

COMING OF AGE: RITE OF PASSAGE AND IMAGES OF MANHOOD IN THE  
SOUTHERN NOVEL

by

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(Under the Direction of Carolyn Jones Medine)

ABSTRACT

Examining the role of the novel as rite of passage and investigating various theories on ritual and Southern masculinity, I apply my findings to Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* and Earnest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*.

INDEX WORDS: Rite of passage, Ritual, To Kill A Mockingbird, A Lesson Before Dying, Southern masculinity, Manhood, Coming of Age, Southern values, Myth, Transformation, Southern Literature

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A.B., The University of Georgia, 2000

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2004

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May 2004

## DEDICATION

The following thesis is dedicated to Dr. Carolyn Jones Medine, my mentor and dear friend, and to my family, for their support and unconditional love.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the entire Religion Department at the University of Georgia for their support throughout my academic career at Georgia. In particular I would like to thank Dr. William Power, Dr. David Williams, and, again, Dr. Carolyn Jones Medine for all of their help in preparing this work.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
CHAPTER	
1 Introduction: Novel As Ritual: Reconstructing the South through Literature .....	1
2 Rites of Passage and Trials of Community: Striving to Make the Just Man in Harper Lee's <i>To Kill A Mockingbird</i> .....	19
3 "A Way Out of No Way": Witnessing Transformation in Earnest Gaines' <i>A Lesson Before Dying</i> .....	38
4 Conclusion: After the Ritual, Beyond the Book.....	61
WORKS CITED.....	68

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: NOVEL AS RITUAL: RECONSTRUCTING THE SOUTH THROUGH LITERATURE

Harper Lee's only novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* and Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* ask readers to follow a ritual movement, to experience, through the imagination, the situation of another, and to return to their own worlds again, taking back with them, the gift of a wider and deeper human experience. In this sense, the novel itself can act as a rite of passage, a ritual specific to transformation from one state to another. Lee and Gaines, in these novels, write about their characters' rites of passage all the while luring the reader to them join in their transformation. Lee and Gaines map out their narratives by marching into the thicket of the secret hearts of their fictional communities and characters. The thicker and more detailed the narrative landscapes, the more intimate the connection between reader and text. The reader gets lost in the text with only the lamp light of the author to lead him or her back out again. Literal legal trials and the effects of these trials provoke individual characters and fictional communities to reflect on Old Southern traditions and values. Both novels focus on individual character's rites of passage as well as the fictional community's steps towards transformation. As the reader identifies with these characters and communities in crisis, the reader vicariously takes part in these trials, but at a safe distance, through the imagination, which, at the same time creates intimacy.

Both novels focus on a particular time and place in American history, the highly segregated rural South of the 1930s and 1940s. After the Civil War, the South, despite the

official end of slavery, still maintained a strong sense of Old Southern values, both good and bad. New laws had been made, but the spirit had not changed. Change in spirit did not happen over night, but rather began as *A Lesson Before Dying* ends, in the post World War II 1940s, and continues to change still today. Given these changes, Southerners then and now must ask themselves, what Southern values should be preserved in the face of change and how and which values are detrimental or outdated? Many Southern novelists have taken it upon themselves to ask and sometimes answer this question in their novels. Harper Lee and Earnest Gaines are two notable examples of such Southern writers. Lee and Gaines choose to cling to and magnify three strains of thought often associated with the honorable dimension of Southern culture: Aristotelian friendship, Christian brotherhood, and Stoic resilience and honor. For Lee and Gaines, these are the admirable qualities of a true Southerner, black and white.

Not only do Lee and Gaines explore and evaluate many Southern traditions and values, focusing particularly on issues pertaining to Southern manhood, they also ask and answer more generalized questions regarding human existence and community. Despite the small town Southern flavor of these two novels, the questions they ask and answer are not limited to issues pressing to the South in the 1900s. Lee and Gaines also ask what it means to be a man, what it means to be a hero. They also address questions of “self” and its relation to community. This leads them to ask questions regarding power and its effects on human relationships. Finally, Lee and Gaines answer these questions by showing us, through the image of the legal trial, the inner workings of transformation and rites of passage in the bodies of their texts. Before we can enter these novels, therefore we must first look at ritual theory. Here I will examine the rite of passage theory articulated by Arnold Van Gennep and how it has been utilized for the social by Victor Turner and for the individual by Joseph Campbell.

Investigations about theory concerning pilgrimage, the hero journey, and border theory, all require a return to the origin from which much of this theory sprang. This origin is ritual, more specifically a category of ritual designated as “rite of passage” by Arnold Van Gennep in 1908. Victor Turner, an anthropologist who expands on Van Gennep’s rite of passage theory, defines such rites as “the transitional rituals accompanying changes in place, state, social position, and age in a culture” (*Image 249*). This ritual’s structure has three phases, as designated by Van Gennep and appropriated by Turner: separation, margin or *limen*, and reaggregation.

During the first phase initiates are cut off from their old surroundings, preparing them for a movement into a new existence. In the second phase, the subjects enter a state of liminality. In this liminal stage, the subjects are forced to shed all notions of self they had prior to the rite. Ambiguity abounds. The subjects are stripped of their secular situations and individuality for a reason: to make space for the sacred and to open up channels for bonding with each other. In this second phase, the “secular powerlessness” of the subjects “may be compensated for by a sacred power” (*Image 249*). It is within this state that the subjects undergoing the rites, the ambiguous liminars, spontaneously unite in “unmediated communication” or “communion,” which Turner calls “communitas” or “antistructure” (*Image 250*). Sometimes regarded as dangerous by the guardians of structure, this “communitas” “does not merge identities; it liberates them from conformity to social norms” (*Image 250*). Communitas, according to Turner, is “an essential and generic human bond” (*Image 250*). Its existence requires connection, communication, and communion on the deepest human level. It is an equalizer and codifier. Turner draws on the thoughts of Jean-Paul Sartre to explain the relationship between communitas, also known as antistructure, and structure, when he writes “structures are created by activity which has no

structure but suffers its results as structure” (*Image 250*). *Communitas* is the “activity which has no structure;” however, its results are, ironically, structure. *Communitas* and structure are, Turner asserts, dependent upon one another. Healthy societies work on “a continuous cycle of *communitas/ /structure/communitas,*” (*Image 252*).

In order for society to operate in an orderly fashion, this liminality, this *communitas*, must be a temporary state. This leads us to the third phase set out by Van Gennep and elaborated by Turner, reaggregation. This return to social structure, to society, is the last phase of the rite of passage. It is the phase which installs the ritual subjects “inwardly transformed and outwardly changed, in a new place in society” (*Image 249*). This final stage is the result and goal of the entire rite of passage according to Turner. Although all three stages are necessary, the first two stages find their purpose and fulfillment in the last stage. Separation and communion are done for the renewal of structure. Liminality, for Turner, is a means to an end, the end being the continuation of a healthy and ordered society. As I will discuss later, the emphasis on societal structure and its continuity and undercurrent of progress in Turner’s rite of passage theory, which implies that liminality and ambiguity are necessary but inferior states, will become sources of tension for border theorists. Turner is occupied with the societal functioning of rite of passage. His interest in individuals is limited to how he sees individuals constructing and renewing community.

Another theorist inspired by Van Gennep’s three part scheme of rites of passage is Joseph Campbell. Campbell, however, seems to place more emphasis on the individual’s transformation than Turner.

Robert A. Segal, an expert on and sometimes critic of Campbell, presents an insightful description of how Campbell utilizes Van Gennep’s rite of passage theory as a vehicle for his

own theory. Segal states that Campbell applies to myth the pattern which Van Gennep applied to ritual (*Intro* 16). The functioning of myth for Campbell, according to Segal, is psychological and metaphysical which contrasts with Van Gennep, who sees the function of ritual as social (*Intro* 16). Segal states that Campbell's use of Van Gennep's rite of passage designations for myth lead one to believe that "myth exists to help the individual and only secondarily to socialize him" (*Intro* 16). Segal, particularly in his book *Theorizing about Myth*, systematically accuses Campbell of many things. Segal accuses Campbell of being dogmatic, "asserting rather than proving his theory," of ignoring theories that rival his, of contradicting himself "on the meaning, function, and origin of myth," of arguing circularly, and of being "lopsidedly universalistic" (*Theorizing* 138-140). Segal claims that Campbell "brazenly ignores lingering differences," "uniformly ignores adherents of myth," and often pits myth against religion (*Theorizing* 140-141). Segal likens Campbell to "a Christian fundamentalist who urges everyone to accept the Bible because it is true" (*Theorizing* 140). In another of his books which was previously cited, *Joseph Campbell: An Introduction*, Segal is more sympathetic however he still admonishes Campbell for the comparative method he used as he looked for the similarities among world myths. In this instance, Segal makes his critique of Campbell's practices in the name of particularists:

They might well deny the existence of the similarities. They would certainly deny their importance. They would argue that the differences count far more. They would argue that the sheer presence in even all myths of gods, virgins, heroes, saviors, death, and rebirth would beg, not answer, the key question: whether the archetypes mean the same in each case. (*Intro* 95)

Despite the variety of criticisms Segal makes in regard to Campbell and his theories, Segal praises, albeit only briefly, the contributions Campbell has made to the study of myth:

Despite these many criticisms, Joseph Campbell merits much praise. He, more than anyone else, has helped to revive popular interest in myth...Campbell's work is an important introduction to myth. It is simply not the last word (*Theorizing* 141).

No matter what one thinks of Segal's comments, he correct in asserting that Campbell's theories on myth are not the last word. Campbell, as well as many other myth theorists have inspired generations of theorists in all fields of study. Segal's interpretation of Campbell's translation and appropriation of Van Gennep's distinctions may be overly critical at points however, it is important to note that Campbell gave Van Gennep's formulation new and vital embodiment in his theories on myth and its function for the modern individual.

Campbell's myth theory, having evolved from a rite of passage theory, has a progressive flow which finds its structure in the pattern of the hero journey. Campbell gives an outline of what he terms the monomyth in his work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. It is here that Campbell connects Van Gennep's rite of passage theory, in slightly altered terms, with his own theory on the hero myth:

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation- initiation- return*: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth. *A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.* (30)

Campbell sees the hero myth as an expansion of the rite of passage. Although Campbell may be more focused on the individual than either Van Gennep or Turner, he seems just as interested in the promotion of the human race, via myth as rite. Campbell defends myth when he writes of myth and rite's prime function as having always been "to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back" (11). As with Turner's theory, the idea of evolution or progress takes center stage.

Many theories based upon a rite of passage scheme: pilgrimage, initiation, and myth theories, necessarily imply a movement from a lesser, inchoate, and/ or inferior state to a greater, more integrated, and/ or superior state. The very structure itself hints at a hierarchy of states and therefore a hierarchy among the individuals within those states. For theorists such as Turner and Campbell, whose aim, whether focused on society or the individual, is the progress of human kind from one stage to another, this was not a problem. However, for "border" and other postcolonial theorists, this tacit valuing of some states over others carries with it the taint of an imperialistic mindset, one which would place European, Christian, wealthy, heterosexual males and their ideals in the highest rung of the ladder and everyone else clamoring for identity. This identity could be claimed but only into proportion to the amount of assimilation the so-called "inferiors" were willing to undergo. Words used by Turner such as "liminal" and "marginal," words that many groups and individuals identify with, are depicted as, at best, temporary goods and, at worst, necessary evils required to eventually gain a higher status. The very designation of the superior person as the "hero," a title which necessitates the individual be male, seems to place all females outside of Campbell's myth pattern, and therefore outside of personhood, communal renewal, and cosmic communion.

Although this is not the only critique launched against Campbell, it is one which seems indicative of the others. “Border” and other postcolonial theorists see within theorists such as Turner and Campbell an essential “othering” of certain individuals, communities, and states, to clarify the imperial Self’s claim to identity. Identity is claimed by a few but at the cost and to the detriment of the “others.” Border theorists seek to create a fluid borderland where differences are celebrated, a literally leveled playing field where differences meet on equalized turf, not on a ladder of status. The borderland position on Victor Turner’s theories is mapped out and evaluated in Donald Weber’s article “From Limen to Border: A Meditation on the Legacy of Victor Turner for American Cultural Studies.”

Although the border critique of Turner, and other theorists, is legitimate and border theory, in general, gives voice to many underrepresented groups, I think it would be rash to entirely disregard theories of Turner, Campbell, and other theorists. Their theories can prove very insightful and be incredibly helpful when they are applied to specific scenarios, particularly in scenarios when individuals and communities are transformed to new states of being.

