a new space for spiritualism. Robinson's work is set in America during the late 1950s, the approximate period when both Ng and Hungerford argue that the country is experiencing a significant shift away from conventional religion. My examination of how Robinson navigates this shift through literature sets a precedent for the other novels I will look at.

In chapter two, I argue that Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is another example of a transitional piece between conventional religion and unconventional spirituality. Morrison, like Robinson, also uses genre techniques from biblical texts, but she combines them with African myths to create a different spiritual space than we find in *Gilead*. Morrison further uses allusions to classical myths and fairytales as another way to describe this new space between conventional religion and unconventional spirituality. Morrison's novel follows the story of Milkman as he goes through a coming-of-age story to find his own understanding of religion and spirituality.

While the biblical influences of this novel are less explicit than in Robinson's novel, they are still important to understanding where Milkman is coming from and where he is going. Morrison uses genre techniques from the Bible and African myths. These African myths of the "Flying African" allow Morrison to open a space for Americans that have different cultural influences to interpret conventional religions.

In chapter three, I refine my argument by looking to earlier, Appalachian texts. While most critics claim that there was a significant shift in American religious thinking following World War II, I demonstrate that Appalachian spirituality was in fact already more creative and flexible before the mid-twentieth century. James Still's *River of Earth* is an example of a text that is a firmly spiritual piece. Still uses techniques from Appalachian myths and legends to explain Appalachian spirituality. Still does use some references to conventional religion but he does not rely on these influences to function as the main spirituality in his novel. Still's use of Appalachian folk legends allows readers to begin to understand a concept of the "otherworld" as it relates to spirituality instead of conventional religion. These folk legends are secular, recalling Robinson's use of secular influences in *Gilead*, but the legends also contain a sort of mysticism somewhat similar to the African legends and myths in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. All three of these authors are able to orchestrate a more flexible spirituality than Hungerford's analysis allows for. From these novels, we can see a distinct pattern of authors using religious forms in combination with unconventional spirituality to create a space for faith to adapt to non-dogmatic modes of living.

These chapters help us to understand and to complicate the transition in American literature post-1960s from conventional religion to unconventional spirituality. This transition coincides with American acceptance of unconventional spiritual practices that were likely formed

from the adaptation of strict religious rituals to secular theories or practices. These combinations can be seen in *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson, *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison, and *River of Earth* by James Still. I argue that these authors have taken conventional religion and created a more flexible spirituality that allows for Americans to practice faith in new ways.

Chapter 1

Marilynne Robinson: Reimagining Religion Through the Secular

Gilead by Marilynne Robinson is a novel set in 1956 Iowa where readers are able to read a letter John Ames, our narrator, is writing to his young son. John is using this letter to recount his life and profession in the ministry to his son because he is a much older man who is nearing his death and doesn't want to leave his son without proper knowledge of who his father was or perhaps more importantly, how his father came to be a pastor in the ministry. Throughout the story, John focuses more on life and the joys of it than what death is or trying to teach his son a lesson about heaven or hell. The religious aspect of this text may seem straightforward; however, John uses various influences, both religious and secular, to guide his understanding of life and to adapt his faith to the apparent growing secularization of society.

This focus on religion and secularization can be understood more with comments from Marilynne Robinson herself about the concept. She suggests two things in the following interviews that are important to keep in mind when reading literature that addresses religion and secularization, the first being that the concept of secularization itself is too broad when considering that public spaces have become more accepting of different religions, and the second being that the individual soul is the permanent place that faith will always reside. One interviewer asked Robinson about her thoughts on the possible "failure" of secularization as a historical process or whether she thought perhaps more accurately secularization is uneven in its effects. She answered that it is important to understand the meaning of the word secularization and that "If increasingly diverse societies create larger civic spaces where no specific religious identity is asserted, they are doing this to allow for the equal flourishing of a variety of religious

cultures. This has been characteristic of much of this country through most of its history, and we have— no doubt partly for this reason— various, vigorous and harmonious religions” (Stevens 264). In other words, Robinson believes that there has been a broadening of accepted religions due to the impression that we’re living in a more secular world. In another interview, Shannon Mariotti and Joseph Lane ask Robinson about her attitude towards “mainstream views of secularism that posit a sharp separation between religion and public life” (Mariotti and Lane 299). She answers by saying, “This is an issue that always brings the word “merism” to my mind. I feel very deeply— very deeply— that faith is a conversation between God and the individual soul that no one else is in a position to understand or to judge” (299). Robinson’s use of “merism” is an excellent way to describe the transitional aspect of *Gilead*. The novel is set in a transitional time where American religion was undergoing a major change from conventional religion to a more fluid, spiritual understanding. The term *merism* is derived from *merismus*, which is defined by the *OED* as “A form of synecdoche in which two . . . contrasting or complementary parts are made to represent the whole; an instance of this.” A *merism*, for example, is the concept of searching high and low; it’s implied that you’re looking high, low, and everywhere in between. This connection is made by Robinson because as far as she is concerned, conversation between God and the individual is another form of merism. She views these two halves as part of the whole of faith and without one, you would have a hard time finding the other or understanding everything between them. By understanding Robinson’s own views of twentieth-century religion, we can begin to situate it in a rough timeline tracing American literature’s move from traditional religious texts to spiritual texts.

During the 1960s, American religion underwent many transitions that have led us to our current understanding of conventional religion today. We easily understand that our great-great

grandparents experienced a very different religious upbringing than most of us today, but this distinction can also be made with more recent generations. Hungerford's book, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*, examines the influence of religion on literature and, as she argues, the influence of literature on religion. She opens the book with an introduction that states that criticism has long overlooked how "qualities of language gain religious authority by virtue of scriptural history – by precedents of style, cultural prestige, literary complexity that are rooted in the American understanding of the Bible as a literary and a religious work in the 1970s and 1980s" (Hungerford xv). This statement helps inform postmodern readers of the emphasis on religion in earlier works and how even later, seemingly unreligious texts still have an influence from the Bible or other religious beliefs. Other aspects of her book discuss the form of novels and literature as religious, and how the belief in something makes it religious to readers. While she does address that literature is borrowing the form of religion, she doesn't allow that literature, such as *Gilead*, could be transforming worship and reconnecting audiences to faith. Many contemporary novelists have worked with religion in a way that allows readers to consider alternative forms of spirituality and worship.

Ray Horton has a slightly different approach to understanding contemporary novelists that use religion as a literary form. He points to a "false opposition" between modern secularists and conventional religions that has created a split in literature discourse (Horton 122). Horton points out how in various aspects of Robinson's works she herself has tried to display the opening in public spaces for religions and religious life and that secularization is not irredeemable in society's understanding of faith. His understanding of *Gilead* as a novel is much more in line with my own understanding as he states that real and fictional worlds are rife with language and imagery of religion and how we believe in those things.

Robinson's work in *Gilead* does many of the things Hungerford outlines in her book, but more importantly displays a deep understanding of the various influences that can be found in a religious person's life. The book follows the transition from a younger religious person to an older religious person and demonstrates how the form of a novel can be subtly similar to the form of the Bible. John Ames brings all of these aspects into one story and begins to teach readers and his son what it means to have a spiritual life or to understand the world at the complex intersection of the religious and the secular.

Biblical Form in a Contemporary Novel

Hungerford argues that "literary critics and novelists" in the twentieth century "work out the relationship between literature and the sacred in ways that make literature akin to scripture" (76). This "relationship between literature and the sacred" is seen throughout Robinson's novel and is a key point in the reader's understanding of her agenda for John. Adapting the text of *Gilead* from the Bible makes readers feel familiar with the lessons and intensifies the understanding we have of the various things John discusses throughout the novel. John himself is aligned with Hungerford's arguments on literature and religious belief because he uses the practice of reading and writing as a way to understand his world religiously.

The novel as a whole is written similar to the Bible as a text. For example, *Gilead* is presented to the reader as a letter John is writing to his son because he will die soon, before his son comes of age. John doesn't include dates or any type of distinct break in the text, but readers can still gather that it is a letter. The Bible employs the same form in 21 of its books, such as Romans I, Romans II, Timothy I, or Corinthians. Both the Bible and *Gilead* have a similar agenda in teaching or converting the intended reader to a religious or spiritual belief. The writer of these epistolary books in the Bible, Paul, has written to various groups of people, cities, and

individuals after the death of Jesus to spread the gospel. In addition to sharing a name with one of the 12 disciples, John has written his letter to inform his son of his life, various influences on his understanding of religion, and to teach him about human emotions such as anger or joy.

Robinson includes quotations from the Bible, sometimes verses that John simply identifies as “Scripture” without specifying verse or chapter. The novel may therefore rely on the reader’s own knowledge of the Bible. These inclusions of quoted Scripture make the world that Robinson has created more identifiable as far as the novel being a religious text. However, when John says, “that’s Scripture,” Robinson is also indicating an area where religion has overflowed into the public sphere of life (33).

The first instance of Scripture in the text is found during a scene where John is describing how his grandfather would steal things from John’s mother to give to the poor people in their community. This caused tension within the family because they were also not the most financially secure family in their town and struggled to make ends meet. John’s mother did everything she could to protect her family from her father’s generosity, but he still would find things to give away to others. His mother is convinced that her father cannot see through to the true intentions of “drunkards and ne’er-do-wells,” but grandfather simply says “‘Judge not,’ and of course that’s Scripture and hard to contradict” (33). This seems a bit odd because there are various places in the Bible where this is the lesson, but it is only specifically stated three times in the King James Version. Perhaps Robinson wanted this to be a lesson in Christian theology that some Scripture doesn’t need a specific citation to feel legitimized. This lack of citation indicates an area where religion has bled into everyday life. Reader’s may not expect this bleeding into everyday life to be in *Gilead* because of the novel’s Christian connotations.

The next important instance of Scripture that is in the novel is found when John begins his dialogue about joy and finding happiness in the world regardless of circumstance. He is discussing the perfection of the saying “twinkling of an eye” and goes on to quote “The light of the eyes rejoiceth the heart” (53). This is a verse found in Proverbs 15:30 but John does not tell his reader that specifically. There’s no stated reason why Robinson decides against providing the exact verse in this scene, but I think it implies that John believes that his son will know Scripture even though he has a fear of the opposite happening because of this blurring of religious life and secularized public life. This piece of Scripture also indicates another area where religion, specifically Scripture, has bled into normal life. John uses the Bible to his advantage to explain how Scripture can become a perfect piece of poetry that people say every day.

Another instance of Scripture comes a few pages later; John gives readers the first quotation from the Bible when talking about the baptism of his first child Rebecca. He writes, “The Lord said, ‘Their angels in Heaven always see the face of my Father in Heaven’” (56). There is no reason why he includes the exact verse for this quote, but he does later state that people have found comfort in it; however, he does not claim to be one of those people. This failure of Scripture to provide comfort to an individual shows that possibly, Robinson wants to again point to her argument that religion and secularization are more entwined than some people would like to think, meaning that faith isn’t just learning the Bible through and through but having the everyday experiences of human emotions to go with it to provide a meaningful understanding of the world and humanity’s place in it.

A final instance of quoting Scripture that is worth looking into more closely comes from

Edward, John's brother and the self-proclaimed atheist of the family. This is also another scene where John is aware of the joy in the situation and remarks on the simplistic way of enjoying the little things in life. Edward quotes from Psalm 133:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is,/ For brethren to dwell together in unity!/
It is like the precious oil upon the head,/ That ran down upon the beard;/ Even Aaron's beard;/
That came down upon the skirt of his garments/ Like the dew of Hermon,/ That cometh
down upon the mountains of Zion (64).

This scene is beautiful because we see a blurring of the lines between the super religious stance John and his family hold and the more relaxed understanding of the world Edward holds. It doesn't seem like Edward is quoting this verse in a malicious way or to be disrespectful towards John but is rather taking in the beauty of the world and quoting Scripture as if it were any other piece of poetry. This could be due to the bias of the story being told through John's eyes, but I don't think that he would change his brother's action in that way because of the amount of respect we see towards Edward at later times in the story.

Another similarity between *Gilead* and the Bible is that the writers both address a "you" in the texts. Readers understand that John is addressing his son; however, they can also take this "you" as an address to themselves, again emphasizing John's agenda of teaching spiritual belief. The various authors of the Bible also use a second person you in many different verses. These verses appear in many books of the Bible and in many different contexts. John alludes to one such verse when he discusses his maternal grandfather saying, "Judge not" (Robinson 33). A specific example from the Bible comes from Matthew 7:1: "Do not judge or you too will be judged" (*New International Version*, Matt. 7:1). This gospel is written specifically to emphasize Christ's fulfillment of the Old Testament and his role as a new lawgiver for the New Testament

similar to John’s fulfillment of transitioning from conventional religion when he was a young man to a more fluid spirituality as an older man.

***Gilead* and Transitional Phases**

There are many types of transitions during *Gilead* and those are both at the personal level and the social level. John goes through transitions with himself by understanding the concepts of vocation versus trade, his age (younger vs. older self), and being happy versus grieving the loss of his first wife and daughter (his “dark period”). While John is experiencing all of these changes, the world is also undergoing many monumental changes with the transition from peace time to times of uncertainty (the Spanish Influenza and World War I) back to a time of peace, then uncertainty (World War II), then peace again. All of these different transitions influence a broader transition from conventional religion to a fluid spiritual understanding of belief due to Americans becoming more open to different faiths from conventional Christianity.

John talks about the “dark period” of his life after his first wife Louisa dies in childbirth along with their daughter, Rebecca/Angeline. He writes that he spent most of his time reading and if he would wake up still in his armchair how he would go for walks through the town at night (70). John goes on to talk about how he thinks about stopping to “see if there was a problem I could help with, but then I’d decide it might be an intrusion and I’d go on” (71). He also speaks about his friend Boughton, a pastor at a nearby church, and his struggles with family. John tells his son that “It was years before I really knew what was troubling them, close as we had always been” (71).

Many times in the Bible, we are given small stories of grief and loss—similar to John’s transitional period or “dark period” created by the loss of Louisa and Rebecca—while a big story of loss is being told. For example, the story of Jephthah is similar to the story of John losing his

wife and daughter. Jephthah is asked to lead the Gileadites against the oppression brought by the Ammonites and vows to God that if he is victorious then whatever or whoever would come out of the door of his house first, he would sacrifice (*New International Version*, Judges 11:30-32). Jephthah is victorious in battle and when he returns home his only child, a daughter, walks out of his house first (*New International Version*, Judges 11:34). The similarities between John and Jephthah end here because the latter goes through with the sacrifice and is mostly willing to submit to God's will in this instance. However, the format of these two stories is the same. Both men are witness to a great battle—war against the Ammonites and World War I—and both have the loss of a daughter.

The setting of the story situates our narrator John in a time period when America is experiencing various changes in culture, especially in society's views of religion. John talks about various events he has lived through from the Spanish Influenza of 1918 and the Great War. With various major events happening in quick succession, John finds himself having difficulty relating a positive message from God to his congregation. He specifically mentions a sermon that he never gave that was focused on the Spanish Influenza. John relates the Spanish Influenza to a war on the home front by bluntly stating, "It was like a war, it really was. One funeral after another, right here in Iowa" (41). This closeness to death is a reason why many people either grow closer to religion or further away from it and this turmoil is displayed in the next section of John's letter when he writes:

The parents of these young soldiers would come to me and ask me how the Lord could allow such a thing. I felt like asking them what the Lord would have to do to tell us He *didn't* allow something. But instead I would comfort them by saying we would never know what their young men had been spared. Most of them took me to mean they were

spared the trenches and the mustard gas, but what I really meant was that they were spared the act of killing. It was just like a biblical plague, just exactly. (41-42) This section shows how John views life as possibly a reenactment of the Bible or perhaps a warning against our sins. This section blurs the line between life and death or morality and sinfulness as experienced by the people of this time period and reveals how swiftly society's morality was changing.

Being set in a time after both of the World Wars, *Gilead* shows readers the shift that is taking place in religious views in America. This shift of views is related to the emotions followed by the unnecessary loss of life during the war and people's views of God as a benevolent being. John discusses this lack of understanding of why God would allow this and how the war has affected his own congregation in his letter to his son. He sees this transitional period as a time where people are losing their faith and perhaps the end of all religion because of his fearfulness of his son not being brought up in the church.

Viewing *Gilead* as a transitional piece between conservative religious novels and more fluid, or spiritual, novels is key to our understanding of John and his own character growth that has been mapped throughout the novel. When John describes his young self in his letter to his son, readers can begin to identify the transition he's undergone from an uber pious person to a more relaxed person as far as his religious understanding. This transition seems to be credited to the various outside influences on John's life. For example, as a child and young adult, John was only exposed to his family and his friends that were similarly brought up as "God fearing" citizens. His father and grandfather were both men of the clergy and influenced John to follow that same path because he saw the destabilization of his family unit when his older brother declared that he didn't believe in God as they knew Him. Seeing his brother declare against the

family was a major event in his life and in turn helped John realize that his understanding of religion was a bit different from his family's.

Older John has had many influences in his life that made him believe in a more fluid religion that is still very close to what we would deem Christianity. These differences are nuanced because readers must look closely at the text and see what John has been through in his life to get to the point where he is writing the letter. Things like reading Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, his brother's disregard of conventional religion, and the loss of his first wife and child are all influences that have made John question his belief in a conventional religion. He is still very religious by our standards, but he does have a much more fluid understanding of the world, God, and his own purpose in life.

Experiences as an Influence on Belief

Religion is rarely ever just taught but rather a lived experience that informs a person's beliefs about the world. John's narrative reveals that even so-called secular experiences can be important in reshaping contemporary religious belief. The story begins with John recounting his childhood and how his father and grandfather and mother's father all worked in the ministry during their lives. He goes on to state how "That life was second nature to them, just as it is to me" (Robinson 6). This shows how religion or religious vocations may seep into all aspects of life and begin to broaden one's understanding of the world, or life and death—such is the case with John. John states something similar a few pages later when he tells his son, "My father left me a trade, which happened to be my vocation. But the fact is, it was all second nature to me, I grew up with it. Most likely you will not" (8). The almost fearfulness that John will leave his son without religion or even worse in his eyes a vocation is palpable in this section. Ng indicates that this fearfulness comes from the change in religious sensibilities post World War II (vi).

Specifically, he states, “laws relating to censorship and obscenity would undergo significant reformation that not only disavowed religious pressure but also reflected a distinct secular position” (Ng vi). John doesn’t seem too concerned with leaving his son to grow up without religion but is much more focused on leaving him without a trade or vocation as he views his religion. He distinguishes these two terms by writing statements about his religious trade and his calling to ministry or vocation. Understanding the difference between the two will help readers understand John’s agenda for writing his letter to his son. John does give his son a caveat about working in the ministry by writing:

I don’t wish to be urging the ministry on you, but there are some advantages to it you might not know to take account of if I did not point them out. Not that you have to be a minister to confer blessing. You are simply much more likely to find yourself in that position. (23).

John makes sure that his son does not feel pressured to try to pursue the ministry but does warn him to always take stock of his life to appreciate the joys and miracles that may happen.