Others have added their voices to Weber’s; Marc Manganaro, in *Myth, Rhetoric, and the Voice of Authority: A Critique of Frazer, Eliot, Frye, and Campbell*, critiques Campbell’s “easy conflation of ‘primitive’ to ‘Oriental,’ and the equation of Western individualism to the higher reaches of the species” (176). Manganaro charges Campbell as having “some evolutionist assumptions inherited from turn-of-the-century social theory and anthropology (Tylor, Frazer, the Cambridge Hellenists, Leo Frobenius, Spengler)” (176). Gregory Salyer, in his article “Interpreting Campbell: Hermeneutics and Comparative Mythology,” touches on the problematic position of Campbell in relation to the academy. Salyer asks, “Is he an anthropologist, a psychologist, a mythologist, a mystic, a guru, or a popular hero?” (53). Salyer also notes that

Campbell is often critiqued for breaking the unwritten rules of scholarship. For example, Campbell “refused to complete his doctorate because it was too limiting a project” (53). Campbell’s popularity with the general public “tared his reputation in the academy” according to Salyer (53). Salyer’s comments up until this point seem to be critiques of Campbell’s character, made by others and only recorded by Salyer, rather than criticisms of his theory. At this point Salyer however, addresses, and undermines, many of the critiques of Campbell’s theories made by Robert A. Segal, probably the most notable critic of Campbell to date. Salyer defends Campbell against Segal’s claim that his theory of myth is reductionistic. According to Salyer, Campbell did note the differences as well as the similarities between myths and saw the relationship between these two as advocating contradiction and paradox but never erasure of one or the other. Salyer describes tension myth works in:

The comparative mythologist walks a tightrope, and the tension between the universals and the particulars is the creative tension that generates viable interpretations of myths. By embracing both sides of the world duality—similarities and differences, universals and particulars, transcendence and ethnicity—and by refusing to reduce myths or let his work on myths to either side of this duality, Campbell is able to let myth speak in its own term. (Salyer 57)

Today, many comparative approaches in the study of religion have come under fire. This has spawned critique upon critique in the world of scholarship. It has caused many to abandon theorists such as Turner, Campbell, and Mircea Eliade. At a time in human history when many scholars of religion note a rapid secularization of the world, hailed from the continued ushering in of the Enlightenment, it seems that the study of ritual and myth, as general subjects themselves not just in specific cases, would be of the utmost importance. Rite of passage and myth,

functioning as, rite of passage, has long served to socialize the younger generation, to make them both individuals, alone, and a community, together. As ritual vanishes from the surface of social structure, myth goes underground—as Campbell and Eliade assert. Here it continues to socialize the next generation, most notably in the form of literature and other arts (Eliade 134). It is in these instances that the theories of Turner and Campbell can be of the most use to the study of religion and literature. Using their theories, one can distinguish rite of passage elements and mythic patterns in the artistic products of more secularized cultures. Although Mircea Eliade's initiation theory is not explored here, I think it important to note his assessment of the status of the rite of passage motif in the modern age. Eliade argues that “initiation themes remain alive chiefly in modern man's unconscious” and that this is affirmed “not only by the initiatory symbolism of certain artistic creations- poems, novels, works of plastic arts, films- but also by their public reception” (134). In agreement with his assessment, I think that the rite of passage motif continues to play a dominant role in postmodern, as well as post-post modern society, camouflaged or not and continues to motivate individuals and cultures. If the study of religion refuses to acknowledge the variety of manifestations that the rite of passage motif takes, it will be to the detriment of both the study of religion and culture itself. The protean nature of the rite of passage motif shows just how essential it is to human nature. However, making broad generalizations about human nature opens the door for critique, as the previous assessment of theorists has just illustrated.

My focus on rite of passage in these two novels pertains to the trials related to becoming a man in the South. Both novels present characters who embody or learn to embody the honorable qualities of Southern manhood, qualities which these authors see as preserving the best of Old Southern values in the face of modernity and the New South. Honorable Southern

manhood, as alluded to in these novels, is best characterized in the following qualities: Aristotelian friendship, Christian brotherhood, and Stoic resilience and honor. This formula of values, which will be expounded upon later, represents a very distilled and refined vision of Southern manhood. Before we can reflect upon this refined vision, we must look, therefore, at the pictures of Southern manhood, and manhood, in general for that matter set out in contemporary theory.

First, many scholars of masculinity make a distinction between biological sex and gender. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner, the editors of the anthology *Men's Lives*, comment on the gendering process:

Our sex may be male, but our identity as men is developed through a complex process of interaction with the culture in which we both learn the gender scripts appropriate to our culture and attempt to modify those scripts to make them more palatable. (xx)

This statement implies multiple assertions regarding masculinity, all of which Kimmel and Messner later point out: the meaning of masculinity is culture specific and time specific, gender is a “organizing principle of social life,” and we all, as gendered beings, “come to know ourselves and our world through the prism of gender” (xv-xx). There are various kinds of theories regarding the relationship between sexuality and social behavior: biological methods which focus “on the ways in which innate biological differences between males and females [program] different social behaviors,” anthropological models which examine “masculinity cross-culturally, stressing the variations in the behaviors and attributes and attributes associated with being a man,” and the kind of method Kimmel and Messner adopt, a sociological model (xv). My goal here is not to determine which method is most accurate in determining the relationship between the above mentioned factors but rather to look at how masculinity has been

defined in the South over time, as well as the role it plays in the Southern novels I study. For this reason, a sociological perspective is the most useful for my purposes.

In his article “The Construction of Masculinity and the Triad of Men’s Violence,” Michael Kaufman draws attention to the fragility of masculinity and, like Kimmel and Messner, he emphasizes the distinction between maleness and masculinity:

With the exception of a proportion of the population born as hermaphrodites, there can be no biological struggle to be male. The presence of a penis and testicles is all it takes. Yet boys and men harbor great insecurity about their male credentials. (8)

Masculinity, it seems, means more than having the right physical attributes. It requires repression of “a vast range of human desires and possibilities: those that are associated with femininity” (Kaufman 7). In patriarchal societies, communities in which men are privileged in relations of power, men’s power coupled with the anxiety and the fragility intrinsic in masculinity often results in violence. Kaufman describes “the triad of men’s violence” as violence against women, violence against other men, and violence against oneself (5). Masculinity is often affirmed through many activities: sports, verbal put downs, competition, fighting, male bonding, and exclusive heterosexuality (Kaufman 9-11). It is vital to mention these attributes of masculinity for Southern masculine identity will weigh heavily upon them.

Bertram’s Wyatt-Brown’s book *Honor and Violence in the Old South* provides insightful elucidation on the changing face of Southern masculinity over time. As I noted earlier, masculinity seems to differ from culture to culture. Although much of Southern masculinity resembles masculinity in other cultures, it is predominately its own entity.

Southern culture has always valued honor as one of the highest human virtues. Honor in the Old South held different expectations, applied to certain individuals, and, on the whole,

meant something drastically different than in does in much of the South today although the concept still has power. According to Wyatt-Brown, honor was “an encoded system, a matter of interchanges between the individual and the community to which he or she belonged” (vii). Within it “meaning was imparted not with words alone, but in courtesies, rituals, and even deeds of personal and collective violence” (vii). Wyatt-Brown states that honor resided “in the individual as his understanding of who he is and where he belongs in the ordered ranks of society” (14). Honor in the Old South was based largely on public opinion. Wyatt-Brown states that in such a culture, “...honor is reputation” (14). This emphasis on hierarchy reminds us of Turner and the desired outcome of rite of passage.

If honor, public reputation, was highly coveted, its opposite, shame, was dreaded. Public humiliation was a fate worse than death for many a Southerner in the Old South (viii). Although this last trait may be viewed as admirable, the Old Southern definition of honor required that it be “inseparable from hierarchy and entitlement” (Wyatt-Brown 3-4). Honor was bestowed on one by the public. It lacked much of the internal quality now associated with it. Such a brand of honor, in order to give power and prestige to a few, required the subjection and rejection “of the lonely, the alien, and the shamed” (Wyatt-Brown 3-4). If everyone was granted honor by the public, it no longer meant anything. Its very nature required that others were honor-less. Wyatt-Brown connects this brand of honor to the master/slave relationship in the Old South:

The very debasement of the slave added much to the master’s honor, since the latter’s claim to self-sufficiency rested upon the prestige, power, and wealth that accrued from the benefits of controlling others. (ix)

Whereas Old Southern honor applied to all white classes, gentility was “a more specialized, refined form of honor, in which moral uprightness was coupled with high social position”

(Wyatt-Brown 40). According to Wyatt-Brown, there were three components which “appeared to be necessary for public recognition of gentility in the Old South: sociability, learning, and piety” (41). Wyatt-Brown notes that two of these attributes, learning and piety, over time begin to undermine much of the Old Southern honor code. Old Southern gentility had required allegiance to the Old Southern honor code. However, learning and Old Southern gentility become “increasingly incompatible as white democracy eroded the old deferences to hierarchy” (Wyatt-Brown 49). Besides the effects of learning on Southern gentility, Wyatt-Brown asserts that the influx of evangelical Christianity with its “somewhat democratic...character” and the influence of Victorian values at this time “transformed Southern gentility” (51, 23, 53). As two of the characteristics of Southern gentility radically changed, so did Southern gentility and the Southern definition of honor. With the rise of more democratic values via the infusion of evangelical Christianity and the ideology being taught young Southern gentlemen in universities, the Old Southern honor was revised. Southern honor became a more internal matter, as conscience and guilt rivaled and surpassed public honor and shame as motivators (Wyatt-Brown 51-55). Wyatt-Brown notes that as a society starts to assert “that there are no ranks, honor must necessarily be set aside or drastically redefined to mean something else” (14). Wyatt Brown gives an example of this “new democratic and Christian orientation” when he cites the notes of a young student from a class with Robert Henry, a professor of moral philosophy at South Carolina College: “Honor is that principle of nature which teaches us to respect ourselves, in order that we may gain the respect of others” (53). One hears, here, an echo of Atticus Finch, as we will see.

These changes affected individuals as well as society in general. As Southern gentility and Southern honor changed, Southern masculine identity and Southern societal structure were transformed. Southern societal structure was democratized; honor no longer depended on the

public honor of the few and the public degradation of many. The rise in the importance of a conscience/ guilt mentality over a public honor/ shame mentality required that Southern masculinity be re-examined. The two novels I will examine show us a working out of these questions regarding Southern masculinity, which are still in flux today.

Harper Lee's novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, deals with issues of Southern masculinity on several levels. Set in a small Southern town in the 1930's, the novel shows us the tensions around Southern honor and Southern masculinity are felt in full force. The town of Maycomb represents the Old South and the Old Southern honor code. Maycomb is rigidly socially stratified. Atticus Finch embodies both the publicly honored, pious, and genteel Southern gentleman and the democratic gentleman of conscience. Atticus is the isolated intellectual who does not adhere to Maycomb's ranking of human beings according to race and "breeding," although he does recognize that hierarchy's existence. His recognition of Tom Robinson and Calpurnia, two African Americans, as human beings, his refusal to change vocal registers when addressing persons of so-called lower-rank, and his advice to his children to try to see things from the "other's" point of view by climbing into their skin and walking around in it, all are testaments to his example as the New Southern gentleman (Lee 30). However, Atticus is an anomaly. The real possibility for a New Southern masculinity lies in Jem, his son. *To Kill a Mockingbird* records Jem's gendering process. Issues of Southern masculinity are of the utmost importance to him as he begins his rite of passage from childhood into manhood, his initiation. Jem has picked up on the Old Southern prerequisites for masculinity. His profound preoccupation with football, a civilized and honored manifestation of veiled violence in the South, throughout the novel shows how he associates, as many people do, violence and dominance over others with masculinity. Jem's desire for a gun also hints that he equates guns

with masculinity. Atticus seems to be aware of Jem's assumptions regarding masculinity and courage, and he uses Jem's encounter with Mrs. Dubose to show Jem "what real courage is"-- to steer Jem away from "getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand" (Lee 112). Jem continually tries to understand Maycomb's ranking system. In the beginning of the novel Jem operates on a public honor/ shame mentality. Jem "others" and demonizes Boo Radley, admonishes Scout for her femininity while at the same time condemning her for not acting like a lady, and would rather lose his life than be called a coward and publicly humiliated. However, by the end of the novel, Jem no longer pesters Boo; he takes a protective rather than antagonistic role in Scout's life, and he chooses again to risk his life. He, finally, is not risking his life to save his honor and to avoid shame; rather, he risks his life to save his sister—for the sake of the "other," like his father. Jem's identity is still undefined at the end of the novel; his initiation incomplete. However, the novel provides a template for a New Southern masculinity in both Atticus Finch and the gendering process of his son, Jem. Atticus' "self" is not dependent on the subjection of others, nor is his honor dependent on the recognition of others. In other words, his self depends on his communion with the "other" but not on domination of the "other."