A few pieces of this letter are dedicated to talking about John’s older brother, Edward, and his departure from the church and religion. Edward leaves his family to go to Germany to hopefully study theology so that he may one day come back and take up the mantle of being a pastor in the town. However, that is not that case, and he returns with different ideas and a book by Ludwig Feuerbach, an atheist and anthropologist that Edward read about (24-26). Edward’s announcement to the family that he no longer believes in God is abrupt and leaves their father and mother reeling. He and John go on a walk after this disastrous family dinner, and this is when Edward gives John a book called *The Essence of Christianity*. This book is by Feuerbach and Edward tells John to be sure to hide it from their mother (26). Although Feuerbach’s book gained

the author little to no literary notoriety, the book is a major influence on John's understanding of life, religion, and philosophy. This book, published in 1841, was Feuerbach's magnum opus and in it he tried to develop a philosophy of positive religion and state his belief in the distinguishing aspect between humans and animals—religion (Gooch). Feuerbach's essay was later studied by Karl Marx and is arguably one of the major influences on what we know as Marxism (Gooch). Although this brief literary fame was of no consequence to the people of *Gilead*, John uses these philosophies as an integral part in his understanding of God and religion.

Even though the book is little known, John decides to read the book and uses it to inform his own beliefs about Christianity and life. He cites a passage from this book about the baptismal waters and how Feuerbach gets it right. John quotes,

Water is the purest, clearest of liquids; in virtue of this its natural character it is the image of the spotless nature of the Divine Spirit. In short, water has a significance, as water; it is on account of its natural quality that it is consecrated and selected as the vehicle of the Holy Spirit. So far there lies at the foundation of Baptism a beautiful, profound natural significance. (22)

This portion of the text indicates to readers that John has a much more fluid understanding of religion and religious texts than his predecessors and can find spiritual significance in seemingly unreligious texts. This further reflects how Robinson situates this novel in a transitional period in religion from strict and conventional to a more forgiving form of worship.

John tries to make Edward proud by using his philosophies as a way to interpret religion in a way that allows for fluidity. He writes, "I believe I have tried to never say anything Edward would have found callow or naïve" (154). John has tried to appease his atheist brother with a philosophy that blurs the line between religion and aesthetic understandings of the world because

of his staunch upbringing in the conventional religion. Feuerbach has become an important aspect of John's sermons and is mentioned regularly throughout the book. He does take issue with some of the things that Feuerbach writes in his book, but overall he uses his philosophies for his own purposes. John points to the first chapter of *The Essence of Christianity* as a misunderstanding on Feuerbach's part about what it means to believe in God. Feuerbach writes a lengthy definition of religion in the opening of his book:

Religion is the disuniting of man from himself; he sets God before him as the antithesis of himself. God is not what man is—man is not what God is. God is the infinite, man the finite being; God is perfect, man imperfect; God eternal, man temporal; God almighty, man weak; God holy, man sinful. God and man are extremes: God is the absolutely positive, the sum of all realities; man the absolutely negative, comprehending all negations. (Feuerbach)

This statement may clarify the difference between man and God; however, John remarks that Feuerbach fails to realize that God has created man to take delight in the world (Robinson 143). Robinson creates her own merism by using John's response to Feuerbach as a way to identify God and individual, and therefore everything in between, as being a part of the whole of religion. Another section of the text where John gives a glimpse of his respect towards his brother and his way of thinking is noted when he writes:

But the fact is that his mind came from one set of books as surely as mine has come from another set of books. But that can't be true. While I was at seminary I read every book he had ever mentioned and every book I thought he might have read, if I could put my hand on it and it wasn't in German. If I had the money, I ordered books through the mail that I thought he might be about to read. (125)

This indicates a willingness on John's part to try to understand what others in the world may think about God and religion. However, it does seem to be a bit defensive in nature because John also does this to not seem unintelligent when trying to defend religion or describe certain aspects of religion to unreligious people.

Emotions as a Form of Religious Study

Emotions are a very prevalent aspect of John's life and understanding of his religion. He especially notes in his letter when he is angry, joyful, or grieving and the circumstances that surround those emotions or the meaning he can find in those emotions. This anger comes out usually in reference to John Ames Boughton or Jack, Boughton's son who is named after John. When Jack first comes back to town, readers are left questioning why John has such a dislike for him. As time goes on, John and Jack have an episode during John's sermon about Hagar and Ishmael and a parent's unwillingness to let their children go into the wilderness of the world. John goes off script during this sermon, something that he rarely does, and begins to preach about parents being unkind towards their children (128-131). This episode is expressed solely through awkward eye contact between the two men and Jack's apparent antagonism towards John. Readers are again left to wonder what has happened in the past to make the two men's relationship so seemingly volatile through John's eyes. He writes various half warnings in his letter but does not initially disclose what happened (140). It is much later when John finally tells the story of discontent between himself and Jack. John tells his son through the letter that Jack fathered a child to a young girl when he was in college (156). John makes no judgement against Jack for fathering a child out of wedlock but instead judges him for leaving his child unclaimed and forcing her to live in poverty when he very well could have provided a better life for his child (157-158). Unfortunately, the child dies a few years later due to an infected cut on her foot

and Jack has no remorse in John's eyes, which explains the hostility between the two men. Having lost his own child too soon, John cannot fathom why Jack would not want to claim and care for his child when given the opportunity. This anger and defensiveness are at odds with John's overall joy and love for life in the rest of the text.

John writes many different phrases about the beauty and joy of life about many different instances throughout his letter. He remarks on the pleasures of watching his young son and the family cat lay together in his study in a patch of sunlight (104), his wife and son blowing bubbles together in the garden (9), and his son wanting to surprise him with a peanut butter and apple butter sandwich (117), among many other instances throughout the letter. John ascribes joy as one of the greatest human experiences and that each instance of the emotion should be treasured regardless of enormity. He discusses the amazingness of the world by comparing himself to "a child who opens its eyes on the world once" to see the beauty of the world only to then "close its eyes again" (57). This appreciation for amazing *things* in the world is also applicable, in John's eyes, to *beings* in the world.

Horton writes about the aesthetic nature of this religious novel (120). He believes that previous scholars, like Hungerford, are missing a key point in Robinson's works and that Robinson is more inclined to have her readers look to the background of the text to understand the true meaning of religion in her characters' lives, like we see here with John watching the bubbles float to the heavens. Horton states:

This religious background is determined less by what the characters believe (as purely theological readings would have it) or by how they enact and negotiate belief (the view of postsecular readings) than by what conditions of possibility—what modes of seeing, perceiving, experiencing, and narrating—belief makes available. (121)

The “modes of seeing, perceiving, experiencing, and narrating” that Horton points to as the way to make belief available is the goal that Robinson is achieving through John’s letter to his son. He indicates various points where each of these aspects are at the forefront of his argument for any type of belief in a higher power. “Seeing” is emphasized by scenes like the bubble scene or when he notices his son and their cat laying in a patch of sunlight. This seeing of heavenly events in ordinary life is an important aspect of John’s life and his understanding of religion and the emotion of joy. “Experiencing” is deeply related to this “seeing” of religious events in everyday life. John’s experience of these events makes the sight of them felt much more deeply by him and in turn his son, and us—the readers.

Horton also states that an important aspect of critiquing a work like Robinson’s is noticing the breakdown of the “false opposition between secularist modern aesthetics and a wholly religious discourse” (122). The two sides of this equation are, for Robinson, a kind of merism rather than a binary opposition. This so called “opposition” has been a normalized dichotomy in post-1960 criticism, and we have somewhat missed how novelists like Robinson have worked hard to close the gap in secular and religious understandings of literature.

John’s emphasis on human emotions is much more in line with a fluid understanding of spirituality and its daily occurrences in life. This understanding comes out during times like the bubble scene when John is in awe of the simple joys of his life with his wife and son. John is a man who has taken a step back from the strict understanding of the world through his forebearers’ religious upbringing and transitioned into a less conventional state of being. John’s experience of joy seems to have come from his reading of *The Essence of Christianity* and has begun to seep into his own sermons to his congregation. He often states his love for his son and his extreme grief of missing his son’s life and journey into adulthood. These two emotions are

most poignant during his confrontations and later discussion of his distaste for Jack, and his sermon on the Fifth Commandment.

During an extended lesson on the value of the Fifth Commandment, John writes about the importance to “Honor your father and your mother” but how this is something that works both ways, meaning parents honor their children in the same way. He states this clearly by writing, “You see how it is godlike to love the *being* of someone. Your *existence* is a delight to us” (136). One of John’s main goals in writing this letter is to show his son that he is valued by him, even if he is no longer living and just a distant memory of a child, and readers can understand this goal more specifically in this instance when John is writing to identify the godlike emotion of loving *someone* and not just loving *life*.

The extreme contrast between *loving* and *grieving* is again apparent during John’s explanation of his “dark period” and his exposure of Jack. Child loss is an aspect of John’s life that, at one point, turned him into a darker person and is the source of his anger towards Jack. He cannot begin to understand the lack of care that Jack displays towards his first daughter and the circumstances that she lived in for her short life. John is left with a bitter taste in his mouth about the whole situation and has let this poison his attitude toward Jack for the coming years. The loss of his own daughter prior to this situation does not help matters and makes him question why anyone would not want their child to be happy and healthy. The loss of these daughters is biblical to John and is a source of much angst and anxiety in his current life. John is aware of his flaws as a good Christian—those being his inability to forgive Jack and succumbing to his anger and his inability to accept the loss of his daughter. Coming to terms with these two emotions is not a goal of writing this letter but is something that Robinson is using to explain that no one is capable of being the perfect Christian.

John seems to waiver in his stance on which is worse, losing a child or being lost from a child. Both instances create a deep sense of grief for John, and he is anxious about the day that his son will be left fatherless, so much so that he has decided to write a letter to his son explaining who he is and what he has done in his life, along with lessons he hopes to impart. John also wants his son to know how much he loves him, whether he is blatantly stating it, or it is an underlying tone, like his inclusion of his sermon on the Fifth Commandment.