In another novel focused on Southern manhood, Ernest J. Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant, the local African American school teacher, attempts to make Jefferson, a young African American convicted of murder and awaiting execution, into a man. In the process of this "man-making," questions regarding Southern manhood come to the fore. How is Grant to make Jefferson into a man when Grant feels that he himself does not know what it means to be a man? How can he teach that which he does not know himself? A certain unspoken question is addressed in the text itself. What standards of Southern manhood can these African American men apply to themselves, if the Old Southern standards of masculinity require a social hierarchy,

in this case a racial hierarchy in which they represented the bottom rung? Grant has acquired one of the characteristics attributed to southern gentility, learning. His education makes the whites view him as subversive. Grant also believes that his education allows him a degree of honor. Ironically, in the beginning of the novel, Grant operates in the Old Southern terms of honor, in which he seeks public honor and avoids public humiliation. He has internalized the racial hierarchy of his home.

Only when Grant begins to invest in Jefferson, who is unlearned and poor, does he lose this internalization. Grant and Jefferson redefine honor. The causes and effects of honor change. Honor must start with personal integrity and not public recognition. Jefferson's search for self-respect starts with his interaction with Grant, with his recognition that he is not "a hog" but a man. When he claims his "masculinity," he claims his humanity, by embodying a paradox. Masculinity, strictly defined, necessitates a denial of feminine qualities, such as passivity. This limits men's and women's ability to operate as whole human beings. Gaines rewrites this definition in his novel. Jefferson learns to kneel, to be passive when passivity is called for, and also how to stand, when the occasion requires it. Reverend Ambrose expresses his understanding of this paradox when he asks Grant, "You think a man can't kneel and stand?" (Gaines 216). Grant, the teacher, in turn, becomes Jefferson's student. Grant, always too eager to stand in all situations, by the end of the novel, is crying. When manhood no longer requires the traits traditionally associated with masculinity, the exaggeration of aggressive qualities and the suppression of feminine qualities and those that possess them, be they women or other men, manhood is transformed. Grant and Jefferson do not gain their manhood at the expense of the women in their community. Grant and Jefferson do not gain their personal honor by publicly

dishonoring “others” but rather by claiming their personal human integrity and communing with “the other.”

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, as in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, the characteristics of Southern manhood are put on trial, along with their protagonists. The trial is the liminal phase in the rite of passage in these novels, a rite that Jem and Jefferson undergo for and with their communities. In the structure of the trial, the *limen* causes a reaggregation-- but in these novels of a different kind. *Limen* becomes border. On that border, hierarchy is broken down: both these novels end with Turneran continuity: the community is safe and the father is present in *To Kill A Mockingbird* and Grant is still a teacher and the school goes on in *A Lesson Before Dying*. But there is a change, an exchange, that reminds us of the border theory: Paul and Grant are friends based on Jefferson’s “testament” and Jem sleeps and does not see Boo Radley but Scout, the writer, does and she tells us what she learns by standing in Boo’s shoes. Both books emphasize books: *A Lesson Before Dying* ends with Jefferson’s diary and Scout and Atticus are reading *The Gray Ghost* but real ghosts are dispelled. Friendship, the brotherhood of the book, and honor and resiliency are what Lee and Gaines want to teach us. The novel is rite of passage: we move to that border, experience it and move beyond, back to our communities, Gaines and Lee hope, as transformed individuals, ready to meet with the “others” at our borders, within our own communities.

## CHAPTER 2

RITES OF PASSAGE AND TRIALS OF COMMUNITY: STRIVING TO MAKE THE JUST  
 MAN IN HARPER LEE'S *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*

It must never be forgotten that initiatory death simultaneously signifies the end of the "natural," noncultural man, and passage to a new modality of existence ... Thus initiatory death forms an integral part of the mystical process by which the novice becomes another, fashioned in accordance with the model revealed by the God's or the mythical Ancestors. This is as much as to say that one becomes truly a man in proportion as one ceases to be a natural man and resembles a Supernatural Being.

-Mircea Eliade *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (132)

One must think like a hero to behave like a merely decent human being.

-May Sarton

Both what goes on in a town's courthouse and in a community's perquisites for manhood act as barometers of that community's morality. In Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch tries to compel Maycomb's moral standards upward through his handling of the trial of Tom Robinson. This book is also a testament to his striving to make his children decent human beings. Maycomb moves forward, albeit at a painfully slow pace, into what Lee calls the "New South" via the unjust trial of Tom Robinson, while Jem and Scout both go through "trials" of

their own, rites of passage<sup>1</sup>, in order to earn their roles as gentlemen and lady within what will become the “New South.” Rites of passage and trials involving thresholds and transformation are accompanied by ambiguity, instability, confusion, fear, doubt, and the ever-present possibility of irrational behavior. In this book, both an adolescent on the verge of adulthood, Jem, and a small segregated town faced with modernity, Maycomb, prove to be fertile ground for the above transitions and the accompanying effects. The states that the adolescent and this town occupy are what Victor Turner<sup>2</sup> calls “liminal” states, which he defines as “the state and process of mid-transition in a rite of passage” (*Image* 249). In terms taken from Arnold Van Gennep, Turner defines rites of passage as “the transitional rituals accompanying changes of place, state, social position, and age in culture” (*Image* 249). These rites of passage provide the frame for personal and social change. Tom Robinson’s trial is the beginning of Maycomb’s rite of passage from the last gasping breathes of Old South to the birth pains of the New, and it also marks Jem’s rite of passage, as he passes from the threshold of adolescence into manhood and becomes what I will call a “re-religioned” man.

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<sup>1</sup> My intention is to focus on Jem’s rite of passage and the correlation between the preliminary pains of his transformation and Maycomb’s. Although Scout’s rite of passage, a topic of recent scholarship, is important, it is not the intention of this article to investigate it. For an insightful peering into the issues of the “female voice” in the novel, reflections on Scout’s coming of age, and concerns about the film compromising the novel’s feminist and gender-related aspects, see Dean Shackelford’s article “The Female Voice in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Narrative Strategies in Film and Novel.”

<sup>2</sup> Recent ‘borderland’ scholars are critical of Turner’s terms, such as “liminal,” seeing his terms and methodology as being too limited and culturally biased. Turner’s terms take on an imperialistic taint when used to describe persons having multiple identities (doubleness etc.) because of their belonging to various communities due to their racial, ethnic, class, and gender identification or sexual orientation. These borderland theorists insist that theories like Turner’s view this ‘liminality, this ambiguity, as merely a means to an end, an end in which a healthy community is one in which assimilation has reached its highest level, an end in which incorporation is celebrated. These theorists claim that the term ‘border’ is a more inclusive term. It suggests a more flexible space in which various parties can dialogue on a more level footing. This claim is legitimate, especially when addressing postcolonial issues. However, Turner’s terms, such as ‘liminality,’ and his ‘rite-of-passage’ methodology are more appropriate for addressing Jem’s coming-of-age and Maycomb’s uncomfortable meeting with modernity. For more information on the ‘limen’/‘border’ argument see Donald Weber’s article “From Limen to Border: A Meditation on the Legacy of Victor Turner for American Cultural Studies.”

The trial, as an institution, offers the community the possibility of justice. It tests those on trial, those judging the defendant, and those who witness the judgment. It is a microcosm of the community it represents. However, it is, like a rite or ritual, a reaching above and beyond the standards of the community. It, again like a rite or ritual, looks forward while still harkening to vital parts of the past. Trials and rites are conduits for change as well as bastions of tradition. It is up to the participants in these two processes to decide what stays and what goes. Michael Meade, in his foreword to Eliade's *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, describes perfectly the effects on the community and individual that such transitional processes, in this case initiation processes, have:

...the initiation of youth always imply an opportunity for the cleansing and restoration of the life force of the community and the society...During initiation the individual becomes bound through spiritual experience to the future of the society on one hand and open to the origins and ancestral beginnings of the group in the past. For a time, the initiate steps out of being simply himself or herself and becomes an ancestral, dreamtime hero or heroine re-entering the origin stories of the culture. By shedding the skin of their limited sense of self, marked by the time they were born into and the family they were born amongst, the initiates encounter the sacred. (xx)

Why the focus on initiation rites? There are three reasons. First, Jem's initiation is the symbol of Maycomb's initiation. Second, the initiation reminds us that change is painful. Finally, the ordeal in initiation is confrontation with the "other"- - in this case Tom Robinson, but also those "others" that act as boundaries for Jem's world: Boo Radley and Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose, on whom I will focus here.

In *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Jem's rite of passage, a critically unexamined but crucial symbol, is not just a transformation of one individual boy; it is also an initiation into something new for that boy and a whole community. On the personal level, Jem becomes a functioning part of Maycomb's community. He is initiated into the workings of the adult world, confronted by its brutality but, in return, allowed some agency within its confines. He still retains part of his past identity. He is still Jem, but of equal importance is the addition to his name; he becomes Mr. Jem (Lee 115). On the social, he is a symbol of what Maycomb must become. Maycomb undergoes a similar initiation process during the trial of Tom Robinson. Its transformation is small, minuscule even. It is still 99% of the Maycomb it was before the trial, but that small percentage of change foretells the slow and silent ushering in of the New South and modernity. The South, like Jem, retains its distinction but it is headed in the direction of, acquiring the title of, "New." Jem and Maycomb both become part of communities larger than themselves; they become part of something more. Miss Maudie heralds Atticus' seeming failure in court as a movement forward, however small it may seem:

"I was sittin' there on the porch last night, waiting. I waited and waited to see you all come down the sidewalk, and as I waited I thought, Atticus Finch won't win, he can't win, but he's the only man in these parts who can keep a jury out so long in a case like that. And I thought to myself, well, we're making a step- it's just a baby-step, but it's a step." (Lee 216)

The trial as initiation brings about the movement of Jem and Maycomb; it brings the new into contact with the old. The trial and initiation are the spaces of negotiation, to use de Certeau's distinction between fixed and defined place and fluid and open space. In the space of trial,

conflicting parties can reach a compromise between the need of the individual and the requirements of the state, “an agreement reached by mutual concessions” (Lee 31).

Second, initiation imagery is pertinent because initiation rites and trials are necessarily painful. They are both testing grounds for the next stage. There must be some kind of death to one kind of life in order for there to be an awakening to the next. Eliade uses initiation rites as his template for the trials and ordeals that he believes every human being must undergo in order to truly become a “self”:

[The human being] becomes [him or herself] only after having solved a series of desperately difficult and even dangerous situations; that is, after having undergone ‘tortures’ and ‘death,’ followed by an awakening to another life...the process of initiation seems to be co-existent with any and every human condition.

(Eliade 128)

Finally, and most importantly, the trial and initiation, and rite of passage in general, imply that there is a series of ordeals to be faced. Neither trial nor initiation are one-step transformations but rather both are processes, a series of binding up what is to be kept and loosening what is no longer of use. Throughout these processes, participants in both are asked to re-orient themselves, to shift their postures, to refocus their outlooks, in order to allow room for their encounter with the “other,” whether that “other” is a person like Tom Robinson or Mrs. Dubose, a new way of life like that offered by adulthood or the New South, or the Sacred Other. They are, what I call, re-religioned, connecting the metaphor of binding to one of the roots of religion: *religio*, to bind. Past perspectives, superstitions, evil assumptions, prejudices, and caricatures of others as monsters or ghosts are questioned and either affirmed or denied when the

“other” is actually encountered, once one actually attempts to see the “other.” Trial and initiation are, like Victor Turner describes, all major liminal situations,

occasions on which a society takes cognizance of itself ... members of that society may obtain an approximation, however limited, to a global view of man's place in the cosmos and his relations with other classes of visible and invisible entities. (*Dramas* 240)

When Maycomb and Jem encounter the “other,” their past positions are confronted by Atticus' dangerous question, “Do you really think so?” This question is a constant in the on-going process of justice and formation of the just man and therefore a staple in the realm of the trial and initiation because justice is the goal of the trial and the just man the goal of initiation. By the just man, I mean a “good” man, a man who properly orients himself to others, whose stance mimics the gods', to put it in Eliade's terms, and whose religion adjusts appropriately, in the Aristotelian, not the relativist sense, in each encounter he has with the “other.” A community requires these re-religioned men, these intermediaries between what was, what is, and what is ahead, if it is to survive the integration of the new. The “other” often is, at first, monstrous. Turner discusses this when he describes the pedagogical function of monster imagery in initiation rites of young men:

The unusual, the paradoxical, the illogical, even the perverse, stimulate thought and pose problems...the portrayal of monsters and of unnatural situations in terms of cultural definitions like the incestuous ties connecting the gods in the myths of some religions may have a pedagogical function in forcing those who have taken their culture for granted to rethink what they have hitherto taken to be its axioms and 'givens.' For each society requires of its mature members not only adherence

to rules and patterns, but at least a certain level of skepticism and initiative.

Initiation is to rouse initiative at least as much to produce conformity to custom.