Conclusion

We can situate Robinson as a key writer focused on the transitional period in religious novels post WWII. Hers and similar novels use the form of the text and aesthetic appeals as a way to reconnect audiences to religion. John's understanding of religion, the influences from his life—from religious and secular sources—that have informed his ideas of religion, and the form of the text itself help guide readers to a better understanding of what a religious novel may look like during this time period. *Gilead* participates in the transition from conventional religious literature to more fluid spiritual pieces of literature that still use religious forms as a basis for their stories.

Chapter 2

Toni Morrison: Finding Spirituality through Classical Myths, African Legends, and Fairytales

Toni Morrison and Marilynne Robinson share many of the same tactics used to create a world that readers are familiar with in *Song of Solomon*. Morrison uses forms found in the Bible as well as biblical names to create a sense of comfort or familiarity for her readers. She also combines western ideologies about faith with African spiritual traditions to display a fuller explanation of religion and spirituality in America. While Robinson focuses on the spiritual connections on the individual level, Morrison focuses much more on the community involvement in building a spiritual connection to one another or to a higher power. Morrison's spiritual leader can be found in Pilate and the lessons she teaches to Milkman, while Robinson focuses on the passing of faith from father to son. Both of these authors tackle the transition in American culture from strict religious faith to fluid spirituality through various literary tactics and differing focuses.

While Morrison and Robinson both use conventional religion in a new way to signify the changing perspective in American Literature, they both use biblical ties to create the foundation of their respective novels. Both authors use biblical names in their characters to invoke a specific feeling in their audiences. We could assume that they want us to trust their characters or maybe show that their characters are struggling in their religious lives. Another tie to the Bible is the format that their books take. Morrison and Robinson differ in some other ways that make their novels have very different modes of revising conventional religion. Morrison, for example, uses classical influences such as Greek myths to broaden her story in *Song of Solomon*, along with fairytales and African myths. While Robinson uses atheism, philosophy, and the aesthetics of

nature and emotion to broaden her story in *Gilead*. Morrison's revision of conventional religion and unconventional myths creates a new representation of spirituality within the American literary canon.

Song of Solomon introduces the Dead family on the day Macon Dead III's (nicknamed Milkman) is born. Other members of the Dead family include Ruth Foster Dead (mother), Macon Dead II (father), First Corinthians Dead (sister,) Magdalene Dead (sister), Pilate Dead (paternal aunt), Reba (paternal cousin), and Hagar (paternal cousin once removed). Milkman's is the main storyline followed throughout the novel and takes readers on a journey of finding out more about his family origins, specifically on his paternal side. The loss of knowledge about Milkman's family origins is a devastating absence in his life and he goes on a journey to not only prove himself to his father but to also find out about his paternal grandfather and the origin of the name Dead. He later finds himself in his ancestral home of Shalimar, Virginia and learns the origin of his family. Milkman finally comes to a moment where his spirituality is fulfilled, and he experiences a moment of understanding about the world and his family.

The novel opens with the scene of Mr. Smith, an insurance agent, standing on the roof of the local hospital preparing to take a suicidal flight. Readers meet Pilate Dead for the first time as she sings the "Sugarman Song." Milkman is born on the same day as Pilate's song and Mr. Smith's flight and thus this scene sets the tone for the rest of the novel. During Milkman's childhood, he discovers many things about his family that he seems to wish he hadn't. He and his childhood friend, Guitar Bains, go on many adventures together throughout their hometown. The two boys visit Pilate, Ruth, and Hagar to sneak sips of wine and to learn from the wild women of the family. During their teenage years, Milkman starts a sexual relationship with his cousin, Hagar, which continues until their adulthood. Milkman breaks off the relationship, which

eventually leads to Hagar's death from depression. Milkman doesn't find out about Hagar's death until after he returns to his hometown from Shalimar. After his reconciliation with Pilate over causing Hagar's death, the two journey back to Shalimar to bury her father's bones on Solomon's Leap. Guitar, a member of a secret Black vengeance society called the Seven Days, makes his return at this point in the novel and shoots Pilate from the bottom of the cliff. Milkman sings a version of the "Sugargirl Song" in Pilate's last moments before he takes flight off the edge of the cliff down to seek revenge on Guitar.

Morrison's use of western myths, classic heroes, and African legends allows for this story to transform into a bigger spiritual journey. She criticizes these cultures for their lack of wellrounded understandings of the world and combines them to create a new identity that is found in her characters. This new identity is easily translated into the real world as a form of spirituality.

Ashley Tiede builds on Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s expansion of Dubois's "double consciousness" theory of African American identity. Gates argues that critics should approach texts through the comparison of black and white identities. Tiede, however, pushes this idea further and posits that the best way to analyze African American authored texts is to approach them with two methodologies in mind: one pertaining to Western culture and traditions and one that points to African cultures and traditions (49). These cultures and traditions are not the only traditions that could be used. Tiede's main argument about this approach is to use a methodology that is "indigenous" to African American literature (49). Her first example of this double methodology is to compare Freud's notion of the "death instinct" to Dona Richard's idea of an "Afrocentric" interpretation (50). She puts it distinctly, "From this perspective, one can juxtapose Richards's representation of the collectively defined identity of the African to Freud's narrative of the

singular self's 'undoing'" (50). By using these two methodologies, readers are able to understand the implications of self-identity and community identity as described in *Song of Solomon*. Tidey goes on to say that she wants to highlight the "tension between the narratives and to demonstrate more broadly that such inherent complexity in an African American novel suggests the applicability of two methodological approaches" (52). Her two approaches are Afrocentrism and psychoanalysis, but I suggest approaching the novel through two different lenses: conventional religion of a typically western culture and unconventional religion/spirituality typically viewed as a non-western culture. This approach further explores the duality of the text itself by emphasizing how Morrison has chosen to combine Western cultural practices with African cultural practices. The combination of two cultures creates a type of spirituality rooted in both traditional and nontraditional views of the world. I use "traditional" in the sense of religion as canonized in the West and "nontraditional" in the sense of the spiritual practices of Africa.

Classical Myth and the Lone Male Hero

Morrison's treatment of spirituality in *Song of Solomon* is influenced by mythology and folklore and is a driving factor in the characters' development throughout the novel. Milkman and Pilate are the most intriguing characters in the novel because they both undergo a major change in their view of the world to reach a higher level of spiritual intelligence or to prepare for their deaths. Morrison delivers a coming-of-age story with various elements of a hero's journey that ultimately implies a level of community spirituality in her characters, who can easily be identified with archetypes and are essential to Milkman's journey. The preparation for death, signified through the release of Earthly belongings, as exemplified by Milkman and Pilate, is only one aspect of the spiritual nature of the text and is a sped-up version of a hero's story. By

introducing death into the narrative of a hero's journey, Morrison has created a new timeline for this journey that is still able to deliver the same message of increasing one's spiritual connections to attain a version of Camelot/Heaven.

Prior scholars suggest that Morrison's definition of spirituality is multi-faceted and follows along the path of a hero's journey. Morrison is influenced by many other traditions, specifically, with the naming of her characters. Readers are introduced to characters that take their names from the Bible, like Pilate and Hagar, and other characters that take their names from Greek myths, like Circe. Judith Fletcher argues that naming is important to the narrative of *Song of Solomon*, specifically the naming of the midwife, Circe, to "position her within and beyond the classical tradition of the catabatic narrative" (405). This type of narrative is usually called "going down" specifically as in a descent into the underworld. She asserts that the novel is a combination of warring tropes in literature and is simultaneously a descent into the underworld and a metaphoric ascent through a man's ability to fly (Fletcher 405). Fletcher also suggests that, although naming in the text is patrilineal, it is the women of the family that are ultimately able to uncover the truth of names as they relate to the ancestry of Milkman and therefore guide his spiritual understanding of himself (410). Fletcher analyzes the text to justify her arguments about naming and the use of classical myths, specifically the *Odyssey*, as a vehicle for Morrison to present the story of Milkman to modern readers (405). Fletcher presents examples from both *The Odyssey* and *Song of Solomon* that implore readers to understand the emphasis of naming and renaming as an integral part of Milkman's discover of self and preparation for death.

The use of these western and classical influences is a way for Morrison to investigate African American characters' approaches to religion and spirituality. She uses these references to

western and classic culture as a way to show Milkman's movement across spiritualities. He is given a chance to explore different ways of understanding the world through these references and is given a choice of if he wants to be conventional or unconventional. These cultures are typically only used in the white American literary canon.

Milkman is never truly associated with his given name and is renamed at a young age like other classical heroes in this genre of fiction. The nickname of "milkman" is given to him by Freddie, when he happens to find Ruth breastfeeding him well into his childhood (Morrison 15). This removal of identity through a name is significant to Milkman's own journey to find his spiritual self and reconnect with the family name of Dead. However, he soon learns that even that name is a replacement for his true ancestry. By traveling on his journey, Milkman soon finds out his true origins as a member of the Solomon family and that the Dead name came from Jake Solomon's registry with the Freedman's Bureau (Morrison 324). Through learning his true familial identity, Milkman is able to completely understand himself and reconnect with his father's history and be fully prepared for his death or flying away.

Another area in which Milkman resembles a classical hero is through Ruth's experience of breastfeeding him. Morrison writes:

She had the distinct impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold. Like the miller's daughter – the one who sat at night in a straw-filled room, thrilled with the secret power Rumpelstiltskin had given her: to see golden thread stream from her very own shuttle. (14-15)

Ruth's fantastical imagination of her and Milkman's connection through her providing him sustenance at an older age is indicative of his future as a mythical or classical hero of sorts. She imagines him to have gained a sort of power from her to be able to conquer the world or at the

very least, find a true identity for the family. This gift is what powers him to go on his journey of losing his earthly belongings. This possible reimagining of the Rumpelstiltskin story also has biblical ties where maternal nurturing is what gives the hero his strength. Morrison has referenced stories like Hansel and Gretel or Rumpelstiltskin, perhaps to signify a moving away from conventional religion, specifically back to a fluid state of spirituality, to further complicate her use of African legends.