Accepted schemata and paradigms must be broken if initiates are to cope with novelty and danger. They have to learn how to generate viable schemata under environmental challenge. (*Dramas* 256)

Jem encounters multiple “monsters” during his initiation process. One of the most crucial episodes in Jem’s initiation is his confrontation with the ancient, Southern, matriarch Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose. Mrs. Dubose is a paradoxical figure. She is an elderly Southern lady who positions herself on her porch to observe the progress of her prized camellia garden while loftily passing judgment on the actions, etiquette, and family pedigree of all passersby. She is also a monster. She is a racist<sup>3</sup> and a morphine addict who spends her time ruthlessly belittling others and inducing fear and panic in the hearts of the neighborhood children. As Scout so aptly describes her, “She was vicious” (Lee 100). A living and breathing contradiction, she is both lady and monster at the same time. She is the physical manifestation of the rumors that depict her with “a CSA pistol concealed among her numerous shawls and wraps” (Lee 99). She is a CSA pistol concealed among shawls and wraps, a potentially destructive force wrapped in feminine finery.

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<sup>3</sup> Theodore R. Hovet and Grace-Ann Hovet’s article “‘Fine Fancy Gentlemen’ and ‘Yappy Folk’: Contending Voices in *To Kill a Mockingbird*” states that Harper Lee employs “the despicable white trash scenario” by placing “the responsibility for racial injustice squarely on the shoulders of a socioeconomic group without power or voice in the South—the poor, uneducated, disease-ridden rural whites represented by Bob Ewell” (76, 72). The article’s authors also state that Lee’s dedication to create “a realistic portrait subverts her employment of the white trash scenario” (77). Although I agree that, in the novel, the poor, rural whites appear to be the scapegoats on which southern culture pins the blame for the continuation of racial injustice, I think it vital to take into account the blatant, vicious racism demonstrated in the character of Mrs. Dubose, a woman who exemplifies the opposite of the rural and poor white community. The novel presents racism as prominent in many of the town’s subgroups: Mrs. Dubose and the aristocratic southern faction, Scout’s teacher Miss Gates, as well as the Ewells and the Cunninghams.

She is also a tangible remnant of the old ways, the Old South, a “Confederate Army relic” (Lee 104). Her paradoxical nature positions her perfectly to act as an illogical monster image in Jem’s rite-of- passage, the monster image which Victor Turner describes as an important pedagogical tool in the initiation process. Mrs. Dubose’s role as a symbol of the past and the “known” along with her contradictory and frightening nature enable her to act as a threshold guardian in the hero journey, a journey which Joseph Campbell<sup>4</sup> describes as parallel to the initiate’s journey.

Campbell describes the threshold guardians as terrifying and dangerous beings that stand “for the limits of the hero’s present sphere or life horizon” (77). And yet, Campbell states, “...it is only by advancing beyond [established] bounds, provoking the destructive other aspect of the same power, that the individual passes, either alive or in death, into a new zone of experience” (82). Not only does Mrs. Dubose act as a threshold guardian, her house itself is a literal boundary marker of Scout and Jem’s known childhood world, the other end bound by the Radley Place. Scout remarks on the mysterious power of these borders:

We were never tempted to break them. The Radley Place was inhabited by an unknown entity the mere description of whom was enough to make us behave for days on end; Mrs. Dubose was plain hell. (Lee 6)

Now, Jem, as the initiate, ventures forth to encounter the terrifying threshold guardian in order to enter the realm of trials that will propel him towards manhood. Mrs. Dubose, at the time of Jem’s

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Campbell’s books on comparative mythology, although still extremely popular, have recently come under attack academically. In all actuality, Campbell has always faced accusations of reductionism, overgeneralization, and ‘Westernization’ in his handling of world myths. Campbell himself addresses such concerns in the 1948 preface of his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in which he responds to such allegations by writing, “there are of course differences between the numerous mythologies and religions of mankind, but this book is about the similarities” (Campbell viii). Being fully cognizant of the controversy currently surrounding Campbell’s theories, I have still chosen to use his work on the hero journey to help elucidate and better illustrate Jem’s identity as an initiate.

confrontation with her, is aware of her approaching death, having just earlier asked Atticus to make out her will. She, like Jem, is about to cross a boundary and enter into the unknown.

Jem's encounter with Mrs. Dubose is strategically placed in the last chapter of the first half of the book, the half of the book dedicated to the Finch children's childhood world. The second part of the book focuses more on more adult material with its depiction of the harrowing events surrounding Tom Robinson's unjust trial. Jem's encounter is also placed right between Atticus' encounter with the mad dog and Jem's obvious induction into the physical and societal world of adolescence. Part two of the book opens with a description of Jem having entered an ambiguous and delicate stage:

Jem was twelve. He was difficult to live with, inconsistent, moody. His appetite was appalling, and he told me so many times to stop pestering him I consulted Atticus: 'Reckon he's got a tape worm?' Atticus said no, Jem was growing. I must be patient with him and disturb him as little as possible. (Lee 115)

Jem, after his encounter with Mrs. Dubose, enters into the adult realm in which he will witness the injustice awarded to Tom Robinson for feeling sorry for a white woman, become aware of his father's mortality, and see his home town "go mad" when Atticus tries to see justice done. In this adult realm, he becomes Mr. Jem.

By the time Jem makes the conscious decision to confront Mrs. Dubose, he has endured a laundry list of trials, "having survived Boo Radley, a mad dog and other terrors" (Lee 100). After these tests, Jem concludes that it is cowardly to avoid Mrs. Dubose's house, a step which leads him to confront the threshold guardian. However, Jem does not enter this encounter empty-handed. Atticus has already equipped him with a method of how to deal with Mrs. Dubose:

“Easy does it, son,” Atticus would say. “She’s an old lady and she’s ill. You just hold your head high and be a gentleman. Whatever she says to you, its your job not to let her make you mad.” (Lee 100)

Atticus provides Jem with advice on how a gentleman would act towards Mrs. Dubose. He should attempt to have compassion for her but also do his duty, his “job,” and not let her get to him. Atticus also displays to Jem and Scout how this course of action is to be implemented through his own interaction with Mrs. Dubose. Scout narrates one such encounter, emphasizing Atticus’ unique brand of bravery:

When the three of us came to her house, Atticus would sweep off his hat, wave gallantly to her and say, “Good evening Mrs. Dubose! You look like a picture this evening”...It was times like these when I thought my father, who hated guns and had never been to any wars, was the bravest man who ever lived.  
(Lee 100)

Scout, with her depiction of Atticus as a master at the art of courageous action, summarizes for the reader the real definition of bravery, which focuses on the grace one embodies when confronted with forces of chaos and moments of crisis instead of a definition concerned only with guns and war. Carolyn M. Jones perfectly illustrates Atticus’ heroic stance in her essay “Atticus Finch and the Mad Dog.” Atticus’s heroic stance involves his “putting himself between the innocent and danger” (101). Stating that Atticus exemplifies the everyday hero, Jones describes his position as both critical, asking himself and others his dangerous question “Do you really think so?” and compassionate, always attempting to see things from the vantage point of others. Jones qualifies his stance by highlighting the importance of balance between the two qualities: “critique without compassion threatens to become force; compassion without critique

may dissolve into sentimentalism or emotionalism” (105). Atticus bestows upon Jem not only sage advice but also a working template for how to encounter people like Mrs. Dubose. Armed with this knowledge and model, Jem can now face the threshold guardian himself.

In this particular encounter, Mrs. Dubose’s verbal attack on the children is nothing out of the ordinary. She unleashes her usual torments on the children: accusing them of playing hooky, threatening Jem with reform school, scolding Scout for her boyish attire, and predicting Scout will end up as a waitress at the O. K. Café, a questionable establishment in Maycomb. Her assault follows its normal pattern and Jem, believing that Mrs. Dubose’s arsenal will soon be emptied, reminds Scout of Atticus’ words:

“Come on, Scout,” he whispered. “Don’t pay any attention to her, just hold your head high and be a gentleman.” (Lee 101)

Jem’s resistance, however, is resisted. Mrs. Dubose forms a new plan of attack and strategically picks her weapon of words to strike what Jem holds most sacred, his father’s honor:

But Mrs. Dubose held us: “Not only a Finch waiting on tables but one in the courthouse lawing for niggers!”

Jem stiffened. Mrs. Dubose’s shot had gone home and she knew it:

“Yes indeed, what has this world come to when a Finch goes against his raising? I’ll tell you!” She put her hand to her mouth. When she drew it away, it trailed a long silver thread of saliva. “Your father’s no better than the niggers and trash he works for” (Lee 101-2).

Mrs. Dubose, having worked herself into a frenzy, salivates from the mouth and takes on a sickly appearance- - not unlike the mad dog Atticus shoots in the previous chapter. Jem does not react right away. He and Scout continue downtown and make their purchases. It is not until they make

the return trip home, walking past Mrs. Dubose's now empty front porch, that Jem frantically destroys Mrs. Dubose's camellia garden with Scout's newly acquired baton. Scout, unable to fully comprehend Jem's violent actions, speculates on his motivations:

In later years, I sometimes wondered exactly what made Jem do it, what made him break the bonds of "You just be a gentleman, son," ... At the time ... I thought the only explanation for what he did was that for a few moments he simply went mad. (Lee 102)

Jem becomes something like a mad dog himself as he annihilates Mrs. Dubose's Snow-on-the-Mountain. He goes mad because he encounters the threshold guardian and resists her stinging insults but is wounded when she changes her strategy. Jem mimics his father's model and it works until the point at which when Mrs. Dubose's attack requires him to embody and improvise on his father's ethic. Jem fails the test because he cannot yet make the model his own - - he cannot improvise. As noted earlier, the monster-like qualities of Mrs. Dubose function as a part of Jem's initiation. Victor Turner outlines the basic function of initiation:

Initiation is to rouse initiative at least as much as to produce conformity to custom. Accepted schemata and paradigms must be broken if initiates are to cope with novelty and danger. They have to learn how to generate viable schemata under environmental challenge. (*Dramas* 256)

Initiation, then, does not enforce mere repetition of pattern, but teaches a cultural norm which the initiate must make his own - - one he must improvise upon and sometimes, if necessary, reject. That maturity, that capacity to be a self with others, is what it means to be "re-religions": to both embody the best of culture without being a mere copy. Jem, in his encounter with Mrs.

Dubose, conforms to the model set forth by Atticus but is unable to creatively appropriate it for himself.

Jem, therefore, must encounter the threshold guardian again, face to face. This time, Atticus, the father figure, initiates the confrontation. Jem's punishment for his destructive tantrum in the camellia garden requires that he go read out loud to Mrs. Dubose daily. Claudia Durst Johnson says that, for the children, this sentence is like their having to enter "the devil's chamber" (90). This encounter, unlike the first, insists on a kind of intimacy. This time, Mrs. Dubose is not "stationed" on her porch but rather lying in her bed, under a pile of quilts and surrounded by medical paraphernalia (Lee 106). Contrary to the rumors and her own fierce facade, all that lies under these quilts is the body of a sick, old woman. Jem, along with Scout, is forced to encounter Mrs. Dubose up close. Edgar Schuster, in "Discovering Theme and Structure in the Novel," describes the children's realization about Mrs. Dubose as one in which they "learn what she is really like, that she is not the ghost or ghoul they had made her out to be" (12). Scout describes the scene with which one is greeted upon entering into Mrs. Dubose's realm in detail:

An oppressive odor met us when we crossed the threshold, an odor I had met many times in rain-rotted gray houses where there are coal-oil lamps, water dippers, and unbleached domestic sheets. It always made me afraid, expectant, and watchful. (Lee 106)

Scout's reaction to entering Mrs. Dubose's house contains all of the emotions an initiate has when encountering the border. Scout also paints an intimate portrait of Mrs. Dubose herself:

She was horrible. Her face was the color of a dirty pillowcase, and the corners of her mouth glistened with wet, which inched like a glacier down the deep groves enclosing her chin ... Her hands were knobby, and the cuticles were grown up

over her fingernails. Her bottom plate was not in, and her upper lip protruded; from time to time she would draw nether lip to her upper plate and carry her chin with it. This made the wet move faster. I didn't look any longer any more than I had to. (Lee 106-7)

Mrs. Dubose, as the threshold guardian between the world of youth and the world of maturity, gives the children their first look at more unpleasant aspects of old age. During Jem's reading of *Ivanhoe*, Mrs. Dubose changes from a state of constant critique to one in which she falls silent and appears as if in a stupor. The alarm clock's ring indicates both the release time for the children as well as the time for her scheduled medical treatment. Each day, Jem's reading time is extended. A pattern, a ritual, emerges and over time Jem begins to change.

Throughout the weeks he had cultivated an expression of polite and detached interest, which he would present to her in answer to her most blood-curdling inventions. (Lee 110)

Jem, having already learned to mimic Atticus' model, now has the power to improvise on it and is able to dodge even the worst of Mrs. Dubose's attacks, "her most blood-curdling inventions" (Lee 110). This time, Jem encounters the threshold guardian intimately and acts both compassionately and critically, being both polite and detached.