Milkman's transformation and subsequent journey into the world of the dead happens simultaneously with his physical journey to Shalimar to understand his family's origin story. When Milkman begins his journey, he has "two bottles of Cutty Sark in his suitcase, along with two shirts and some underwear" (Morrison 226). He is wearing his watch that his mother gave him (226), and a "beige three-piece suit, his button down light blue shirt and black string tie, and his beautiful Florshein shoes" (227). As far as Earthly possessions, Milkman is by no means wealthy at this point in his journey away from his family, but these specific items indicate a deeply rooted characteristic of his, which is pride. He values material wealth more than spiritual wealth and is very invested in his public image. As his journey progresses, Milkman begins to lose or break his Earthly belongings, thus signifying his spiritual transformation and his preparation for death. The first loss is experienced when he is trying to find the cave with the hidden gold, and he falls into a creek and his watch breaks (Morrison 249-250).

At this point in his journey, Milkman's perfectly curated physical appearance is no longer viable for his journey. He learns several lessons that appearance does not make a person acceptable or revered, and that most people value yourself over your material wealth. The next loss of his Earthly belongings comes upon his return to the train station where he has a conversation with a woman about how "the bag was not there, the man was not there, she didn't

know if a colored boy picked it up or not, they didn't have a checkroom and she was mighty sorry" (Morrison 255). This loss is similar to the first because they aren't decisions that Milkman makes to get rid of his Earthly belongings, but they do signify an end to an era especially when readers consider the growth that he is going through currently.

The final removal of earthly belongings that Milkman goes through is giving up his threepiece suit for the "World War II army fatigues with a knit cap" given to him by King Walker in preparation for their hunting trip (Morrison 271). This loss is arguably the most important part of his journey to death because he is beginning to understand what it is like to be a black man in the south and can appreciate his privileges. When Milkman has reached his goal of understanding his family's origins, he can finally accept his paternal heritage as an important aspect of his life and is a fully formed individual that has reevaluated their spirituality. Milkman alludes to this idea that he has finished his spiritual reevaluation when he says, "I'm losing everything" (Morrison 294). Morrison's possible foreshadowing of Milkman's death is hidden behind his journey of self and is a perfect example of the removal of items in preparation for death and how this theme will continue throughout the rest of the book.

The classical Hero's Journey, as theorized by Joseph Campbell, has been used in the past to identify Christian themes as well as other classical symbolism. Dorothy Lee presents an argument that Milkman's journey follows the epic hero's journey, specifically the parallels of "the preparation" and "the adventure" (65). She also provides evidence for identifying characters in *Song of Solomon* with archetypes found in a hero's journey. The most obvious archetype that can be assigned to a character in the novel is that Milkman is the hero of the story. He is our protagonist and goes on his hero journey by traveling on a quest to identify his true ancestry.

Another character that is easily identified within the archetype structure is Hagar as the innocent. She is used by Milkman sexually until he grows tired of her. The final archetype that can be assigned is that Pilate is the spiritual leader in the novel. Her freedom from material belongings and family connection allows her to provide an example to Milkman, especially, that he needs to find his own identity to be able to transcend. Pilate is specifically used as the example of this transcendence and Milkman is soon to follow. These characters are able to transcend Earthly expectations and reach a spiritual understanding of self.

African American Legends and the Flying African

Morrison uses a very specific legend about African Americans in the south to introduce a major theme throughout the novel. This legend is the focus of my second methodology of unconventional religion/spirituality. Michael Awkward argues that Morrison has written *Song of Solomon* to create a new genre that is needed by the Afro-American community to combine “classical, mythological, archetypal” texts with “new” information (483). This combination is exemplified by the updating of an African folktale that describes slaves freeing themselves from bondage by quite literally flying away from their oppressors, decidedly through the magic of a witch doctor (Awkward 484). Awkward points to Julius Lester’s myth “People Who Could Fly” as the original text that Morrison has “appropriated” for her own purposes (484). In this story, first generation African slaves have the ability to fly given to them through the magical word of the witch doctor (Awkward 484). There are three situations in the novel where readers are introduced to this reimagining of Lester’s myth. The first instance comes with Mr. Smith’s flight and Pilate’s version of the “Sugarman Song” (Morrison 3-6). The lyrics that Pilate uses are “O Sugarman done fly away/ Sugarman done gone/ Sugarman cut across the sky/ Sugarman gone home . . .” (6). This instance of flight and song is the first introduction readers have to this type

of worship session. There aren't a lot of details about the flight itself, and the scene is more focused on Pilate's interactions and Milkman's birth.

The next instance of a flying African is only a reference to Milkman's paternal ancestor, Solomon's original flight, thus creating the major plot of the novel (302-304). Solomon's flight is different because he tries to take his son, Jake, with him on this flight. This scene is much closer to the original myth as told by Lester and arguably Morrison uses it to establish a timeline of these types of flight. However, Morrison's version of the myth as displayed through Solomon is lacking the communal effect of Lester's version because Solomon ultimately takes flight on his own while the people identified in Lester's version of the myth take flight together after the overseer tries to take away the witch doctor's powers (Awkward 483-484). Another song, the song of Solomon, is an integral part of how Milkman learns his family origins and is featured with this flight. Readers also learn that Sugarman's Song is quite similar to Solomon's song, specifically the lines that say, "Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone/ Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home" (Morrison 303). The similarities between these two songs are a reason that Milkman makes the final connection between his family and his paternal ancestors who lived in Shalimar.

When Milkman learns of his family origins, he is able to reconnect to his community and the ability to "fly away" is granted to him and leads to the final instance of flight in the novel (Morrison 336-337). His flight takes place after Pilate is killed by Guitar on Solomon's leap with her last request being that Milkman sing to her. He chooses a familiar song but changes the lyrics to "Sugargirl don't leave me here/ Cotton balls to choke me/ Sugargirl don't leave me here/ Buckra's arms to yoke me" (336). A similar version of this can be found in Solomon's song, exchanging "Sugargirl" for "Solomon," but the emotion by each singer is the same.

Because the first and last instances of flight along with a “Sugarman/girl” song are the most pivotal in the novel, readers can see how Morrison has revised the Flying African myth to suit her purposes for Milkman and the Deads. Awkward argues that Morrison is aware that myths are useful to teach people or cultures how to behave to be accepted by society (486). We can see this awareness through the changing of the lyrics between these two instances, “Sugarman” to talk about Mr. Smith and “Sugargirl” to talk about Pilate. Pilate’s role in these two instances of flight are a major consideration for the novel and for Milkman’s perception of what a flight does for a person. However, I disagree with Awkward’s assertion that females in the text are not able to partake in the transcendent flight because of a lack of knowledge and are therefore left in unmeasurable pain due to abandonment as is the case with Solomon and Ryna (496).

Reimagining Biblical Women as Community Leaders

Three female characters in Morrison’s novel share names with biblical characters and their stories have been rewritten to show her attitude towards the changing relationship between society and spirituality. Pilate, Milkman’s aunt, shares her name with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who presided over Jesus’s trial and ordered him to be crucified. Another important part of making this connection are the parallels of giving biblical names to supporting characters, such as First Corinthians and Magdalene Dead (Lee 66). In *Song of Solomon*, it is said that Pilate’s father couldn’t read and pointed to a page in the Bible to give her a name. However, Morrison does not convey this choice in name as coincidental and uses it to signify Pilate as a spiritual leader in the community. In the opening scene of the novel, Pilate is shown singing outside of the hospital when Mr. Smith takes his flight, leading the crowd in a song, perhaps

asking Mr. Smith to not jump, before his flight. Pontius Pilate does not lead the spectators in a sermon, but does seemingly lead the crowd in the villainization of Jesus.

In Genesis 16, the story of Hagar and Sarah is introduced. These two women are united in a common cause of creating a family for Abraham. Hagar, Sarah's slave, is given to Abraham as a handmaiden and she conceives (*New International Version*). Sarah notices that Hagar has come to despise her and tells Abraham that God will have to choose between them. After Hagar flees from the mistreatment of Sarah, she is visited by an angel who tells her that she will give birth to a son and that she should return to Abraham and Sarah. Hagar goes back and gives birth to Ishmael (*New International Version*). In Genesis 21, Sarah gives birth to her son Isaac, and after he is weaned, Hagar and Ishmael are cast out. God placates Abraham by saying that Ishmael will also be the father of a nation (*New International Version*).

While Hagar in *Song of Solomon* is not cast out for her own actions, she is a part of the separate family unit that is distanced from Milkman. Hagar is further distanced from her family because of her greed for material things, which her mother, Ruth, obliges. These instances of being "cast out" are not intentional on Hagar's part but are more passive in nature. She follows the lead of her mother and grandmother and does not seek out her extended family. The only instance she does reach out is at the start of her and Milkman's relationship. However, he does later cast her aside in favor of someone more beautiful and (she thinks) appropriate for him to be with.

Although Hagar's actions are powered by a very negative experience, she still exemplifies the power and knowledge of women in the novel as well as Pilate. Through the eyes of Guitar, we are shown a glimpse of this power that is evident to outsiders. He thinks about

Hagar and her will to “kill for love, die for love. The pride, the conceit of these doormat women amazed him” (Morrison 306). The ability to kill or die for love is an example of this power, especially through Guitar’s eyes. This ability is also shown when Pilate comes close to killing Milkman for his part in causing her the loss of her granddaughter (Morrison 331-333). Pilate’s own knowledge of transcendence comes during Hagar’s funeral when she asks for mercy and begins to sing to form a connection with her living daughter, Reba, and her recently deceased granddaughter, Hagar (Morrison 317). This step of forming a connection across the physical world and the spiritual world is imperative in Pilate’s journey of preparing for death. Pilate’s ability to lead her family’s grief is another connection to the community that is being brought back by her power as a spiritual leader.