Shortly after Jem is released from his reading duty, Mrs. Dubose dies. Atticus then reveals to Jem the secret responsible for Mrs. Dubose's erratic and cruel behavior. He explains that she was a morphine addict and had "meant to break herself of it before she died" (Lee 111). Despite this explanation, the mysterious nature of Mrs. Dubose lingers even after her death. Atticus explains to Jem that despite her horrible appearance, cruel remarks, and elitist value

system, that she did in one way exemplify an important quality. Atticus saw in Mrs. Dubose the essence of courage.

“You know, she was a great lady.”

“A lady?” Jem raised his head. His face was scarlet. “After all those things she said about you, a lady?”

“She was. She had her own views about things, a lot different from mine, maybe...son, I told you that if you hadn’t lost your head I’d have made you go read to her. I wanted you to see something about her- I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It’s when you know you’re licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do. Mrs. Dubose won, all ninety-eight pounds of her. According to her views, she died beholden to nothing and nobody. She was the bravest person I ever knew”  
(Lee 112).

The threshold guardian has done her duty, whether she intends to or not, of propelling Jem forward into his ultimate trial, his coming to terms with the dark side of his town, his home. Equipped with Atticus’s ethical model and his own ability to improvise which he acquires in his encounter with Mrs. Dubose, Jem is able to encounter the trial that awaits him. Jem is not the only one about to meet his ultimate test. Maycomb, too, will have to learn to improvise. In order for both Jem and Maycomb to grow beyond their limits, they must cultivate the ability to improvise ethically in moments of trial and test. Atticus Finch is the catalyst that pushes both Jem and Maycomb towards acquiring this ability.

Atticus Finch is trying to prepare Maycomb county and his children for the “New South” that lies ahead. He in choosing to defend Tom Robinson, the town’s Mrs. Dubose, is asking them to imagine another way of living, a different way of interacting and seeing others. In particular, he asks the jury to imagine justice. He says that if there is one place where justice could possibility be imagined, where man could reach beyond his place and resemble the Divine in acting without bias, it is in the court, in the process of a community on trial. He tells the jury that there is one place “in this country in which all men are created equal ... that institution, gentlemen, is a court” (Lee 205). In asking the jury to do their duty, to act without bias, to strive for something greater, something sacred, he is asking each of them to be God-like in hopes that each will behave, as the May Sarton quote suggests, “like merely a decent human being.” Atticus must face the “mad dog” in the behavior of his friends, neighbors, and family in order to save them from themselves and their incestuous thought. It is the creative thought, the something new that will save their community. It is the difference they fight so ardently that will save their community if it is integrated properly. Atticus is teaching them how to at least “see” the “other” by forcing them to think critically, in asking them to question what they take for granted and what they assume.

Atticus, in forcing Jem into the trial, the intimate confrontation with Mrs. Dubose, is showing Jem how constantly to question himself, how continually to re-position himself, and how to negotiate with difficult people and situations. He is teaching him how to be just: to compromise but also to keep one’s integrity while doing it. The beginning of the novel starts with a description of Jem’s new stance, which he gains only at the very end of the story in his confrontation with another monster, Bob Ewell. He is psychically marked by his violent

confrontation with the adult world embodied in Bob Ewell and is psychologically scarred by the failure of the trial to issue justice for Tom Robinson, but is still able to move in his new world.

When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow. When it healed, and Jem's fears of never being able to play football were assuaged, he was seldom self-conscious about his injury. His left arm was somewhat shorter than his right; when he stood or walked, the back of his hand was at right angles to his body, his thumb parallel to his thigh. He couldn't have cared less, so long as he could pass and punt. (Lee 3)

To be marked is one sign of the successful negotiation of initiation. Throughout the novel, Jem attempts, not always successfully, to give up his worn-out childhood positions, superstitions, and warped visions of others in order to mimic Atticus' stance and to imagine his own. He mimics and embodies Atticus' stance, his hero's stance, which interestingly is never static. It is a stance that is always readjusting to the current situation in relation to the two poles described by Carolyn M. Jones as detachment, transcending emotion, and compassion, drawing close to the personal. This stance involves danger - - facing the monster, the irrational foe, and humanizing both the monster and the self. Jem's final act- his stance places him between a violent and irrational force, Bob Ewell, and the innocent, Scout. The irrational monster, Bob Ewell, made monstrous because he is infected with racism, "Maycomb's usual disease," is killed by the monster Jem has come to see as human, Boo Radley. In this test is embodied the cost of change and its necessity. Bob Ewell breaks his arm, but with the help of Boo Radley, Jem passes over the threshold, is marked, and he continues deeper into his journey to become, like his father, a re-religions man, a just man. It is in his mimicking

of his father in conjunction with his own imagination that he can be more than he is; and his reaching for something more in conjunction with appropriation of his father's definition of courage - - "when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what" - - that Jem learns how to be himself "a merely decent human being."

Jem's transition from child to man is incomplete at the end of the novel. The novel closes with Atticus keeping a night watch over Jem as he sleeps. Jem's sleeping as the novel ends is symbolic of the liminal stage he remains in, indicating that he will continue to experience and endure the trials of his coming of age. Maycomb, at the end of the novel, too, has not completed its transformation to the New South. There is hope, however, that the seeds of change have been planted in Maycomb. Miss Maudie calls attention to the "baby-step" Maycomb took, made evident in the long time Tom Robinson's jury spent deliberating about their verdict (Lee 216). Atticus mentions that one of the Cunningham's "connections" on the jury took "considerable wearing down" to arrive at a verdict of guilty (Lee 222). Although Atticus calls the guilty verdict "an inevitable verdict," he also hopes the jury's long deliberation might be what he calls "the shadow of a beginning" (Lee 222).

This novel does not document the radical reversal of a small southern town's racial, social, and gender prejudices. It records the painful and turbulent beginnings of the changing of ideology slowly arising in the South. It records the tremors of the ideological movements which quake through the South during the years the book gained esteem. Jem and Maycomb, like the South during the 1930s, lay sleeping at the end of the novel. Both are not fully yet able to deal with the darkness they face in their "home." Both are, as Atticus describes Jem, "trying to forget

something” while all they are “really doing [is] storing it away for awhile” (Lee 247). Atticus is re-elected to the Alabama legislature with “no opposition” (Lee 243). Both Jem and Maycomb are relying, for now, on Atticus Finch to watch over them as they sleep.

He turned out the light and went into Jem’s room. He would be there all night, and he would be there when Jem waked up in the morning (Lee 281).

## CHAPTER 3

“A WAY OUT OF NO WAY<sup>1</sup>”: WITNESSING TRANSFORMATION IN EARNEST

GAINES’ *A LESSON BEFORE DYING*

A vigorous enforcement of civil rights will bring an end to segregated public facilities which are barriers to a truly desegregated society, but it cannot bring an end to fears, prejudice, pride, and the irrationality, which are the barriers to a truly integrated society. Those dark and demonic responses will be removed only as men are possessed by the invisible, inner law which etches on their hearts the conviction that all men are brothers and that love is mankind’s most potent weapon for personal and social transformations.

-Martin Luther King Jr.

Ernest J. Gaines’ novel *A Lesson Before Dying* opens with a narrated depiction of the trial and sentencing of an African American man wrongly convicted of first degree murder. The trial depicted is no trial at all, for it does not shed light on this man’s guilt or innocence. Majority American culture had already passed judgment on the African American race hundreds of years prior to this very trial. It is their assessment which haunts this courtroom and the rest of 1940s Louisiana plantation culture outside its doors. During these court proceedings, the defendant, Jefferson, sits silently as his destiny, as well as his identity, are decided. Both the defense and the prosecution agree that Jefferson is not a man at all but an animal. The conflict arises over whether he is a dangerous and violent beast that must be put down or an ignorant hog that should

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<sup>1</sup> *Our God can make a way out of no way... He can do anything but fail.* –African American folk saying (Swann-Wright)

be pitied. The judge sentences Jefferson to death by electrocution, but Old South plantation culture had long since sentenced him to a life that was truly no life at all.

This is hardly an environment ripe for communal and personal transformation, and yet Gaines works literary alchemy. By the end of the novel, Gaines has brought the reader full circle, back to the same courthouse mentioned in the first chapter. This time Jefferson is going to his own execution in the storeroom on the bottom floor of the courthouse. By this point, many of the characters are painfully aware that Jefferson is a brave man walking to his death, not an animal being dragged to slaughter. It is in these last days that Jefferson becomes the locus around which the entire community positions itself. In these last days, Jefferson exhibits grace under fire and redefines what it means to be powerful, to be a hero. Ironically, the lesson before dying is one taught by Jefferson.

In the pages between these two events, the trial and the execution, Gaines leads the reader through the stages towards transformation, through a rite of passage. Numerous theorists give detailed outlines of how a rite of passage functions. However, this story does not fit the framework of just one of these theories, but rather it operates on a tension between two opposing theories, Arnold Van Gennep's theory expounded upon by Victor Turner and "border" theory. Before understanding the transformation written of in the text, an examination of the theories themselves is required.

As noted in the Introduction, in 1908 Arnold Van Gennep designated "rite of passage" as a specific kind of ritual. Victor Turner, an anthropologist who expanded on Van Gennep's rite of passage theory, defines these rites of passage as "the transitional rituals accompanying changes in place, state, social position, and age in a culture" (*Image 251*). This ritual's structure has three phrases, as designated by Van Gennep and appropriated by Turner: separation, margin or *limen*,

and reaggregation. The first stage of the rite is separation and, as its name implies, it is during this time that those undergoing the rite are separated from their community. In the second phase, the subjects enter a state of liminality in which they shed all notions of self-existence they held prior to the rite. This stripping away of individualizing characteristics is necessary in order to open up a space for the Sacred to enter, to encourage bonding among the participants, and to foster a sense of equality among the initiates. This represents a critical part of the rite because it is in this state that the subjects undergoing the rite spontaneously unite in “unmediated communication,” “communion,” or “communitas” (*Image 250*). This “communion” is human bonding on one of its most intimate levels. Turner’s unifying “communitas” is pure activity despite the fact that it usually results in structure. Phase two leads to phase three, reaggregation, a return to the social world as a transformed being.

In this model, phase one and two find fulfillment and purpose in phase three.

Undoubtedly the Van Gennep/ Turner model is hierarchical and evolutionary in nature, the last stage of the journey is regarded as superior to the first two. Enlightenment theory prided itself on ideas such as hierarchy and evolution so it is not surprising that many theorists, even today, feel heavily persuaded to glorify models that endorse these ideas. However post-colonial, post-modern, and “border” theorists<sup>2</sup> critique such models. For these theorists, hierarchy requires suppression, usually the powerful suppressing the powerless, and evolution implies “inferior” states as well as “superior” ones, with colonizers identifying themselves as “superior” and the

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<sup>2</sup> Recent ‘borderland’ scholars are critical of Turner’s terms, such as “liminal,” seeing his terms and methodology as being too limited and culturally biased. Turner’s terms take on an imperialistic taint when used to describe persons having multiple identities (doubleness etc.) because of their belonging to various communities due to their racial, ethnic, class, and gender identification or sexual orientation. These borderland theorists insist that theories like Turner’s view this liminality, this ambiguity, as merely a means to an end, an end in which a healthy community is one in which assimilation has reached its highest level, an end in which incorporation is celebrated. These theorists claim that the term “border” is a more inclusive term. It suggests a more flexible space in which various parties can dialogue on a more level footing. This claim is legitimate, especially when addressing postcolonial issues. See Introduction for citation.

colonized as “inferior.” To “border” theorists, Western, hierarchical, theories such as Van Gennep/Turner’s model which idealizes the “superior” necessitates that there be an “inferior” state from which it evolved. “Border” theorists, as their name implies, promote a border model in which all “selves” meet at a border and are counted as equals. Despite the freedom “border” theory allows all “selves,” there is an underlying chaos in this model which is unnerving. The Western mind may have difficulties eliminating all notions of hierarchy from theory, especially theory on transformation. Hierarchy, progress, and evolution are not inherently evil terms. However, they have been used by mankind in the past, and are, sadly still utilized today, to subjugate and terrorize. One need not erase them from the dictionaries, but one should use them responsibly or the effects can be devastating. The aftermath of colonization shows how building one’s own identity through the negation, suppression, and erasure of another person’s identity breeds only discontent.

Masterfully Gaines’ juxtaposes these two opposing models and forges a middle path by playing off the tension between the two. Gaines re-appropriates and redefines the rite of passage theory by using the Christian myth as his vehicle and focal point for transformation. In order for hierarchy, a vertical movement, and equality, a horizontal movement, to coexist, where the two overlap must be riddled with paradox. It is where they overlap that a third dimension, depth, opens up. Each model is too flat in its own right. Paradox, in this novel the Christian paradox, fleshes out a new model for how to live in a world that glorifies both hierarchy and equality.