Pilate’s journey toward spiritual awakening begins a bit differently than Milkman’s because she is not tethered to the Earth through a physical manifestation of a familial line. Pilate’s lack of a belly button is never expanded on or explained so readers are left to make their own interpretations, which are easily applied to her being unbound from the Earth from her birth (Morrison 37). In response to this missing artifact, members of the community ostracize Pilate and essentially treat her as a witch. Another loss that is not the removal of material items is the experience of losing Hagar that sets forth the remainder of the story that will prepare her to leave the world of the living. Pilate’s actions in dealing with the grief of Hagar’s death further her removal from her family because she wants to punish Milkman for his part in breaking Hagar’s heart (Morrison 331-333). When Milkman returns, he tells Pilate he knows who the bones belong to and what the ghost of her father wants her to do with them (333). This conversation reconnects Pilate back to her spiritual self because she has returned to the family again.

Pilate further abandons her earthly belongings when she buries her father's bones on Solomon's Leap and her box with them (Morrison 335). This is arguably the most important removal for Pilate because not only has she granted her father's spirit peace in death, but she removes her last tie to him by burying the box that holds her name written on a piece of paper. This removal of an item is the signifying event that shows that Pilate has given up her ties to her trauma filled childhood and is prepared to cross over spiritually and be reunited with her loved ones. Pilate's acceptance of being untethered from the rest of her family is the final preparation she needed to make to be ready for a complete death. Pilate's journey is very different from Milkman's and allows for readers to understand that not everyone's spiritual journey is the same, nor should it be.

Pilate is a display of a female power in the novel and shows that Morrison values women as spiritual leaders. She is an example of a spiritual leader in two distinct ways; she leads the town's people in a kind of worship, and she is a leader to Milkman specifically. Pilate is shown in two different scenes to be leading worship for a "congregation" in song (Morrison 6, 317-318). These congregations aren't necessarily what would be expected in western religions, but the gathering of people to witness a tragedy in Pilate's life still feels like a type of spiritual movement. The first instance of Pilate using song as a form of worship is when she sings the Sugarman Song as a way to warn and perhaps shield others who are standing witness. Morrison writes, "Some of them thought briefly that this was probably some form of worship" (6). The next instance that Pilate uses a song is during Hagar's funeral to help her and Reba grieve the missing link in their family. They sing, "In the nighttime./ Mercy./ In the darkness./ Mercy./ In the morning./ Mercy" (317). This cry for mercy is supposed to force the congregation at Hagar's funeral to reconcile their place in her death. Pilate uses song as a form of conversation, like the

form of worship typically used in African American culture—call and response during this scene and is trying to get the town's people to accept their roles in this tragedy.

Pilate's role as a spiritual leader in Milkman's life specifically is a bit more vague at the beginning of the novel. As a child, he and his friend—Guitar—go and visit Pilate's house as a rebellious act towards Macon (38-39). Milkman is intrigued by his paternal family and wants to know more about them and in turn becomes one step closer to his final spiritual journey. To him, Pilate is a symbol of unconventional life and can be used as a metaphor for spirituality. Because Milkman continues to visit her house throughout his childhood and into adulthood, he is able to undergo a transformation that brings him closer to his familial origins. By the end of the novel, Milkman completely trusts Pilate as a spiritual leader and takes her to Shalimar to bury her father's bones on Solomon's Leap (335). There is a peace in the family that hasn't been felt in a very long time, and Milkman is to thank for finding the family's origin. This peace doesn't last long, and Pilate is shot by Guitar after the burial ceremony. Her last words are to command Milkman to sing to her, and he obliges. This final act as a spiritual leader allows Milkman to potentially sacrifice himself to avenge Pilate's memory by attacking Guitar, allowing him to become fully cemented into his new spirituality.

It is Pilate's knowledge and the power she has over the family and the wider community that leads me to refute Awkward's assertions about women in the novel. He gives an example that shows that Milkman has more knowledge and power to take flight while Hagar, specifically, is left to die (Morrison 332). While this is true in the novel, Awkward fails to recognize that Pilate has the same knowledge and power that Milkman has. Pilate is the one character throughout the novel that seems to understand more about the family's origins than anyone else alive and she has a knowledge of the afterlife or spirituality that Milkman craves. He goes to

Pilate to learn and gain the knowledge and power he needs to make his initial journey, or flight, to Shalimar. Pilate gives more knowledge and power to Milkman when she asks him to sing to her, so that he is able to make his supposed final flight at the end of the novel. Pilate is also a major connection between Milkman and the broader community he is trying to become a part of.

Morrison identifies a strong tension often found in spirituality and that is the question of whether the individual or the community should be the center of spiritual enlightenment. Susan Blake also argues that Morrison's use of the African tale of slaves being able to fly away from their oppressors and go back to Africa helps set up a dialogue of community versus the individual as seen in *Song of Solomon* (77). The conflict between the individual and the folk community is outlined specifically in the characterizations of Macon Dead II and Pilate (Blake 78). Macon's greed for money and therefore power is the driving force in his dislike of his sister. Because he values money more than anything else, he is not an active member of his family and is ostracized by the community they live in. Macon is depicted as a stereotypical greedy landlord and this makes his character feel even more out of touch with his tenants. Milkman transitions from prioritizing the individual, following what his father says, and prioritizing the community, understanding Pilate's lessons about the interrelations between everyone and the trials he undergoes when he is in Shalimar (79). Milkman starts his journey off as being spoiled and wanting to please his father by finding hidden gold and ends this journey by realizing the greater importance of family and connection to community. Blake emphasizes that Pilate can fly without leaving the ground by pointing to Milkman's own words, "Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (Morrison 338). *Song of Solomon* has more than one hero or journey within the story and is more focused on the community's spiritual understanding of self than the individual's spiritual understanding of self.

Conclusion

Morrison's use of various cultural influences shows an interest in blurring the lines between conventional and unconventional religions. Her use of biblical references helps to tie this novel to something that readers may find familiar while also allowing them to broaden their understanding of the meaning of religion and spirituality. Morrison is able to suggest that Christian names (and frameworks) don't dictate a person's understanding of the world but the combination of culture and religion can be used as a guide to spiritual awareness. For example, Pilate's name comes from her father pointing to a random page in the bible and not because her family was uber religious. Through an analysis of these two character's removals of connections to the world of the living in preparation for their deaths, readers can understand the spiritual implications of *Song of Solomon*. Morrison convincingly shows how spiritual reevaluation includes a journey in understanding a person's spiritual connection to not only the Earth and Earthly belongings but to other beings as well. The revision of various myths and legends to create a new spirituality is similar to what Robinson does in *Gilead*, just with different materials, and Morrison offers another way of understanding the transition from conventional religion to unconventional religion/spirituality through literature.

Chapter 3

James Still: Adapting Folk Wisdom into Spirituality

In the late 1970s, Appalachian literary scholarship has been focused on collecting oral stories from various places in the region or concerned with what W.K. McNeil calls “survivals” that have been passed down through generations of people in Appalachia, such as the “survivals” of Scottish folklore (55). While this is important work, it undervalues the role Appalachian stories play as sources of original literature. Over the next few decades, the field has begun to emphasize analyzing texts for their cultural and religious implications. We can see this push to critique Appalachian literature as text in Jim Wayne Miller’s scholarship based on James Still’s novel *River of Earth*. Miller is interested in the “otherworld” as a distinct part of Appalachian storytelling and culture. According to Miller, “Appalachian literature is—and always has been—as decidedly worldly, secular, and profane in its outlook as the traditional religion appears to be spiritual and otherworldly” (13). Appalachian literature being “decidedly worldly, secular” is why some Appalachian stories are rooted in the basics of everyday life. For many Appalachians, the world is what we can see and is happening to us in the present. But Appalachian literature also draws on the “otherworld,” the spiritual. Changing the way we study Appalachian literature to account for this mixing of the worldly and the spiritual is important to begin understanding not only the stories but the cultural implications of a region with a stereotype as being “yesterday’s people” (Eller 2).

This stereotype of Appalachia being an outdated culture is defused when we consider the religious implications of Appalachian literature and the otherworld. Melinda Bollar Wagner outlines “several conclusions” made by Appalachian scholars about the defining characteristics

of conventional Appalachian religion (185). These characteristics are fundamentalist, puritanism, an importance on a personal relationship with God, salvation is achieved through God's grace, fatalism or realism, and the experiential and emotional expression of faith (Wagner 185-187). Two of these characteristics are traceable to nontraditional spirituality, specifically the individual relationship with God and realism. The individualized relationship with God instead of using a community approach and a realistic approach to life and death are both found more often in spiritual practices than in conventional religious dogma. While mainstream literary critics, like Hungerford and Ng, find a shift in religion and spirituality happens after the 1960s, Still's version of Appalachian literature shows this shift much earlier in the 1940s. In other words, Appalachian spirituality is ahead of the times in terms of its fluidity.

In this chapter, I will discuss stereotypes of Appalachian religion and spirituality, and how Still has taken genre factors from folk tales and applied them to his novel to help readers bridge the gap from oral stories to written literature. I will also suggest a new way to discuss Appalachian literature with a focus beyond linguistics or tracing heritage back to Scots-Irish writings, specifically viewing religion as a major avenue of connection for some Appalachian people. With close readings of folk legends collected by Thomas E. Barden and scenes from *River of Earth* by James Still, I will paint a picture of Appalachian spirituality and how the area isn't as conventional/fundamentalist as mainstream critics like to think it is. Focusing on the uses of the otherworld is beneficial to all scholars and readers in the genre and is important to consider when placing these texts in a modern context.