Why does Gaines use the Christ myth as the vehicle for transformation in this novel, particularly if he is not proselytizing? Certainly it is an apt model for a narrative addressing social justice, considering the foundational role the Christ model played in the Civil Rights



offer the other also; and from anyone who takes your coat do not withhold even your shirt...Do to others as you would have them do to you.

(Luke 6:20-21, 27-31)

Jesus of Nazareth, the historical catalyst of the Christian movement, is depicted as having embodied this paradoxical claim. Founded on the inversion of ancient ideas of who was “blessed” and how one should react to abuse, Christianity questioned itself into existence. From the beginning, it asked of itself the questions Christians ask of it today. How can one love someone who hates them? How can anyone believe in a messiah that ends up on a cross? What does it mean for someone to die for others? And why would someone choose such a fate? In the shadow of the monumental Roman Empire, do the weak and the poor count? What can one person do in the face of gross injustice? What does it mean to turn the other cheek? Can acting this way in the face of assured annihilation change anything?

In the ancient world, much like the modern one, much of what is external to us dictates our fate, and yet, there remains one thing which remains intrinsically ours and ours alone, our decision on how we will face the world. Here Christianity incorporates a Stoic attitude towards human agency. What we have to choose is rarely the “what” of our lives but almost always the “how.” This one human power allows a person to stand in a situation when both nature and culture advocate running away in terror. This one human power is a power that belongs to all people of the world, and not just the Alexanders and Caesars. This is why such a meager religious faction was seen as a threat to all that was good and rational in the Roman Empire. It represented an ideology which completely inverted ancient definitions of divinity, human interaction, and most importantly, power. “Blessedness” and power were no longer defined by exclusivity. The Jesus movement said that even the powerless are somehow powerful. Love even

those that hate you. When someone hits you do not hit them back but rather turn the other cheek. Class and privilege, or lack thereof, mean nothing in the eyes of God. These guidelines go against rational thought, which the Romans held in such high esteem. John Dominic Crossan, in his book *Jesus: a Revolutionary Biography*, notes how Christianity's belief in Jesus as a divinity was viewed as absurd through ancient Roman eyes:

Sometime between 177 and 180 C.E., with the emperor Marcus Aurelius already persecuting Christians, the pagan philosopher Celsus wrote his *True Doctrine* as an intellectual attack on their religion. When he discusses Jesus' virgin birth, for example, he never says that such an event is incredible in itself. What is incredible is that it could happen to a member of the lower classes, a Jewish nobody like Jesus. (27)

This is a class issue. The Romans tried to extinguish this group because its ideology was politically and socially subversive. Its ideology undermined the hierarchical Roman Empire and ancient foundations of regulating power. The Roman Empire had specific criteria for citizenship and "personhood" which privileged the powerful. The kingdom of God, however, granted "citizenship" to all but especially to the disenfranchised.<sup>5</sup> Christian thought has maintained this theme up to the present day. It is for this reason that some "other"-ed people choose to reject an ancient definition of power which implies that one person's power is dependent on another person's weakness, in which one person's identity is wrapped up in the negation of another person's, and in which the only way up is by stepping on the heads of others. Disenfranchised groups may be attracted to an inversion of this ancient definition of power because it gives their lives significance. A vision of the world as a place which glorifies strength, health, and money,

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<sup>5</sup> Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians that all Christians are one in Christ:

As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27-28)

only a miniscule minority can be “somebody.” Inverted power ideology, however, glorifies qualities which all human beings have at hand; all avenues of power in this ideology are a matter of choice. Christianity’s inverted power ideology is foundational in much of Western thought. It is part of our cultural make-up in the West. Sadly, Christianity, despite its radical egalitarian roots, has many times been used to deny disenfranchised groups “citizenship” and “personhood.” This only proves that we all interpret in our favor. The Christ story is THE story in the West, seeing and hearing oneself in that myth allows one a voice in it. Many African American Christians in the Civil Rights movement saw themselves reflected in that story, their plight mirrored in Christ’s plight, and their hope for political salvation tied to their Christian hope for religious salvation.<sup>6</sup> Suddenly the Christ story and their story were one and the same. The Civil Rights movement used a vehicle which many white Americans knew, a story which they too felt an intimate connection with, the Christ story. Collective identification with a “sacred” story, a narrative event, can bring many different people into “communion.” It forces them into a narrative community. Gaines uses the Christ story, in the hope of creating such a narrative community in which young blacks and young whites, culturally informed by this western myth, can each see their story reflected in its pages and will hopefully see each other in its process.

Narrative is the common table to which all may come to “commune:” it is an literary altar which requires that one sacrifice a bit of the ego to in order to participate. The bit of self that is offered up is but the sign of the willingness to enter an “other’s” world, to give up some of one’s engrained perspective, a bit of one’s “self.” In order to pass into the narrative world, one must

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<sup>6</sup> James Cone writes of the risen Christ, “To encounter him, the resurrected and exalted Christ who now is present now as the Holy Spirit, is to encounter the possibilities and certainties of human existence which transcend the value structures of oppressive societies” (Erskine 121). Erskine continues to elucidate the connection between Christ and rebellion made by Cone:

It is this Christ who empowers the community to rebel against all that would deny it, its God-given dignity. This Christ became the “last,” teaching us that in God’s eyes the “last” is “first.” It is this new knowledge which that allows the oppressed to rebel against all that encroaches on their right to freedom. (121)

use one's imagination because it is the faculty of the imagination, when applied to narrative, which provokes the reader into empathy with the characters of the narrative. Readers are bound together in their internalization of the narrative. Readers are asked to imagine, to have faith, to believe in things unseen, for it is only the imagination which allows us to look outside of what already is. It is only the imagination that allows us to look at what could be. Kimberly Rae Connor cites, in her book *Imagining Grace: Liberating Theologies in the Slave Narrative Tradition*, Mark Ledbetter's definition of narrative as "an act of desire motivated by a wish for "something 'other than'" what present reality offers" (2).

Connor herself acknowledges the unequivocal power of the imagination for "generating tolerance and inspiring liberating action" (5). Connor highlights the vital part imagination plays in the success of the slave narrative to promote empathy among whites for black slaves:

My decision to identify imagination as one of our most valuable resources for generating tolerance and inspiring liberating action was suggested by my reading of Frederick Douglass's first narrative, in which he proclaims, "To understand it one must needs experience it, or imagine himself in similar circumstances" (144). These lines jumped out at me when I read them and stayed with me as I continued to explore different articulations of the slave narrative tradition. I began to see that promoting the process of imaginative identification was a key motive behind Douglass's (and others') development of the tradition and that this process is continued in the tradition. (5)

Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*, although not a literal slave narrative, requires the same sacrifice on the reader's behalf, to give up a bit of one's self long enough to walk in another's shoes for a short time. It requires "imaginative identification." The canonized Gospels in the Christian Tradition, the four sacred biographies of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, offer a sacred narrative

which requires the same action. The Christian tradition itself requires the “imaginative identification” with Christ on various levels: the Eucharist, in which participants ingest the “body” and “blood” of Christ to become one in Him. Christian mystics are notorious for attempting to physically emulate and mentally identify with the sufferings of Christ in many ways, like the stigmata. Earlier I noted that Gaines constantly draws on the Christian Tradition, its symbols and theology, to illustrate his own story. I also noted that this is not done to advocate Christian conversion. However, Gaines does use Christian narrative and tradition as vehicles for change, conversion of a certain type. The Christ story, the slave narrative, and Gaines’ “new” slave narrative necessitate what Connor calls “imaginative identification,” and this creates a community of readers bonded by their imaginative engagement in the narrative, their personal investment in the text. Such reader communities can span great expanses of time, unite people of differing races, genders and classes, and generate a temporary yet eternal “communion” between readers. Although the slave narrative and Christ story summon readers to identify with historical landscapes and specific cultures, that which allows such a diverse audience to identify with something so markedly different from themselves, ironically, is these stories’ ability to generate a feeling of sameness. However, recognizing sameness does not justify the smothering of difference; on the contrary, it acts as merely a portal to experiencing an “others” perspective, it is the bridge, it is the way, and it is the door to the “other.”

Gaines borrows symbolic threads from both the Christ story and the slave narrative and weaves them into a narrative which calls forth readers from both traditions to imaginatively identify as one in the face of the mixed narrative. In the moment of union with the text, reader communities merge together so that one reader community cannot tell its story without telling

the others.<sup>7</sup> The distinction here is not between Christians and African Americans, for as noted earlier these two can and do overlap quite often. The distinction between the two reader groups are those that identify with the Western Christ Myth, whether they profess Christianity or not, and those who identify with the Slave Narrative Tradition. Taken even further, one need not even divide up a receptive audience so literally. If a reader merely identifies with Western concepts of identity and orients him or herself to Western ideas of reality, the reader can easily recognize the traditional Western symbols and ritual movements signifying transformation. Here, I will focus on the Christ Myth as the primary vehicle for multi-cultural “imaginative identification” in Gaines’ text *A Lesson before Dying*. Gaines not only utilizes the Christ Myth to create a diverse community of readers but also adopts Christian symbols and ideology to illustrate the intimate tie between humanity and divinity, to advocate identity creation by means of inclusion rather than exclusion, and to promote the redefinition of power, heroism, and what it means to live a meaningful life.

Gaines’ is literarily doing what African American churches have done for more than a hundred years; he is making something new out of old parts and applying new flesh and tissue to old bones. Readers may not see, at first, all of the allusions to the Christian text. It is not until the readers recognize the cultural allusions and symbols that they are able to personalize the text.

Once the readers are engaged in the narrative, once they recognize their personal ties to the story,

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<sup>7</sup> Drawing upon responses in Sharon E. Greene’s “A Conversation with Robert Detweiler,” I have applied Detweiler’s view of the ability of narrative to promote survival and interconnectedness to the merging of the two reader communities mentioned above. Here Detweiler mentions the effects of hearing “war-and-suffering” stories while he was a refugee relief worker had on his own identity and understanding of narrative:

These had a profound effect on me; in some ways I have never recovered from them. They are part of my identity, although I was not the sufferer. They taught me that narrative and survival are intertwined, indeed that story finally is always, one way or another, about survival. (Greene 434)

Then, Detweiler comments that sometimes our own narratives becomes intertwined with others so much so that “[we] can’t think [our stories] without thinking [theirs’]” (Greene 434).

they are given a new life, a new identity in a larger context. In this narrative, just as in the book of Acts of the Apostles, recognition and resurrection are intimately connected.

As I mentioned earlier, Gaines' novel merges together two diametrically opposed theories and forces them into negotiation to empower rite of passage theory, rather than let this conflict cause theoretical stagnation. Acknowledging the essentially progressive nature of narrative, Gaines' story is structured on a Van Gennep/ Turner model: separation, limen, and reaggregation. A sense of separation and absence envelopes the first half of the book. The novel begins with a startling passage recording Grant's admission of both his absence and presence at Jefferson's trial:

I was not there, yet I was there. No, I did not go to the trial, I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be. Still, I was there. I was there as much as anyone else was there. (3)

Jefferson's godmother, Miss Emma, according to Grant's absent observation, is most definitely there in a physical sense and yet she seems distant during the proceedings of the trial:

She is of average height, five four, five five, but weighs nearly two hundred pounds. Once she and my aunt had found their places- two rows behind the table where he sat with his court-appointed attorney- his godmother became as immobile as a great stone or as one of our oak or cypress stumps...She just sat there staring at the boy's clean-cropped head...She heard nothing said in the courtroom...She knew, as we all knew, what the outcome would be. (3-4)

Jefferson, as well as Miss Emma, is markedly absent in this first chapter. Strangely the absent narrator, Grant, is the most present identity in this passage. The mysterious aura around this inability to place self reflects the unfortunate success of Old South plantation culture's method of

“othering” through separation, an “othering” which often leads to erasure. The court not only speaks of Jefferson as if he is not in the courtroom, Jefferson’s own attorney separates him from the entire human race by equating him with an ignorant and brutish animal, a hog. Jefferson’s trial, a gross caricature of the legal process, illustrates an individual case. It is but a microcosm of the general state of affairs for all “othered” people whose stories are consistently erased as history is written over them. It is Miss Emma’s reaction to this symbolic severing of Jefferson from the human race, which ushers in the revolutionary spirit of the *limen* and this, in turn, leads to Van Gennep/ Turner’s third step, reaggregation. In this last movement Gaines resists the Van Gennep/ Turner’s model and revolutionizes the concept of “return.” Contrary to Van Gennep/ Turner’s model in which a successful rite of passage necessitates the initiate’s return to society, Gaines requires society to enter into a new idea of community oriented around the initiate hero, who, in this case, is Jefferson.