“Otherworld” Theory

Using the term “otherworld” is important to distinguish the Appalachian way of life and is different from what some readers may think of when first hearing the term. Miller's otherworld

theory in Appalachian literature begins with the idea that lifestyles in the area are separated in two age periods aligned with two different points of view. The first portion of this theory is dedicated to younger individuals in the area and is more focused on a secular way of living. Appalachian youth are more individual and secular (Miller 14). Younger people are allowed to experience the sins of life and are expected to. Miller describes this expectation by pointing to examples from radio shows where the music played passes through the stages of Appalachian people's lives (15). Most of the radio show consists of music themed around the "joys and sorrows of fornication and adultery," while the end of the show will conclude with a "spiritual number" (15). Later life is the time when older people are expected to reform into uber spiritual beings that focus on the next life, or the otherworld (Miller 14). By differentiating the afterlife as something separate from a religious image of the white pearly gates, Appalachian people can focus on the now without the anxieties of the future while still being hopeful of what is to come (14). This separation of secular and religious living is essential to life for some Appalachians and is displayed in *River of Earth*, especially.

Appalachian literature is full of otherworldly aspects of life, and how many Appalachian people try to come to terms with these things. The "otherworld" describes this nontraditional or spiritual sense of faith in Appalachia and shows that the people (and literature) have more fluid ideas about religion than Marilynne Robinson's picture of more conventional religion in *Gilead*. Miller uses this term to describe the transition Appalachian people must undergo from their secular youth to spiritual elders. This transition, however, does not take place in a physical otherworld, but rather a spiritual one. This transition from physical to spiritual priorities is like the one that Milkman goes through in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. These various transitions in the physical and the spiritual world have a major impact on our understanding of

what these Appalachian authors and storytellers deem conventionally religious or unconventionally spiritual. The “otherworld” is a way to enable the belief in an idealized future for Appalachian people in which they don’t need to worry about *how* they get there but only that it will come.

James Still reimagines traditional folk legends and tales to create a world where we are asked to come to terms with the secular living and unconventional spirituality that is found in Appalachia. Still utilizes this transition using the otherworld in his novel, *River of Earth*, by having a young boy protagonist undergo a coming-of-age story in the coal camps of impoverished Appalachia. He reimagines folk tales to help expand his reader’s understanding of religion and spirituality in Appalachia. This example of the otherworld is easily connected to the folk legends collected in *Virginia Folk Legends* by Thomas Barden, in which the tales are a way to ease the anxieties of everyday life in the area and describe the otherworld in more accessible terms. Barden influences some of Still’s writing. Even though they are published in the same time frame, Still would’ve been exposed to folk legends while living in Alabama and later Kentucky. The otherworld in Appalachian literature is used as an avenue for transformation and a depiction of an idealized future.

How the Otherworld Exists in Folk Legends

Traditionally, folk legends are an oral story told by elders to typically younger audiences, making Appalachian folk legends similar to classical myths and legends in their origins and possible adaptations from orator to orator. Ronald D. Eller states that “Appalachian history has been reduced to popular legends and myths perpetuated in romantic novels, missionary tracts, and social surveys” (2). These legends and myths may add to the fantasy of the area but also help

clarify more complex ideas when it comes to Appalachian religion and spirituality. Eller goes on to write:

Because mountain culture—not unlike the larger society of the American South—has been a predominantly oral culture, the successes and failures, the struggles and hardships of the lives of mountain people in their journey to the present day have seldom found their way into the documents from which history is written. (4)

This lack of documentation of the history of Appalachia is part of the reason that there is an idea of Appalachians being ignorant or behind the modern age. While most of Appalachian culture is viewed as behind mainstream America, the area has a vast history that should be counted in America's history as a nation. We can begin to understand how folk legends relate to the otherworld through the work of Miller: "Tales stand in a secular tradition, and their tellers, even when they are extremely sophisticated, are folk artists employing literature to reveal, through art, what reality may obscure" (17). Many folk tales are stories told to audiences that fit into both the younger and older demographics of Appalachia and are used as morality stories. These tales do not have any religiously charged symbolism and stand firmly in the area's secular traditions. Thanks to Thomas E. Barden, the collection of oral history, fiction and nonfiction, has become a major source material for Appalachian folklorists.

With funding through the Virginia Writer's Project (VWP), a sub-branch of the Works Project Administration (WPA), field workers went out into various areas of Virginia to interview the local people about history, geography, town myths, and many other things. These field workers collected these stories from 1937 until 1942 ("Federal Writer's Project"). Folklorist Thomas E. Barden created his collection *Virginia Folk Legends* showing these legends that had never seen print. This collection of folk legends was and is a major part of the study of

Appalachian Literature and folklorists today learn from the field guides used by the VWP. These legends range in topic from place names, omens, witches, ghosts, devil dogs, Daniel Boone, and many other legends relating to Appalachia. African American Folklore uses some of the techniques found in their counterparts of Appalachian Folklore but draw on influences from African religions instead of Celtic religions. Toni Morrison uses an African American folk legend to reimagine the “Flying Africans” from Julius Lester’s legends, while James Still reimagine Appalachian folk legend techniques found in Barden’s collection. I will take a close look at “Death Dog,” “The White Dove: A Dead Wife Returns,” and “A Silver Bullet for a Witch” to further explain the usage of the otherworld in folk legends and how James Still reimagine genre techniques for his usage of the other world in his novel.

Trying to see far off or hang hopes on prophecy is not a new theme in Appalachian literature and is given major attention in Barden’s *Virginia Folk Legends*. In my experience of the region, signs are often used to relieve anxiety for Appalachian families. Using signs as a comfort for the unknown is one way that these legends are used as entertainment while still giving many Appalachian people a way to *foresee* the future. Folk legends are mostly very short tales that encompass a broad range of ideas and themes relating to the culture they are produced in. These tales show a specific understanding of the otherworld as a relatively close aspect of life and dying. The tales that use signs as an omen of death offer a specific understanding of how present life to Appalachian people is not guaranteed and that they must accept the future regardless of what signs they may be given. Miller would say that omens are a way for Appalachian people to come to terms with the brevity of life in Appalachia and use them to look forward to the otherworld, whatever it may be.

However, signs may also serve as a way for characters in Still's novel and characters in the folk legends to look forward to the future without the responsibility of making it happen and not necessarily as black or white omens. This usage of the otherworld is concerned with the relationship of secular, religious, or even sacrilegious thinking. Again, folk legends use the otherworld as a tie to the world of the supernatural, such as witches and haunted houses. Witchcraft is also a major theme when discussing signs and is a consideration when thinking about the otherworld. These folk legends demonstrate that people from Appalachia have not grown up with a fear of the unknown. Some Appalachian peoples collect knowledge about folk cures for ailments. In mainstream America, these cures may be construed as witchcraft. This means that there has been an amazing integration of the natural and the supernatural to create a foothold for the otherworld to thrive. These cordial feelings between the natural and supernatural can be found in the folk legends in Barden's collection.

The separation of a spiritual afterlife from people's present lives is ambiguous in Appalachian folk legends. "The Death Dog" as told by Dicy Adams is a tale about animals, which is a major motif in the heritage of the area as well as a major sign used by Appalachian people as both good and bad omens. This tale describes a big dog that wanders down from the mountains to visit a town and "takes up" in front of family homes (Barden 245). Soon after the "taking up," a member of the family will get sick and die (245). The appearance of the dog is a sign that someone will soon die and is an example of the otherworld meshing with the secular world of Appalachia. Using signs as a connection to the otherworld is a motif often found in Appalachian literature. The teller uses a dog to signify something terrifying coming and to separate what the audience knows to be true for the present and the far-off future. With an

understanding of Miller's definition of the otherworld, it is easy to see how Still's novel has come to follow the same principles as traditional folk legends.

"The White Dove: A Dead Wife Returns," as told by Melviny Brown, describes the story of her master and his first wife. The first wife was in the garden one day with her husband and she leaned over to smell a new flower she noticed. Melviny says that the first wife "fell ober in er faint, an' de young masrter he taken her up in his'n arms an' carried her in de house" (Barden 260). Once the first wife wakes up, she says that "she knew she was a-goin' ter die" but she would "come back as er white dove" (260). The first wife is not scared to die nor is she worried about coming back to life or not. Melviny continues her story and explains that the master of the house doesn't get married again for quite a few years, but he does eventually (Barden 261). On the day he brings home his new wife, a white dove is spotted (261). The first wife's reincarnation as a white dove is a symbolic application of the otherworld as a more hopeful future than the story of "The Death Dog." "The White Dove" is a tale that dedicates its narrative to a way of living and dying as a peaceful endeavor.

Not naming characters is a further strategy used by Appalachian folktales to create a level of ambiguity and applicability to other areas. An instance of not naming characters comes from the tale "A Silver Bullet for A Witch" as told by P.T. Sloan, in which the teller describes an incident of witchcraft, and introduces a concept of mysticism. This tale states that the only way to kill a witch is to use a silver bullet and that a "relative by the name of 'Joe' had killed his brother" using a silver bullet to "be sure his bullet would end the life of his enemy" (Barden 95). This quote is an example of using a different name to protect the anonymity of the people in the tale. While this tale blurs the line between fiction and reality, it is clear that the otherworld is present through the supposed witch character. This tale meshes major aspects of Christian morals

with those of secular superstition to create a cautionary tale to spot the killing of a witch.

Audiences would not necessarily believe in the existence of witches as a true evil because the story was collected in 1939 (Barden 95). However, the suspense the tale creates by removing the given name of the murderer is a way for P.T. to connect the otherworld with the audiences' own.

How the Otherworld Exists in *River of Earth*

River of Earth, originally published in 1940, follows a seven-year-old boy over the course of three years while his family must decide whether or not they will stay on the farm or move to a mining town to make more money. The boy, whose name isn't given, is the narrator of the story and watches those around him closely without understanding the bigger implications of what is happening. Set during the Great Depression, the family must try to keep afloat on farm land that has stopped being fertile. The boy's father, Brack Baldrige, is a giving soul and tries to be a helping hand to other families in the area and his own extended family. When their relatives, Harl and Tibb Logan, come to stay with them, Brack is hard pressed by his wife Alpha to kick them out. However, he declines due to a deep moral belief that one should always help others, especially family. Alpha grows tired of providing for not just their own family but others in the area and Harl and Tibb, so she burns the main house down and the family moves into the shack.

Brack is an especially hard worker and has no problems finding work in different mines in the area. But when the mines are no longer hiring, the family's financial struggles become more dire. He becomes a farmer and a delivery man that goes up to the homes deep in the mountains. As the family's financial distress becomes the focal point, they find it hard to take care of Alpha's brother, Uncle Jolly, who frequently ends up in jail. Uncle Jolly volunteers to take care of their mother, Grandma Middleton, who is dying. These experiences are not fully

understood by the boy currently due to his young age, but do help to form the person he will become in the future.

Through the boy's experiences, we can see the age-based separation of Appalachian secularism and spiritualism described by Miller. The secular world the young protagonist is living in allows him to be excited by the prospect that he may be able to bring a colt home from the neighbor's pregnant mare without considering that this may not be possible. He gets so caught up in daydreaming about possibly having his own horse that his father must tell him to calm down by saying, "There ain't no sense trying to see far off, . . . It's better to keep your eyeballs on things nigh, and let the rest come according to law and prophecy" (Still 25). The reliance on the faith of the otherworld as a hopeful omen is conveyed by this quote's indication of letting "the rest come" regardless of how people may influence the present (25). Father's emphasis on not worrying about what's coming in the secular world is much like the prophecy the first wife makes in "The White Dove" about her own return to life beyond her impending death. This section of Still's novel shows how people in Appalachia separate their lives into what is the present, or this world, and the future, the otherworld. Father is telling the young protagonist to not worry about the future and let life take its own course according to the otherworld's prophecy. This is the beginning of Still's use of this dichotomy to show that people in this area are unable to live for their future and must focus on the present to survive. The young boy, freshly seven at this point in the novel, is being taught this lesson and will soon understand the social implications of the otherworld. Father plays a major role in teaching the lessons of the otherworld and the separation of secular and religious aspects of life and death.

River of Earth shows many examples of the otherworld in Appalachian literature, which emphasizes the different aspects of life in Appalachian culture and shows the separation of young

adult thinking and middle aged to elder thinking. Some Appalachian people are reliant on the idea of the otherworld to help them separate from their own lives to help create a hopeful future. The separation of the novel into three different sections is an aesthetic decision made to use the physical copy of the book as a vehicle for a major part of the otherworld theory Still is trying to use to imply a higher meaning of the text.

Still's decision to separate the novel into three sections is an aesthetically driven move made to resemble the stages of acceptance of the otherworld. By using this separation of the novel, Still deviates from folk tale traditions by showing a better example of the transition from secular youth to spiritual elders. The first section is dedicated to explaining the freedoms of youth (secular thinking), the second section is used as a transition from denying the otherworld to beginning to understand its importance, and the third section is a final agreement on the benefits of believing in an otherworld (spirituality). The young protagonist must navigate these stages of acceptance to understand the trials he will continue to experience much into his adulthood. Still would agree that the wheel never stops turning and has Brother Mobberly, an itinerant preacher, make a statement describing this helplessness as, "where air we going on this mighty river of earth, a-borning, begetting, and a-dying – the living and the dead riding the waters?" (Still 76), and those beings must accept the things that are true to them in the present.

The implication of this quote points to Brother Mobberly's religious belief that despite the matters of the present, the otherworld continues its path guiding Appalachian people. The emphasis on the present is seen throughout Still's novel and is most often portrayed by our guide, Father. Appalachian literature falls into this same pattern with the sectioning of Still's novel as an example.

Part One of *River of Earth* describes the young boy understanding his present and his desire to explore the world beyond his home in the mountains (Briley 66). He must learn the many trials of being a part of a family in rural Appalachia and the differences between his own mindset and that of his father, Brack. Father is the sole figure in this portion of the text that has a set of morals reminiscent of Christian religion and tries to stick to them to better benefit himself and his understanding of the world as he knows it. Father is currently in the middle stage of life and beginning his transition into devout spiritual living. By taking in Uncle Samp, Harl and Tibb, Father shows that he is compassionate and more adept to spiritual points of view, although he does still imply that the present is more important than the future. Father lays down the law to the family by saying, “My folks eat when we eat . . . and as long as we eat” (Still 8). This proclamation shows the reliance on familial ties in Appalachian life and how living is as much about being able to sustain life as it is about sustaining relationships. While he doesn’t say that we should follow in the footsteps of Jesus and give to others what we give to ourselves, the moral that Father is using to guide his decisions regarding his extended family moving into his home implies that he has begun to align his views with that of the religious elders of the community and shows the separation of himself from the secular living that the young boy is living in.

By not naming the young protagonist nor titling the sections of the novel, Still has been able to keep a level of fictional anonymity to make his story potentially relatable to many people in Appalachia. This decision is sometimes used in Appalachian literature so that all stories, ballads, and tales can be transferred to each area in Appalachia as if it happened there originally. We saw this same strategy used, for example, in “A Silver Bullet for a Witch.” Briley would point to this story as an indication of the belief of the supernatural in Appalachian areas much

like the children's curiosity of the fortune-teller in *River of Earth* (Still 196). In this scene, Euly, the boy's older sister, turns from the window and announces that she has seen a woman walking by, possibly a fortune-teller (195). This causes a minor excitement among the family and Uncle Samp explains that the fortune-teller is "a widow-woman, fair as picture-piece. She goes atrapsing all hours, selling broadsides with verses writ in them" (195). The family isn't alarmed by seeing this unnatural woman or by her trade and Euly goes on to say, "If I had some money, I'd get my fortune told" (196). This mystical woman is only a widow that uses crafting as a mode to get money so she can continue to live without a husband but by making her into a fortune-teller, the boy's family is able to explain her otherness in terms that they deem acceptable. Some Appalachian literature uses supernatural beings or events to explain uncommon situations without causing a mass hysteria. Unlike in conventional Christian societies in the past, like the Salem witch trials, these examples of Appalachian literature allows for an acceptance of spiritual practices. Although "A Silver Bullet for a Witch" includes the supposed killing of a witch, the teller and the audience are not immediately frightened and do not view the story as nightmare inducing.

River of Earth tells a story about the otherworld by showing the dichotomy of life that is apparent in Appalachia. The separation of secular youth and religious elders is used to describe the transformation Appalachian people undergo to better understand the circumstances of their present world without caving into the anxieties about a future that is not always stable. While young people in the area are often used as a metaphor for the present in Appalachian literature, their viewpoint is just as important to understand as that of the spiritual elders. The otherworld as it appears in Still's novel *River of Earth*—as a kind of coming-of-age transition—is different compared to how it is used in folk legends, but the underlying message is still the same.

The otherworld begins to play a major role in the explanation of death and the afterlife, and it is increasingly clear that Still hopes to use Father as an exemplary man to define these transitions to the young protagonist. Father's journey is a path to see where the young boy will end up when he reaches his middle life and must begin to come to terms with death. Father states, "It was never meant for a body to be full content on the face of this earth" (Still 52). This declaration of not being "meant" for earth is a way for Father to describe the basic principles of the otherworld. The emphasis of "this earth" is a unique aspect of his speech that indicates an idealized version of another earth or the next earth. This theme continues into a conversation between the young protagonist and Uncle Jolly when he describes a meeting with Walking John Gray, "Oh, I've seed Walking John a dozen times over, meeting him places you'd never expect to see a body" (Still 139). These "places" are unique because one would never expect to see a body, but what defines a body fit for earth? Still's standards don't seem to exist for this type of person to meet in the physical realm of the earth but rather in a spiritual realm of the otherworld. John Walkabout is a symbol of the adventures waiting beyond the mountains of Appalachia for the young protagonist and he becomes obsessed with being able to travel and see "every living hill" (Still 141). While there is no evidence that "Walking John" existed previously in folk legends and could potentially be an invention of Still's, it resembles similarly larger-than-life figures, like "Jack" found in "Jack Tales" that exist in folklore practices (Thompson and Moser 153).

Conclusion

The otherworld, as found in some Appalachian literature, is a complex idea, and is a fantastical place where people have freedom to separate their lives into a binary where young people can explore the world in a secular sense and older people are able to rely on religious thinking to prepare for the next (other)world. Separating life into these two portions is a way for

Appalachian people to expand their knowledge of the world as they know it and how they can interrupt the singular articulation of living. Appalachian people often go on journeys of selfrealization throughout the literature, which is another example of this trope of using the otherworld as a transformative metaphor. Analyzing *River of Earth*, after reaching an understanding of the usage of the otherworld in folk legends, is a way to simultaneously understand some Appalachian people's nonmainstream understanding of the relationship between living and dying. This relationship is best described by Still's "river of earth" in which the living and dead are always a part of the cycle of earth (Still 76). This opinion is rooted in the spiritual *and* physical realms of Appalachia and is a unique way to describe the next (other)world.

Robinson, Morrison, and Still have taken various influences and reimagined conventional religion and unconventional spirituality. Their influences include things that fall within the secular world and the nonsecular world, and they use them to create an in-between space for people of various religious and spiritual backgrounds to connect with their stories. These influences can be atheism, philosophy and the Bible as found in Robinson's *Gilead*, African American folk legends and the Bible as found in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and finally Appalachian folk legends and the supernatural as found in Still's *River of Earth*. By looking at the way these authors reimagine religion and spirituality, we can track a kind of transition from conventional religion to a more fluid form of spirituality through literature.

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