Jefferson, is excluded from the race of men, sentenced, and imprisoned. Ironically, his prison cell, meant to be a space of separation, becomes a place of communion. The prison represents the *limen*, the “inbetween” in the ritual process, where meaning and identity are up for grabs. Jefferson is not alone in the *limen*. Grant enters it, as do Miss Emma and Tante Lou, along with the Reverend Ambrose...and soon the much of the black community has made pilgrimage to Jefferson’s prison cell, passed through the threshold, held Jefferson and others there in an embrace of community. The *limen* calls the initiates to reflect. The prison becomes the space in which Jefferson and Grant reflect on the roles given to them and the roles they wish to play. Grant’s speech ushers both Jefferson and himself into a state of reflection:

“Jefferson,” I said. We had started walking. “Do you know what a hero is, Jefferson? A hero is someone who does something for other people. He does something that other men

don't and can't do. He is different from other men. He is above other men. No matter who those other men are, the hero, no matter who he is, is above them." I lowered my voice again until we had passed the table. "I could never be a hero. I teach, but I don't like teaching. I teach because it is the only thing that an educated black man can do in the South today. I don't like it; I hate it. I don't even like living here. I want to run away. I want to live for myself and for my woman and for nobody else.

That is not a hero. A hero does for others. He would do anything for people he loves, because he knows it would make their lives better. I am not that kind of person, but I want you to be. You could give something to her, to me, to those children in the quarter. You could give them something that I never could. They expect it from me, but not from you. The white people out there are saying you don't have it- that you're a hog, not a man. But I know they are wrong. You have the potentials. We all have, no matter who we are." (191)

Suzanne Jones tells us that "friend," "hero," "scapegoat," and "myth" are the key words that Grant uses with Jefferson, and all are redefined in the men's interactions and in the diary. As language is offered and altered, the cell, originally a place of isolation and suffering, becomes a space of pure human interaction: a space of hospitality, a meeting place. Jefferson and Grant redefine themselves as well as terms such as hero and myth during their time together in the *limen*:

"Do you know what a myth is, Jefferson?" I asked him. "A myth is an old lie that people believe in. White people believe that they're better than anyone else on earth- and that's a myth. The last thing they ever want to see is a black man stand, and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all. It would destroy their myth. They would no longer

have justification for having made us slaves and keeping us in the condition we are in. As long as none of us stand, they're safe. They're safe with me. They're safe with Reverend Ambrose. I don't want them to feel safe with you anymore.

I want you to chip away at the myth by standing. I want you- yes, you- to call them liars.”

(192)

Such transformation of language and signification on myth is consistent with the African American religious tradition. The black church tradition, for example, transformed the Christian mythology that confined it into a mythology of freedom. The language of the myth remains the same; the control of interpretation makes a space for freedom, both political and spiritual. This leads to a creative use of story, of metaphor that is the basis of a culture of resistance. Jefferson is transformed thanks to his own internal strength and also the love of others.

Paul remarks on the most significant display of Jefferson's strength which happens to be on the day of his own execution. Paul also tries to honor Grant for what he helped Jefferson discover in himself:

“He was the strongest man in that crowd, Grant Wiggins,” Paul said, staring at me and speaking louder than was necessary. “He was, he was. I'm not saying this to make you feel good, I'm not saying this to ease your pain. Ask that preacher, ask Harry Williams. He was the strongest man there. We all stood jammed together, no more than six, eight feet away from that chair. We all had each other to lean on. When Vincent asked him if he had any last words, he looked at the preacher and said, ‘Tell Nannan I walked.’ And straight he walked, Grant Wiggins. Straight he walked. I'm a witness. Straight he walked. ...

You are one great teacher, Grant Wiggins,” he said.

“I’m not great. I’m not even a teacher.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You have to believe to be a teacher,” I said. ...

“I saw the transformation, Grant Wiggins,” Paul said.

“I didn’t do it.”

“Who, then?”

“Maybe he did it himself.”

“He never could have done that. I saw the transformation. I’m witness to that.” (254)

According to the Van Gennep/ Turner model, in order for Jefferson to have successfully completed the rite of passage, he must re-aggregate into society. However, it is not Jefferson’s reintroduction into society, although he does “return” to his community in his “testament,” but rather the community’s induction into his experience that marks a successful ritual in this story.

The community must witness Jefferson, either while he waits in prison or on the day of his execution. He does not return to the community as a rehabilitated criminal, but rather the community returns to him, to one whom society hastened to erase but whom, with help from Grant, writes himself into existence, a motif of the slave narrative tradition. This move is unilateral, rather than hierarchical in nature; those on the outside of the prison congregate in the prison either to visit the Jefferson before his death or to witness his execution. Grant, Miss Emma, and Reverend Ambrose make numerous visits to Jefferson’s cell in concerted effort to change Jefferson’s image of himself. In his diary, Jefferson himself describes all of the visitors he has just days prior to his execution. The visitors range from tiny school children to the elderly; even the sheriff pays Jefferson a visit:

Lord have merce sweet jesus mr. wigin where all them people come from whn you ax me if some chiren can com up here an speak to me I didn kno you was meanin all them chiren in yo clas...then after the chiren here com the ole folks an look like everbody from the quarter was here mis Julia an joe an mis haret an ant agnes an mr noman an mis sara...shuf guiry come after I et an ax how im doin an id say im doin all right an he ax me he say I aint never pik up yo tablet an look in it an he ax me what all I been ritin an I tol him jus things an he say aint he done tret me rite an I tol him yesir ...an he say is you gon put that in yo tablet an I say yesir an he say good put that down in yo tablet I tret you good all the time you been yer...(230-3)

The whole community is forced to recognize Jefferson in some way, no matter how far removed, socially, they are from him.

Ironically, the day of the legal systems' attempt to completely erase Jefferson is the one on which many are called upon to experience him. On the day of his execution, Gruesome Gerty, the electric chair, is driven into town, causing many onlookers to feel the physical actuality of what awaits Jefferson (240). The sound of the chair itself, as it is tested, envelopes the whole town, causing many to face what they have tried to put out of their minds, the fact that death is coming. Some see what is coming; others hear it, while others witness the execution itself, and still others wait to hear the news of its completion:

Then Melvina saw it, a highbacked wooded chair with leather straps, and it took all her strength, she said later, to remain on her feet...Clay Lemon...had just gotten out of the car to go into the bank when he first heard the noise...A white man and a white woman walking ahead of him were just about to go into the bank when the woman stopped suddenly and looked back. She said, "Oh, God, don't tell me that they have started"...

The man told the woman that nothing was going to happen until after twelve o'clock...that they were just warming up the thing... The woman said, "But my God, the whole town can hear that thing."(239-242)

No matter where exactly each towns person is located in relation to Jefferson, all are forced to acknowledge him in his last hours. Whether by the horrific sound of Gruesome Gerty filling their ears or by witnessing its shape with their own two eyes as it is driven into town; whether shaving Jefferson's head and then leading him to the chair, whether they are those called upon to witness his death, or whether they are far away in a churchyard and school imaging his last moments, each member is forced to be with Jefferson in some way that day. Many superficial distances are crossed, gaps bridged, as this town witnesses a man face the ultimate border, the border between life and death. This is a border we must all cross someday. In relation to death, Gaines reminds us, we are all on the same side, on equal ground.

A move toward a leveled playing field is reminiscent of the "border land" theory I mentioned earlier. Here is the manifestation of the tension bridged between these two opposing rite of passage theories. The communal participation in these painful moments of witness opens a ritual space, where sacred meets profane, where transcendence, a vertical movement, meets immanence, a horizontal movement. Ritual space opens on the spot where those two extremes overlap. Only in this space is change possible. The only way to transcend brokenness, to remember into a fuller state of being, is to commune, to reach out to and join "others." Jefferson opens a space both Grant and Paul can come to, in equality, in friendship. Their friendship is the bridge. Only together can they make a ladder.

Neither a narrative nor a ritual can be performed alone; "others," divine or otherwise, are required. Narrative and ritual both necessitate structure, some sort of form, but such structure is

in place for the purpose of welcoming the “other,” evoking the “other.” Form without flow is devoid of sacredness. Flow without form is chaos. Form and flow require not only the initiates’ transition from one state to another but also transformation of the society in wake of this transition.

Successful narrative and rite of passage both operate on the form/ flow model; this novel most certainly works on such a model. The problematic structure of the Southern patriarchy provides the ritual space for this transition: the cell, itself, becomes the altar, and love is the flow. Jefferson still dies; prejudice and discrimination remain, and yet something has changed: the minds and hearts of some members of the community. Jefferson’s story, like that of Christ’s, lives on in the hearts of all those touched by his heroism and dignity. The story unites an unlikely audience/ community and provides a working template for latter generations, like the children Grant will teach, on how to preserve identity in the face of erasure, how to be powerful in a world that denies you status, how to live in the face of death. Jefferson’s story mirrors that of the Christ story. In both cases, a testament is left behind. These sacred works, Jefferson’s diary<sup>8</sup> and the Gospels, are textual resurrections of the memory of a person or persons writing their stories in response to continual threat of erasure. The heroes of these stories are resurrected again and again as the texts take on lives of their own in the community of readers just as Gaines’ text

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<sup>8</sup> In his diary, Jefferson “goes deep” (*Lesson*, 228) to examine “self” and “other.” Doing so, he evaluates the significance of “friend,” “hero,” “scapegoat,” and “myth”—the words that Grant uses with him. His diary becomes, when it is passed on, a letter, an epistle. The letter—such as Seneca’s letters, Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*, and King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”—is a form in which a position or idea is defined and explained in a situation of exchange. In such documents, the writer addresses a silent interlocutor. The questioning voice is absent, except in the response of the writer. The New Testament epistles function in the same way. They are letters to a particular community or individual addressing a particular situation, set of issues and problems. These letters are responses to a call. Many times the letter indicates that the response is the only power the writer has. One cannot control, often, one’s circumstances but one can control one’s response. This Stoic strain is present in Paul’s New Testament epistles and in Southern Christianity. The epistle’s particularity becomes, however, a source, for an expanding community. The voice of one—and many of the New Testament epistles were written from prison—becomes the voice for all.

extends beyond its pages to us, a community formed by reading it. These heroes, therefore, become vehicles for transformation themselves and doors to others invested in their story. A reader not only identifies with the hero but also with others conditioned by the story. Jesus, as described in the Gospels, says he is the door (John 10:9) and Jefferson dreams of a door. The door is not only death itself nor is it only the afterlife, or something outside of humanity but rather a symbol of the force which unites what is “in here” with what is “out there,” the vehicle through which “self” and “other” meet; the door invites community. What is a door but a point of access, a space of negotiation between two places, and, when open, the truest demonstration of hospitality? All will come together unified by a common story, all entering through the same door. Narrative, itself, is a door, a portal to another world and also the center through which all readers must pass to enter into communion with the rest of this narrative’s reader community.

Paul, the white deputy, delivers Jefferson’s diary, his testament, to Grant. Grant’s acceptance of this gift demonstrates the profound change that has taken place in Grant. Previously Grant refused anything given to him by a white person, refusing to be part of that relationship. Here Grant not only takes the gift, Jefferson’s diary, but also takes Paul’s hand in friendship (Auger 83-84). Paul represents, in society if not in his heart, the hierarchal system. He is the white man who represents the corrupt law. He, like Saul who becomes Paul (Acts 9), changes through his witness. That law delivers, as the letter is delivered, not legal justice for Jefferson, but moral justice and for the generations to come through Jefferson and Grant. Grant and Paul are brought together through Jefferson. An embittered black school teacher and a white deputy seem unlikely companions and yet here they are, friends, and both transformed thanks to Jefferson and his memory. The friendship between Grant and Paul is the perfect example of Aristotle’s definition of friendship and its relationship to justice:

When he defines friendship, Aristotle, in fact, defines personal friendship, and his definition obviously includes the first mark of friendship. Again, this mark is to wish and do what is good for the sake of another. But justice, too, is to wish and do what is good for another, for it is to have and to exercise virtue for the sake of another. (Schollmeier 109)

For Aristotle, friendship and justice, require seeing the “other” as another “self” and doing good for the sake of that “other” “self.” And such friendship is the basis for the good society.

This novel begins with a legal trial espousing almost every stereotype African Americans have faced in the South. The novel’s contents are the true test for not only Jefferson and the book’s characters but also for the book’s audience. Gaines answers the questions he sets to his reader community and himself in the pages of this novel: How can someone uproot deeply buried racial discriminations? How can a person free themselves when those around them seek to suppress them? How can one create community without bowing to corrupted and unequal relationships of power? What can one do in the face of oppression? All that “one” can do is decide to stay, to face what lies ahead with dignity, face it with the many some “ones” around you, and “be there” for those who look up to you, hope and work towards change, all the while knowing that one must imagine “a way out of no way” in order to become the “way out of no way.” Here King, in Erskine’s book, expresses a similar sentiment:

We can remember days when unfavorable court decisions came upon us like tidal waves, leaving us treading the waters of despair. But amid all of this we have kept going with faith that as we struggle, God struggles with us, and that arc of the moral universe, although long, is bending towards justice. We have lived under the agony darkness of Good Friday with the conviction that one day the heightened glow of Easter would

emerge on the horizon. We have seen truth crucified and goodness buried, but we have kept going with the conviction that truth crushed to the ground will rise again. (140)

This “one” is Jefferson. Jefferson, the hero of this story, is also the personification of the ideological power inversion demonstrated throughout the book, a power inversion deeply rooted in Christian thought. Gaines’ renovating of the hero image in response to pop culture’s portrayal of heroes as supermen parallels the Judeo-Christian remodeling of the hero image from a triumphant imperial conqueror to a “suffering servant.” “Man” and “hero” are synonymous in this novel. Gaines tells John Lowe that

I think we think that being a big tough guy...is being a man...that isn’t what makes a man...this is the responsibility of man; taking responsibility for the whole, all humanity, is what I think manliness is. (321)

Jefferson takes responsibility and accepts his role as the “suffering servant” who understands his suffering as part of his chosen state so that it becomes a task not an outcome of oppression. Suffering, as Victor Frankl reminds us in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, is constitutive of existence: without suffering there is no meaning and there is no true love (106). In the acceptance of suffering, scapegoating becomes sacrifice. As scapegoat, Jefferson is without choice: he is a sign of terror and of what happens when one crosses boundaries. As sacrifice, he gives himself, and he, too, can receive. He can feel his godmother’s and the community’s love for the first time; he is not on his own. This sign of choice means that he becomes the opposite of the boy who, being dragged to the chair, called on Joe Louis (Gaines 91) to save him. Jefferson walks. Jefferson knows he will go to that chair whether he is dragged or whether he walks. It is not within his power to choose life over death, but, rather, he must choose how he will face his death. This is the only choice Jefferson has the freedom to make, but it is this choice that makes all the

difference in the world. Change comes at a price, Gaines tells Wolfgang Iser in an interview published in *MELUS* (1996):

You do suffer, you have to suffer in order to make any changes, especially when you have something so ingrained as racism and over so many years, in order to have any change at all. And it has to begin with one person, and others will follow. It's usually one person that must be willing to pay a big price to make this change. (7)

Gaines' understanding of creative or redemptive suffering, an understanding in line with that of Dr. Martin Luther King, requires that one be responsible for others in order to generate rootedness and to "be there" for others.

Gaines' novel may not fit the format of the traditional rite of passage movements but in its pages it transforms both its characters and its reader community by negotiating between the conflicting elements of the two very different rite of passage theories mentioned earlier, Van Gennep/ Turner's hierarchical model and the ambiguous "borderland" model. Transformation in the novel is neither mechanical nor is it chaotic, but rather it is completely human. However, it is a human transformation which transcends its own humanity leaving us in paradox, that of a divine humanity, a sacred materialism, a powerful weakness. Gaines' story, like the Christ story, functions in the realm of paradox. It has created what all narrative and all ritual aim to create, an imagined reality, urging us towards an identification with the "other" that leads to transformation of the "self." Gaines' novel suggests, with the friendship between Grant and Paul, that the only "way out of no way" is together.

## CHAPTER 4

## CONCLUSION: AFTER THE RITUAL, BEYOND THE BOOK

Rituals are marked by their beginnings and endings. Yet the work of most rituals never ends. Rituals that open us to the creative potential of any given moment can't simply be "put back in the box."

-David A. Hogue *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past: Story, Ritual, and the Human Brain* (167)

At the close of *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *A Lesson Before Dying*, with trials completed and returns attempted, story comes to an end. These fictional small towns, like Jem, lie unconscious, unaware of the realities which have been revealed. Like Jem, these towns are "trying hard to forget something, but what [they] are really doing [is] storing it away for a while" (Lee 247). Yet, all is not lost nor is it forgotten. Scout, Grant, and Paul refuse to lapse into forgetting, choosing instead to remember. They remember Atticus. They remember Tom. They remember Boo. They remember Jefferson. And so do we. We open novels but some, in turn, open us. If the writer has done his or her job, the reader community is called upon to do its job. I will address three points. First, I will focus on narrative as communal space. Secondly, in the case of these two narratives I will address the vision of Southern manhood being put forward. Lastly, I will return to rite of passage.

First, narrative becomes a space of community. This reader community meets in only one place, in the text itself. It is not limited by time or space, nor is it exclusive. Most of time members of the reader community are unaware of their relationship to one another. They may be

aware of their relationship with the text but not their connection to other readers. To actively read a novel, is to experience it. It is a path to be walked. As readers “walk in the shoes” of the characters, they walk in those shoes together. They share a common path, a common story. They make pilgrimage into the text itself and in experiencing it they become one in the body of the text. A textual experience is shared among the readers, when maybe nothing else is.

Novels, like rituals, have both a beginning and end. And yet, what has been evoked in the novel, and likewise in the ritual, is a spirit of possibility. It lives beyond these boundaries. The novel is a safe place, a structured space like a ritual space, in which the reader, led by the author, can view an “other’s” world by watching from the protected distance provided by the imagination. And yet, the novel is a sacred place too, which invites the reader to participate in the story, to become invested in the text. The reader reads him/herself into the skin of the characters and into the body of the text. Paradoxically, the novel is both safe and sacred. It provides readers with the means to confront the unconfontable, like ritual, and yet allows readers a distance. Imaginatively, readers participate in a novel’s ritual movement, temporarily leaving their lives to enter the novel. Imagination allows readers to empathize and identify with the characters of the novel and on some level to open up to possibilities by vicariously living through these characters. Imagination allows the reader to safely leave his or her reality and enter an author-structured world. Readers may be emotionally and intellectually marked, like Jem is marked in *To Kill A Mockingbird*. They may even attempt to apply their textual experience to the world outside. Marked by the narrative experience, like the initiate is marked in the ritual process, readers may try to embody the narrative in the here and now, in the flesh. Responding to the call of the author, they may turn possibilities into realities; they may make the spirit of the novel manifest itself into a living, breathing reality. Here the power of the author, to imagine the

possibilities, meets the power of the reader, to make possible that which is imagined. The word can become flesh; that is the beauty of it. But along with power comes responsibility: power without responsibility is tyranny; responsibility without power is slavery.

Southern manhood, as presented in these two novels, requires using power responsibly. Both novels depict a new Southern manhood which preserves three noble qualities often associated with Southern traditions: Aristotelian friendship, Christian brotherhood, and Stoic resilience and honor. Lee preserves these honorable qualities of Southern manhood by embodying them in one character, Atticus Finch. Gaines glorifies these three honorable Southern values by making them manifest in the relationships between his characters: the friendship between Grant and Paul, Jefferson's giving of himself for others, and Grant, Jefferson and Paul's choice to do their duty.

For Aristotle, friendship is necessary in communal life because it advocates mutual respect; it allows community to even be possible. Friends necessarily come together as equals. Friendship and justice, require seeing the "other" as another "self" and doing good for the sake of that "other" "self." A city is built on its members' ability to see the intrinsic tie between the "self" and the "other." Atticus Finch embodies as well as advocates the spirit of Aristotelian friendship. He recommends "walking around" in another's shoes. The friendship between Grant and Paul exemplifies Aristotelian friendship, as well, a friendship among equals.

Christian brotherhood extends the friendship of equality to all people and advocates a type of hero who gives himself for the sake of others, for his friends. In the Gospel of John, for example, Jesus says:

This is my commandment, That you love one another, as I have loved you.

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

You are my friends...

I do not call you servants any longer; because the servant does not know what the master is doing: but I have called you friends; because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. (John 15.12-15)

Atticus's defense of Tom Robinson in the face of much criticism and even threats from the community demonstrate his willingness to sacrifice himself for two things he believes are more important, truth and community itself. Jefferson inspired by Grant's powerful words and his own inward strength is able to become the hero his community so greatly needs. Together, Grant and Jefferson redefine for themselves what it means to be a hero:

A hero is someone who does something for other people. He does something that other men don't and can't do ... A hero does for others. He would do anything for the people he loves, because he knows it would make their lives better. (Gaines 191)

The self-sacrifice which Christian brotherhood demands is maintained by a Stoic mentality which is still strong in Southern culture.

Stoicism, with its focus on man's ability to decide how he will face what the world gives him, brings us to the third quality of Southern masculinity, resilience and honor. This Stoic mentality is best summed up in the opening of Epictetus' *Handbook*:

Some things are up to us and some are not up to us. Our opinions are up to us, and our impulses, desires, aversions- in short, whatever is our own doing. Our bodies are not up to us, nor are our possessions, our reputations, or our public offices, or, that is, whatever is not our own doing. The things that are up to us are by nature free, unhindered, and unimpeded; the things that are not up to us are weak, enslaved, hindered, not our own. So remember, if you think that things enslaved are free or that things not your own are your

own, you will be thwarted, miserable, and upset, and will blame both the gods and men. But if you think that only what is yours is yours, and that what is not your own is, just as it is, not your own, then no one will ever coerce you, no one will hinder you, you will blame no one, you will not accuse anyone, you will not do a single thing unwillingly, you will have no enemies, and no one will harm you, because you will not be harmed at all.

(11)

We have little control over what happens to us, but we will always have control over one thing and that is our reaction. Sometimes in the face of injustice the only way to fight it is to stand and face it; come what may. This Stoic sentiment permeates Lee's definition of courage, which finds its place in the words of Atticus:

“I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what.” (112)

Gaines has a definition of manhood which sounds similar to Lee's definition of courage. He tells John Lowe that:

I think we think that being a big tough guy...is being a man...that isn't what makes a man...this is the responsibility of man; taking responsibility for the whole, all humanity, is what I think manliness is. (321)

Power over ourselves is a choice. We choose to cower, we choose to stand, we choose to react, or we choose to do nothing at all. Either way, this choice is our responsibility; in truth, it may be the only thing we truly possess.

Finally, having considered the function of narrative and the redefinition of Southern manhood, I want to turn back to rite of passage. In the redefining that is the writing, for Lee and

Gaines, rite of passage and narrative come together. Rites of passage open up spaces for change in thought and, thereby, in communal hierarchy. Narrative as rite of passage gives flesh to the bare bones history of textbooks and timelines. Through narrative as rite of passage, participants are drawn into the experience of virtue of structure. At this site, on this border, multiple reader narratives (the readers' own stories) find orientation so that what seemed to have no governing structure finds one, making value relational. This is the strength of borderland theory.

The question remains: How do we take the insights of the border into structure? How do we, in Turner's language, reaggregate without repeating the rigid and static hierarchies of the postcolonial world? In some ways, this cannot be avoided; structure tends to become fixed. Preserving tradition and welcoming change need not be exclusive activities, but rather, a healthy community is built on creative tension, a continuing conversation between border and structure. We see this in religion, particularly. The prophetic, contemplative, and apocalyptic are dimensions of a religious tradition the insights from which revitalizes that tradition. What narrative and ritual seek is a conversation in chaos, a communion among strife, and a bridge over hostile rapids. In this bridging, both tradition and the individual talent can be honored. What I am arguing here is that novel, the expression of the individual of culture, and ritual, the cultural transformation of the individual and the integration of his or her story into culture, are structured entities which allow for the possibility of change. In an increasingly secular world, we might argue, the novel often takes the place of ritual--witness, for example, the recent *Lord of the Rings* phenomenon. The nature of art, then, is like the nature of ritual. Both affect the world far beyond their limits. *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *A Lesson Before Dying* are both coming of age novels. Their protagonists are stretched beyond their limits. Both novels function as literary ritual movements, stretching us, moving the reader from stasis, to crisis, to reflection. Both

novels shock us out of our innocence and our ignorance. The goal of rite of passage is to change the initiate: to make him or her a more mature, fuller and more functional self. It calls the initiate into the world. So does the imagination. *To Kill A Mockingbird* has had international impact, and *A Lesson Before Dying* is now taught and read everywhere. In a postmodern and postcolonial world, in which dislocation and alienation seem to be the norm, these two intimate, deeply located Southern novels have touched the world. Atticus Finch's image has formed a generation. He was recently named the most significant hero in film history, and readers from me to Oprah Winfrey honor his image. *A Lesson Before Dying* may be that book for the next generation. These works call on us to answer our world, with friendship, brotherhood, and honor. These values are the way through despair:

To take on the imperfections of the world means of course that your heart will be saddened, your self-confidence impaired, your trust disappointed. You will know despair. But isn't maturity the ability to surmount despair? Isn't that what growing up is all about—learning to outlast despair? (Coffin 126)

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